

Official Report (Hansard)

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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 November 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Eddie McGrady

Mr Speaker: It is my sad duty to inform the Assembly of the death of Mr Eddie McGrady, a former Member here for South Down. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my personal condolences to his family circle and to all his party colleagues on their sad loss. I came to know Eddie McGrady extremely well; he and I served on the first Policing Board. He was one of life's true gentlemen, and politics in Northern Ireland will be much sadder with the loss of Eddie McGrady.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words. Unfortunately, the party leader and deputy leader cannot be here this morning. Like all members of the SDLP, I was saddened to hear of Eddie's passing last night. He was a giant among giants in politics and a man who was totally dedicated to peace and the creation of a lasting prosperity for all our people.

He was born and bred in Downpatrick. He sat on Downpatrick Urban Council in the 1960s and 1970s and then moved on to Down District Council, where he sat until 1989. In 1970, he was a founding member of the SDLP, later serving as its first chairman. After a number of unsuccessful attempts, he won a Westminster seat in 1987, when he defeated Ulster Unionist Enoch Powell.

His passing is a loss not only to his friends, family and the SDLP but to all the people of this land. We have lost a great democrat, a true visionary and a patriot. His huge contribution to politics in the North led not only to the shaping of our history but to the foundations of our future.

Over his years in public life, Eddie provided invaluable assistance, representation and genuine advice to thousands of constituents, irrespective of their political opinion or religious background. South Down and the whole of the North remain indebted to Eddie and what he did

for the peace process. He was a man of highest integrity, considerable courage and a deep faith. He brought sharp political insight to everyone he dealt with, whether that was dealing one-to-one with local councillors or with the complexities of an emerging new police force.

His words, delivered by our party leader, Alasdair McDonnell, at the weekend, ring true to the man he was. He said:

"Don't mourn for me ... Just get out there and finish the job."

My thoughts and prayers are with his children, Paula, Jerome and Conaill, as well as the wider family circle, his sister, Marie, and brother, Malachy, and of course his deep friend and political colleague Margaret Ritchie.

When I spoke to Eddie last Wednesday night, I said a prayer with him, because I knew that it would not be long. He will be deeply missed as a close friend and colleague. He has left a lot for Margaret, Karen and me to do to try to fill his shoes in South Down. May he rest in peace.

Mr Wells: I concur with everything that Mr Rogers has said.

I first met Eddie McGrady 31 years ago at a meeting of tenants in Saul Street in Downpatrick. I have worked alongside and with him ever since. He was a gentleman and gentle by nature. What impressed me about Eddie McGrady was that he was scrupulously fair in his representation of all the people of South Down. He was held in the highest respect. Be it in unionist areas, nationalist areas or areas with ethnic minorities, Eddie McGrady was the man people knew they could turn to if they had an issue at Westminster. From Cranfield to Crossgar, from Kilkeel to Kilcoo, everyone had the highest respect for Eddie McGrady.

I happened to be chairing a meeting in Downe Hospital on what turned out to be his last day as the Member of Parliament for South Down. I

saw him coming into the back of the meeting and I realised that Parliament would be prorogued in a few hours' time and that this was Eddie's last meeting. I called him up to the front to say a few last words, and there was hardly a dry eye in the house. Eddie clearly was going to miss representing the people of South Down. Indeed, even when he stood down as MP, he would ring me and ask whether he could attend site meetings that I was organising. I understand that that was quite a regular occurrence, such was his dedication.

He will sadly be missed by all. He was a political giant and I find it a privilege to have known him for so long.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus tá muid ag smaoinreamh ar chlann Eddie McGrady ag an am brónach seo. We are thinking of Eddie McGrady's family at this very, very sad time.

He provided 23 years of service to the people of South Down. Obviously, Eddie and I had different views on many things. We shared views on many other things. What I can say is that I always found him to be a very courteous and fair colleague and enjoyed working with him on a range of issues. I met him fairly recently at the opening of a school and we had a bit of craic together. I know that he will be missed by his colleagues in the SDLP. He will be missed by other colleagues and by all of us in the House. I pay tribute to the service that he provided to the people of South Down over the past two and a half decades.

Mr Nesbitt: I heard of the passing of Mr McGrady while I was in my office at tea time yesterday. When I was leaving the building, I bumped into a senior member of the SDLP who was keen to inform me that Mr McGrady had passed away; he was unaware that I knew. The look on their face and their tone of voice left me in no doubt that this was a matter of huge sadness for the family that is the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

We all agree that, by character, Eddie McGrady was a gentleman. By political conviction, he was a colossus in promoting the aspiration of a united Ireland, but doing so at a time when he, Seamus Mallon and John Hume in particular stood resolute in saying that that aspiration was sullied by violence and those who tried to promote the cause through the use of the bomb and the bullet.

On his political skills, what more need we say than that he unseated Enoch Powell? Enoch Powell. It took more than one go, but he did it.

What a testament to the skills of Eddie McGrady as a politician.

As a journalist, I always enjoyed interviewing Eddie McGrady. I will not give too much away, but there was a time during the negotiations that led to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement when Ulster Television ran a sweepstake on when an announcement would be made. Eddie came to our interview point, and I asked him whether he would like to join the sweepstake. He did and he won. Either he had inside knowledge or some influence over what was going on in those talks.

I am sorry that my colleague Danny Kennedy MLA is not here to pay tribute. However, when we heard the news last night, he was very keen to join me in issuing a statement that expressed the sadness of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Finally, Eddie McGrady gave 50 years — 50 years — of his life to public service. What a fantastic testament to Eddie McGrady. The Ulster Unionists pass on our sympathy to his family and to the SDLP.

Mr Ford: I also want to add a few words of sympathy. Mr Speaker, you started by describing Eddie McGrady as a "gentleman", and I think that every Member who has spoken has used that term of him. Undoubtedly, he was a gentleman. He was man of firm principle. If you met him and talked with him, you could not doubt that he was a nationalist by conviction, yet he was also absolutely determined to ensure that devolution worked in this place and to play his part in ending the violence of the early days of his political career by ensuring that we could move forward constructively and progressively together.

Sean Rogers and, indeed, Jim Wells spoke about South Down from their different perspectives. I cannot do that. However, the fact that Eddie was able to achieve the vote that he did with the background that he had in a constituency such as South Down showed that he could attract votes from a diverse range of people. He was able to do that because of the concern that he had for his constituents and the work that he did for each and every one of them.

I will remember him personally from the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement and from those happy days of the first Assembly when things did not run as smoothly as under your jurisdiction, Mr Speaker. The deals that were done in the corridor behind the Speaker's Chair generally involved Jim Wilson from the Ulster Unionist

Party and Eddie, and sometimes I got in if our votes were needed. Those deals were a tribute to the man. You knew that he was a gentleman and that if a deal were reached, it would be stuck to. He was a man of his word in everything that he did, and, in that respect, we have lost a great presence in the Chamber as well as elsewhere. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I extend our sympathy to his children, his family circle and, in this place, his colleagues in the SDLP.

Mr McCallister: I join colleagues in paying tribute to Eddie McGrady. I first met Eddie when I was a farmer who needed help with a grant application about 20 years ago. Needless to say, Eddie sorted it out very satisfactorily indeed, and I am grateful to him. I got to know him significantly better when I was elected to the House in 2007 and he was still the Member of Parliament for South Down.

No doubt his colleagues in the SDLP will know what a true gentleman Eddie McGrady was, and others have spoken about that. The way in which he represented all the people in South Down was reflected in the enormity of his vote. No doubt the standing of the SDLP in South Down was helped enormously by Eddie and his tireless work for the people in the constituency. His nature was such that so many felt easy in his company and felt him easy to approach to get help with constituency matters and, certainly, easy to support at the ballot box.

He put in, as Mr Nesbitt said, 50 years of service. That is half a century of service. To someone as young as me, that seems like an awfully long time. When you think of how he served in the 60s and 70s on an urban council, then on Down District Council and as a Minister in a power-sharing Executive, you can see that that is tremendous. He did that almost 40 years ago. He also served for 23 years as the Member of Parliament for South Down. That is a huge service to South Down and to Northern Ireland, and it is only fitting that we respect that this morning.

10.45 am

On behalf of NI21 and my party colleague, Basil McCrea, I express our sympathies with the family, the family circle and his party colleagues in the SDLP. I spoke to his dear friend, now our Member of Parliament, Margaret Ritchie, this morning to pass on my thoughts and sympathies. Margaret Ritchie will certainly miss Eddie, as they had a deep friendship for many, many years. We think about Margaret, the family circle and all his colleagues in the SDLP.

He was a towering figure in our political life in South Down and across Northern Ireland, and we will miss him very much.

Mr Allister: I join in expressing condolences to the McGrady family on the loss of Eddie McGrady and to the SDLP on the loss of someone who was so pivotal for so many years in the structures and successes of that party.

My path and that of Eddie McGrady crossed most when I was a Member of the European Parliament. A number of times, we had occasion to discuss fishing issues in particular, because, as Member for South Down, Mr McGrady obviously had an abiding interest in the fishing industry. It was an industry seldom without difficulties to be resolved. I must say that, in all my dealings with him, I found him to be how others have described him today, namely the perfect gentleman. He was always most courteous in his dealings with others, evinced a very deep-seated interest in the needs of his constituents and left undone nothing in that regard that needed to be done.

Although our politics were distinctly different, I found it gratifying to have a good working relationship with Eddie McGrady, as the MP for South Down, particularly on those fishing issues. I left that experience with an enhanced opinion of Eddie McGrady the man. I can well appreciate the loss that will be experienced by those who knew him best. I join very much in adding my sympathy on his passing.

Matter of the Day

Devastation in the Philippines

Mr Speaker: Cathal Ó hOisín has been given leave to make a statement on the devastation in the Philippines that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should continually rise in their place. All Members who speak will have up to three minutes. Members know that no points of order or other issues will be discussed before we conclude this piece of business.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leat as an tseans a bheith ag plé leis an ábhar tábhachtach seo. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for accepting this Matter of the Day.

I do not think that anybody could fail to have been affected by the television pictures that have been coming through from the Philippines during the current disaster. The situation is ongoing and threatens to get worse over the next number of days and weeks. When it comes to some of these national disasters, the unfortunate thing is the roll-out in which the rescue services and aid can reach the affected areas. We have seen that during hurricane Katrina, the south-east Asian tsunami and, a couple of years ago, during the Haiti earthquake. That is a challenge that faces us all, and that challenge will face us now in the Philippines.

Irish people have a very close association with the Philippines. Many of those involved in our care homes and our hospitals are from there. They are hard-working and diligent people. Indeed, our system depends very much on their contribution. They work hard here to send money home and to keep their families there, and I think that we have a natural affiliation with the people in the Philippines.

I will go back to my issue about aid. I believe that it is incumbent on places such as the Assembly, our councils and elsewhere to put together some type of prime funding that might be able to be accessed more quickly and immediately in the case of natural disasters. We also have the expertise of rescue teams in this part of the world, and we should examine how we pull people together to exercise that when these things happen.

I will put it into context. In one city that is smaller than Belfast, current estimates reckon that there are 10,000 people dead. It is incumbent on us to look at how best we can

assist those people and the wider public to assist in the Philippines. I know that a number of motions will come in front of councils this evening, and I hope that they will go through. I also hope that they will receive support from this House.

Mr Poots: I had the opportunity yesterday of visiting people in the Ulster Hospital who are over here from the Philippines and talking to them about the devastation that has taken place in their country. Some of them have had homes affected, and staff in the health service have lost loved ones. It is very important that we support the people from the Philippines at this time. We have found that they have been of huge support to us. Our nursing officers travelled to the Philippines in and around 2000 because there was a shortage of nurses at that point. Those people have admirably filled the gap over the years, and many of them have chosen to stay in Northern Ireland because of the welcome that they found. It is important that we provide them with the care, support and duty of care that the service has to its staff. That will happen through giving appropriate time off, counselling support and other support that can be given. I know that the staff will also rally round their colleagues, whom they greatly appreciate. The Filipino people have a very caring attitude; it is incumbent on us to demonstrate the caring attitude towards them that they have demonstrated towards our people, whom they have supported in the health service.

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful to Cathal Ó hOisín for raising the issue. The Filipino community has contributed much to us. Its care and its sensitivity, particularly to those who are ill or aged and infirm, has become legendary in our community. There are many Filipino people living in the constituency of North Belfast. I have engaged with them on many occasions and have always found them to be a friendly, hard-working and long-suffering people, because this natural calamity is not new to the Philippines. They suffer most dreadful climatic changes and, as a result, similar disasters have occurred in the past, but this one is particularly difficult. Some 10,000 people have lost their life. In Ireland, in the North of Ireland, we should respond generously to any appeal that will be made by the Filipino community here, whether it be for money, materials or some other sort of support, we should give it because they have served us, and we, in their distress, should serve them.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for bringing the matter to the House. As in any political

institution on planet Earth, this is a moment to break from the daily focus on our own issues and to put them into the perspective of what has happened in the Philippines, which is on a scale even greater than the Christmas tsunami of a few years ago. The scale of the death and destruction, particularly the number of young people who have lost their life, is absolutely horrific.

It is the way of Northern Ireland that we are connected. Philippine nationals work here in Northern Ireland, and there will, undoubtedly, be Northern Irish people working in the Philippines. I know that there is a tendency — it is not the greatest tendency of human nature — to sometimes put a value on life depending on how far it is from where we are and to believe that lives and their value lessen the further away the incident is from our focus of attention. However, this is a moment, I suggest, to focus on our common humanity and a time to rally round, because the survivors have certainly survived the incident, but now they face an equally fatal threat of disease, not least because of the shortage of clean drinking water and other issues. This is a moment for all of us, in common humanity, to do what we can for the survivors.

Mr Lyttle: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the issue. It puts the challenges that we face in the House into stark perspective. We have heard that typhoon Yolanda has claimed 10,000 lives and displaced some 600,000 people. It is my understanding that the UN has launched an appeal. The UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs has said that people in the Philippines are absolutely desperate and there is no food or water in many areas. As an MLA for the constituency of East Belfast, I know that there are many people from a Filipino background working in our emergency services and serving our community. Our thoughts and prayers go out to all those people today.

It is my understanding that the UK Disasters Emergency Committee, bringing a number of charities together, will launch an appeal on television this evening. People can donate via dec.org.uk or by texting "DONATE" to 70000. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has announced an increase in aid to the area. I join Members in extending the support of the Alliance Party.

Mr McCallister: When you hear the numbers and try to get some sense of the scale of the tragedy and disaster, you know that the impact that it will have on the country is overwhelming. I have already been in contact with constituents

of mine who have family who are affected. They are struggling to get in contact and to know what they can do from here and whether their loved ones are even safe. That is a very difficult situation for any family to be in. As colleagues have said, that is a very difficult situation to face.

I am encouraged that our national Government are at least responding and that the Disasters Emergency Committee has set up a fund, because people can do something practical by giving and helping to support that. A mammoth effort is required, not just regionally, nationally and on a European level but throughout the world, to help out the people who are so badly affected in the Philippines. I am pleased that here we are all keen and willing to support that and to play whatever small part we can in that, Mr Speaker.

11.00 am

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the seventeenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary format, which was held in Armagh on Friday 8 November 2013. The Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have agreed that we can make this report on their behalf.

Our delegation was led by the First Minister, Peter Robinson MLA, and me. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Minister Durkan, Minister Farry, Minister Foster, Minister Hamilton, Minister Kennedy, Minister McCausland, Minister Ní Chuilín, Minister O'Dowd, Minister O'Neill, and junior Minister McCann. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, and the following Irish Government Ministers also attended: Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore, Minister Noonan, Minister Quinn, Minister Howlin, Minister Bruton, Minister Deenihan, Minister Rabbitte, Minister Coveney, Minister Fitzgerald, Minister Varadkar and Minister of State O'Dowd.

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

Our meeting in Armagh was very positive and constructive, and it provided a valuable opportunity for us to focus on some of the key challenges that we face. Last week's meeting came a few short weeks after the very successful investment conference in Belfast and the Global Irish Economic Forum. The Council recognised the value of both events, and I have no doubt that they will provide an important platform on which to build economic growth and prosperity.

Obviously, because of the challenging times that we live in, much of the focus of the plenary was on our shared economic challenges. In a broad-ranging discussion, the Council welcomed the fact that some signs of recovery had been apparent over the last number of months. The Council was advised that the Irish Government is on track to exit the EU/International Monetary Fund bailout by the

end of the year. The various actions being undertaken by each Administration to help support the economic recovery were explored, and the importance of attracting foreign direct investment and ensuring adequate access to credit within the banking sector in each jurisdiction was recognised.

Both Administrations recognise the value of international trade and have a series of trade visits planned to attract additional investment. The Council also recognised the role that cross-border trade can have in helping local companies grow their markets. InterTradeIreland's recent report highlights the fact that, for many companies wishing to export goods, experience in cross-border trade is a valuable stepping stone and can be a significant influence on the development of additional export markets.

In recent weeks, there has been much discussion about the role of banks. The Council welcomed the role of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) in making lending available to develop assets across the island. Ministers were advised that disposal of assets from NAMA would be handled sensitively, with a view to supporting the economic recovery in both jurisdictions.

Tourism has an important role in growing our economy. At the meeting, the contribution of the tourism industry was recognised. In particular, Ministers acknowledged the success of initiatives such as "The Gathering" and the City of Culture celebrations which have been taking place in my home city over the last year. We must build on those successes, and Ministers looked forward to the hosting, next year, of the Giro d'Italia, which will have a cross-border element, as cyclists travel from Armagh to Dublin. The race provides a real opportunity to work together to maximise tourism benefit.

Growing our economy is an important priority, but it is also important that all levels of society benefit from that. In this context, the progress made to date under the Building a Prosperous and United Community economic package was discussed, and Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the package.

As we move forward, we must continue to support and build our communities. Of relevance to this important work was a conference exploring the role of sport in reconciliation, which some Ministers attended in Armagh last Friday before the meeting. At the plenary, Ministers endorsed the collaboration between sporting organisations across the

island to tackle racism, sectarianism and division.

We also took the opportunity to discuss the importance of European funding to both jurisdictions, and current collaboration to draw down such funding was welcomed. Further possibilities for collaboration to draw down funding that are mutually beneficial continue to be explored.

The future Peace IV and INTERREG V funding programmes were discussed. Proposals for the structure of the programmes are being developed, and both Administrations look forward to reviewing these.

Ministers remain supportive of the concept of the Narrow Water bridge and have asked for urgent analysis of the issues involved. They remain conscious that the priority is not to lose the EU funding involved.

Youth unemployment continues to be of concern to both Administrations. Following our discussion at the last NSMC plenary meeting in Dublin, we received a further update on that important topic. The Council was briefed on the levels of youth unemployment in both jurisdictions, discussed the European Union's youth guarantee and agreed that, where possible, both jurisdictions should collaborate to tackle the issue. The Council also welcomed the ongoing collaboration between the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Social Protection to tackle youth unemployment. The NSMC will receive a further update on the issue at a future meeting.

The North/South Ministerial Council joint secretaries provided us with a comprehensive report on the work that has been ongoing in the Council since the previous plenary meeting in July. Ministers welcomed the following key developments. The business planning process for the establishment of a new radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Area Hospital is progressing on time, with construction due to commence in spring 2014 and completion scheduled for summer 2016. Progress continues to be made on the agreed work programme on child protection. The programme, which was agreed in July 2012, promotes shared learning, contributes further to improving practice in specific areas of safeguarding and child protection and focuses on five work streams.

There is continued progress on the common agriculture policy following the political agreement reached between the European Council and the European Parliament on the Multiannual Financial Framework and between

the EU Council of Ministers and the European Parliament on CAP reform. There is successful high-level engagement between officials in the two Education Departments. Progress will be reported to a future NSMC meeting on agreed cooperation in the educational underperformance and good school leadership work streams.

The terms of reference for an all-island research study into the airborne pollution from residential smoky coal combustion has been approved. Both jurisdictions continue to share knowledge and experience in the delivery of road safety strategies and measures to further reduce road casualties.

In December 2013, InterTradeIreland will launch a free, multiplatform app for Horizon 2020. The app provides a centralised online portal of key information and allows users to communicate with one other instantly, as well as facilitating partner searching and promoting opportunities to get involved in existing project consortiums.

Development on post-2013 territorial cooperation EU programmes is progressing. It is intended that operational programmes for Peace and INTERREG will be presented to the Executive, the Irish Government and the Scottish Government — for INTERREG V only — during 2013, with formal submission to the European Commission following the agreement of the relevant Governments.

A major new campaign that focuses on childhood obesity was launched by Safefood in October 2013. The campaign focuses on helping parents to tackle the everyday habits associated with excess weight in childhood and maintaining awareness of the health challenges posed by excess weight.

The Loughs Agency partnered Tate Britain to supply oysters harvested in Lough Foyle at the Turner Prize events in Derry, including the event launch, which over 1,000 guests attended.

Foras na Gaeilge is proceeding with implementation of the new core funding arrangements with effect from 1 July 2014, in line with the NSMC decision on 10 July 2013. The two agencies of the language body continue to collaborate on governance and promotional issues and the delivery of a joint programme of activities to mark the 400th anniversary of plantation charters.

The new chief executive of Waterways Ireland, Ms Dawn Livingstone, took up her position on

29 July 2013. Development work on the Ulster Canal is progressing incrementally. All planning approvals have now been obtained from Cavan County Council, Clones Town Council, Fermanagh District Council and the Planning Service. The interagency group is exploring funding options.

The final aspect of the joint secretaries' report was the progress on the improved tourist visitor numbers to date in 2013 and the launch of the £15.7 million Tourism Ireland autumn promotional campaign in September 2013. The September–December period traditionally yields as much as 30% of overseas tourism business.

Ministers also acknowledged the ongoing work on the reform of the North/South bodies' pension scheme.

On the St Andrews Agreement review, the Council agreed, following discussion, that Ministers would consider their priorities in their respective sectoral areas. The outcome of this exercise will be considered at a future NSMC institutional meeting as part of the ongoing review.

We had a useful discussion on the north-west gateway initiative, which is being reviewed. Ministers look forward to receiving a report on the outcome of the ongoing stakeholder consultation exercise at a future NSMC institutional meeting.

Ministers agreed to review the North/South consultative forum at a future NSMC plenary meeting.

Finally, the Council approved a schedule of NSMC meetings that were proposed by the joint secretariat, including an NSMC plenary meeting in June 2014.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. My question relates to youth employment. The deputy First Minister is probably aware that the World Health Organization recently said that the issue of people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) is a time bomb waiting to explode. I ask the deputy First Minister to put himself in the shoes of someone who is not in education, employment or training. What comfort would he take from the words of his statement and from the fact that:

"Youth unemployment continues to be of concern"?

He said that, following a discussion at the last meeting, there was another discussion about the issue and that this time they discussed the European Union's youth guarantee and agreed that it was a good thing that they should work on if at all possible. If you were a 17-year-old not in education, employment or training, what comfort would you take from those words?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, we are all very conscious here of the unacceptable rates of youth unemployment. This is sadly a feature of life, particularly during what has been a world economic crisis, throughout western Europe over the past number of years. The youth unemployment rates in places such as Greece, Portugal and Spain are through the roof. That said, the unacceptable rates that we have to deal with here have to be tackled. Work is ongoing on our Together: Building a United Community project, and officials are engaged in its design and the need to ensure that it is implemented at the beginning of next year. That will bear down on the NEETs challenges that we face.

In the European context, the current Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes do not have specific priorities that focus on youth unemployment. The focus and priorities of future EU programmes will be developed, based on the identified needs of the eligible areas. No decisions on the content of a future Peace IV programme, for example, have been taken. However, actions to address training, education and employment will be priority considerations. The development of Peace IV followed an initial public consultation in autumn 2012, the results of which suggest that the new programme should have a particular focus on young people and on providing assistance, youth activities and education for economically excluded young people.

The economic pact provides for an additional £50 million to Peace IV, which is linked, as I said, to an Executive commitment to seek to use it in support of the united youth programme in our Together: Building a United Community project.

11.15 am

Mr Moutray: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. With regard to the Narrow Water bridge project, can he confirm that the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) will be in a position to reallocate funding to other projects so that they can progress at this time?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, that was discussed during the event in Armagh. In the communiqué that followed the meeting, North/South Ministerial Council Ministers clearly expressed their ongoing support for the project. I remain fully supportive of the Narrow Water bridge project. I met the chambers of commerce in the area before the tender costs were announced, and they have briefed me on the very positive business and economic potential for the area if the bridge is built.

The SEUPB, the local councils and the Departments of Finance, North and South, should, I think, put together a proposal on the project for consideration by the Executive and the Government in Dublin, including all the available business cases and economic appraisals. I shall be meeting the local chambers of commerce and councils over the next week to get an update on the current situation from their point of view.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat agus go raibh maith agat don LeasChéad-Aire as an ráiteas sin. I welcome the statement from the deputy First Minister. Does he agree that the Narrow Water bridge project is a very good project for everyone in the Louth/Down area, that the chambers of commerce are representing every single community — Kilkeel, Warrenpoint and Rostrevor — and that the project went through a very rigorous process in relation to the SEUPB and came out at the top of the competitive process?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said, during the discussion that we had on Friday in Armagh, the communiqué made it absolutely clear that Ministers, North and South, are very supportive of the project. Obviously, it has had problems during the past number of months, but, of course, we all have to be problem solvers. Given that we are, in principle, very much in favour of the project, the effort now over the next short while, in conjunction with the SEUPB and all the stakeholders who have a very keen interest in what is a very important project for the area, is to focus attention on how to bring it to fruition.

Mr Attwood: I want to ask the deputy First Minister about the St Andrews review. Are you not concerned that, six or seven years after the review was first commissioned, it has yet to conclude? Are you not concerned that when a commitment was entered into at the last NSMC that a report would be brought forward to this NSMC that that did not happen? Are you not also concerned —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that the Member has asked two questions so far.

Mr Attwood: — that what we are now seeing is what the First Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister.

Mr Attwood: — has declared to be his view of North/South, reducing it to a letter, a phone call or a meeting?

Mr M McGuinness: We are very pleased to note that the part of the review relating to the recommendations specific to the North/South bodies is now effectively complete, subject to any further discussion at NSMC sectoral meetings.

The respective Finance Departments have concluded that the provision of Enterprise-scale shared services within the bodies is not feasible due to a lack of scale. However, they have recommended that the bodies should continue to share knowledge and expertise where it is beneficial to do so.

Work by the Finance Departments on the review of the financial memoranda is at an advanced stage. It is the aim of the Finance Departments to have the review completed by March 2014. With regard to terms of reference two and three, following discussions, the Council agreed that Ministers should consider their priorities in their respective sectoral areas. The outcome of that exercise will be considered at a future NSMC institutional meeting as part of the ongoing review.

At the meeting on Friday, a very clear signal was sent by both sides to the discussions that Ministers and Departments should accelerate and increase the level of contact between the Departments. That is something that everybody has signed up for, and I expect that there will be an acceleration and increased engagement between Departments to see what more can be done. Obviously, as the Member well knows, taking forward those matters has to be subject to agreement by all sides.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. He might be aware that a wide range of victims and survivors of loyalist, republican and state violence in Northern Ireland gathered in the Assembly yesterday to state clearly their view that they have been failed by this Executive in their calls for truth and accountability. Did the deputy First Minister and the First Minister take the opportunity to discuss how the Northern Ireland

Executive and the Irish Government could work together to deliver a comprehensive, victim-centred process on dealing with the past, and if so, what specific ideas were considered?

Mr M McGuinness: As the Member has heard me and others say ad nauseam over the past 15 years, one of the greatest flaws in the peace process has been the approach to the past, of which there are many narratives. There is a huge responsibility on all of us to deal with that. That is why we agreed, and I am very pleased that the Member's party was part of that agreement, to ask a highly esteemed diplomat from the United States, Richard Haass, to chair multiparty talks. He, supported by Meghan O'Sullivan, has been involved in a wide-ranging engagement, and he has been talking not just to the parties but to the Irish and British Governments. We are all aware that the United States Government, through Vice-President Joe Biden, to whom the First Minister and I spoke in the aftermath of the appointment of Richard Haass, are taking a very keen interest in this work. I have to hope, along with all others in the process, that we will see a resolution to the issues of flags and parades and that a way forward will be found on how we support victims.

Yes, I think that all of us need to hold our hands up. This has been a signal failure over the past 15 years. However, I hope that it is a failure that can be corrected over the next months, particularly if we can find a way forward before Christmas, in conjunction with the other challenges that Richard Haass faces. We have a duty and a responsibility to find that way forward. It will be very difficult, because there are different analyses and narratives about the past.

Mr Spratt: I note from the statement that there were discussions on European funding and collaboration between both jurisdictions. Can the deputy First Minister tell us whether the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) funding was raised when discussing transport issues? What is the possibility of substantial amounts of money being made available through that funding?

Mr M McGuinness: Those are part of ongoing discussions that officials are involved in. Of course, transport was a subject for discussion during the NSMC meeting. We are consistently looking for opportunities to draw down extra funding from Europe, and the targets that we set to increase funding by 20% are well on their way to being reached, specifically on how we can utilise whatever other opportunities are

presented on the issue of transport and ensuring an easier way for transport to move around. Those discussions are continuing.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire as a ráiteas agus as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. Can the Minister give us an update on the review of the St Andrews Agreement?

Mr M McGuinness: In answer to the question raised by Alex Attwood, I made it absolutely clear that it is still a work in progress. I understand that some people might not be satisfied with the answer that has been presented, but, as always, Members will appreciate and understand that taking these matters forward is a matter for all-round agreement. We are consistently working to see the situation progressed. I think that the commitment that was made during the meeting to increase contact, Department by Department, and to liberate Departments to do more was a very progressive development. It was quite interesting that, during the press conference in the aftermath of the NSMC plenary meeting, the Taoiseach declared that, from his perspective, it was the best North/South Ministerial Council meeting that he had attended.

Mr G Robinson: What comparisons have been made between the output of the Northern Ireland economy and that of the Republic of Ireland economy?

Mr M McGuinness: During the meeting, we obviously had the opportunity to talk about the challenges that both of us face. Some of those challenges are different. The Government in the South have been dealing with specific economic challenges over the past while, but they indicated at the meeting that they hope to see an improvement. Similarly, in the past number of days, those who analyse the situation here have provided further positive reports of an upturn in our fortunes. I am always very reluctant to talk about green shoots; people who have done that before did so to their cost. However, I think that there is some sense that things are beginning to be on the up. Even our reports over the past eight months on the reduction in the number of people who are on the unemployment register indicate that we are continuing to go in a positive direction. Alongside that, we obviously need to support our local entrepreneurs, who have been stalwarts over a very difficult period for our economy in recent times.

One area where there appears to be commonality is that, in the past short while, the Irish Government have been able to record important increases in foreign direct investment into the South. That actually corresponds with some very positive job announcements here in the North as well. Of course, the economic investment conference that the First Minister and I attended, and which the Prime Minister came to, was the best of the three such economic investment conferences that we have attended. So, there is considerable hope for the economy and considerable hope that foreign direct investment will continue to increase, North and South, which is good for all of us.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire as an ráiteas sin agus na freagraí go dtí an póinte seo.

Will the deputy First Minister provide a further update on the north-west gateway initiative and, indeed, the City of Culture in Derry?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, everybody is aware that the City of Culture year has been a huge success. We had a discussion on the north-west gateway initiative. At the meeting, we noted that the consultation with stakeholders on the north-west gateway initiative has been proceeding, and we look forward to receipt of a report on the findings of that consultation at the next NSMC institutional meeting.

Where moving forward with investment in the north-west is concerned, over the past number of years, there has been major investment in the region, and more is planned. The investment shows that we are committed to the north-west gateway initiatives. Key examples include the Peace Bridge, which has made an enormous difference to the city of Derry; the regeneration of Ebrington and Fort George, which are very powerful and positive developments; hosting the City of Culture celebrations; Project Kelvin; and the multimillion pound project to build the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin. We also discussed some of the major activities that are taking place in the north-west.

We are now in the last quarter of the City of Culture year, with major community events well under way. As a city with significant deprivation, Derry is harnessing the opportunity of much-needed investment to build on its strengths. What are those strengths? They are local people, music, heritage and digital

technology, which all showcase the city to an international audience.

We are committed to ensuring that community-based activities are central, not just in 2013 but as part of a long-term legacy from the City of Culture. Although the following projects receive less national and international coverage, the Music Promise, Portrait of a City and local community cultural strategies are focused on delivering skills and opportunities. DCAL officials are engaged with Derry City Council and partners in the city to develop legacy plans that will help to achieve agreed targets up to 2020 and beyond. We do not view 2013 as a one-off but as the start of a long-term upward trend for the city, and it is vital that we ensure there is that momentum.

11.30 am

Mr Byrne: I thank the deputy First Minister for his report. In relation to promoting cross-border trade by InterTradelreland, was the thorny issue of Strathroy Dairy's difficulties in marketing its milk products in the Republic addressed by our Minister, and does the deputy First Minister agree that the issue needs to be resolved to make sure that we promote more cross-border trade in general?

Mr M McGuinness: We certainly had a discussion on the National Dairy Council (NDC) campaign at the meeting, and the Irish Government listened very carefully to what we had to say. We expressed our concerns that the National Dairy Council campaign is an abuse of country of origin labelling. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment raised that issue with the Irish Competition Authority and with Irish Government counterparts, and she has also brought the campaign to the attention of the European Commission. We are also concerned that the NDC campaign contravenes the principles of the single market. It discriminates against consumers who are being denied the additional choice and benefits of market dynamics that come from the North and that would be provided by the North. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has received feedback from our dairy processing industry about the adverse impact that the NDC campaign is having on local businesses, and we are aware that the Dairy Council is threatening to take action in the European courts to stop the NDC campaign. It was discussed, and we are very concerned.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. Ensuring adequate access to

finance was discussed at the meeting. How is the deputy First Minister making progress on that issue in Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: Access to finance is obviously of huge importance, and the whole issue of the responsibility of the banks to support businesses is an ongoing feature of our discussions, North and South. We all face similar problems, and both jurisdictions highlighted the availability of credit as important to support economic recovery. The banks' position is that demand for credit is low and that this is the main reason why lending is following. The data support that but only to a degree. However, they must be tested on that, and the Finance Minister's message to the business community is that anyone putting off applying for credit should step forward and, if they get turned down, should appeal. We also have no doubt that the costs and conditions attached to credit are contributory factors, and banks need to treat businesses reasonably. We strongly believe that it is acting as a constraint to our economic recovery, and it really is a matter that has to be addressed.

There will be a number of key actions this autumn to tackle issues relating to banks, and the economic pact's joint ministerial task force will hopefully give some focus to that work. Good progress was made at its first meeting. The Finance Minister has also recently met the Secretary of State, the British Bankers' Association and the Irish Finance Minister to discuss those issues. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel have established an access-to-finance implementation panel on banking to work with us, the banks and the business bodies to progress the issues associated with access to finance that we have identified. That panel will bring independent eyes to what we think is important work. We will continue to press the banks.

Mr McCallister: Paragraph 14 of the deputy First Minister's statement mentions the progress to date on 'Building a Prosperous and United Community'. Could he detail what he feels that progress is?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member will be aware that we outlined for public consumption the very extensive projects that are included in the Together: Building a United Community strategy. We recognise that there is a wide range of issues to be dealt with in supporting the community and breaking down barriers. Obviously, the recent news about a new barrier

going up in east Belfast is not good news, particularly in the context of our stated aim of bringing down the walls in Belfast over the next 10 years. However, I think that that is still an achievable, viable goal. As I mentioned in a previous answer, the challenges involved in finding employment for something like 10,000 young people is also hugely significant and important work. The whole issue of shared education is also important. We have seen that take a significant step forward, with the project in Lisanelly now beginning to take shape. Six schools in the Omagh area have now signed up to the whole concept of a shared education campus. I know that the Education Minister has big plans for other areas and that other areas are now focused on the prospect that they can avail themselves of support. There is also support for local communities with regard to urban centres.

A wide range of issues are outlined in the document, and I have no doubt whatsoever that the economic pact that we made with David Cameron, in conjunction with our Together: Building a United Community strategy, will have a dramatic effect as it rolls out. At the moment, it is all in its infancy. For many, it is still in the design stage. However, it is on course to make a real impact within the community.

Mr Anderson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I note that reference is made to the North/South Consultative Forum. In light of there being no Civic Forum in Northern Ireland, and no prospect of such a forum meeting, does the deputy First Minister accept that there is no prospect of the creation of a North/South Consultative Forum?

Mr M McGuinness: Every Member will be aware that the only way that we can progress these issues is by taking a united and agreed approach to them. There is no point in my airing the differing views that there are about this. Some people consider that, although the Civic Forum first happened in the early days of this Assembly, life has changed considerably since then, particularly with the influx of all sorts of other people who have come to our shores to seek a new life for themselves. We have a large representation of ethnic communities in the North. Many Members of the House are supportive of a Civic Forum and many are not. The North/South Consultative Forum is obviously affected by that. Until such times as we can get agreement, we are going to have to continue to make the case for it in the hope that, at some stage in the future, people will agree that it is a sensible way forward.

Mr Rogers: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answers so far. In this statement, there is a strong emphasis on economic recovery. Obviously, the Narrow Water Bridge project is something that will unlock the tourist potential and, indeed, the economic recovery of the south Down area. In answer to a question yesterday on the Narrow Water Bridge project, Mrs Foster said that the issues lay with the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Considering that the Regional Development and Finance Ministers were at the Council meeting, is there any need for further analysis of issues? Do we not need to get to a commitment of funds to the Narrow Water Bridge project?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member knows that there was a very strong commitment from our Administration. There was also a strong commitment from Dublin. What created the difficulties were circumstances totally and absolutely outside our control. That has left us in a new situation, where proper protocols have to be applied. The important thing is that there is still a commitment to the project. The challenge is to see whether we can, in spite of the difficulties that we have faced over the course of the past number of months due to circumstances outside our control, see the project come to fruition. All the Ministers are very supportive of it, but we have to abide by the rules and regulations. We also have the SEUPB, councils on both sides of the border and the Irish Government involved with us. I hope that, in the course of the next while, a real effort will be made to analyse what happened and how that can be fixed.

Mr Dallat: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I note that we have been harvesting oysters in Lough Foyle on a cross-border basis. I wonder whether anyone noticed that the Lough Foyle ferry service has disappeared after carrying up to two million passengers. Surely there must be food for thought somewhere that that ferry service in the north-west is as vital as the one in Strangford? Will the deputy First Minister cancel the notion that we are in a North Korea/South Korea situation?

Mr M McGuinness: Whenever circumstances, which are normally financial, impinge on important services for local communities, that can be a huge disappointment for people in County Donegal and County Derry. The challenge, as always, is to continually look at what more can be done. There are obviously important restrictions on how projects like that

can be supported, through financial input and commitments. That said, if a service is being provided that enhances the tourist potential in the area, there is a challenge for Dublin and for us to look at whether the service can be restored. There have been other discussions, particularly in the past, around the connection between north Antrim and Scotland. I had high hopes that, when we had discussions on that in the past, we would have a necklace of support, from the likes of Scotland through to north Antrim, County Derry and on through to County Donegal. The problems are mainly financial. I think that we can explore whether more can be done to restore the service. I say that without having had any discussions with any of the Ministers who might be directly involved, but I undertake to do that.

Mr Allister: Since the plenary meeting in July, we have had the First Minister's wise and joyous U-turn on the Maze project, which has led to the halting of the peace and reconciliation centre. Was that discussed at the plenary session, or is that such a non-issue that it did not merit being discussed?

Mr M McGuinness: The peace-building and conflict resolution centre is a matter for the Executive and the Assembly. It is not a subject for discussion at the NSMC. It is more a matter between us and Europe.

Executive Committee Business

UK Intellectual Property Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the Freedom of Information provisions in the UK Intellectual Property Bill on the protection of pre-publication research to Northern Ireland.

The Intellectual Property Bill was introduced to the House of Lords on 9 May 2013. It contains a freedom of information provision in Part 3 that requires a legislative consent motion if it is to extend to Northern Ireland.

11.45 am

The new provision emerged from the post-legislative scrutiny of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 that was carried out by Westminster's Justice Select Committee in 2012. This article protects research information held by public authorities that are subject to the Act, but, other than in Scotland, there is no dedicated exemption for information created during a programme of research. The Bill introduces a new exemption into the Freedom of Information Act to protect continuing programmes of research intended for future publication by public authorities. This will achieve parity with Scotland. The new exemption was recommended by the Westminster Justice Committee following representations made to it by the higher education sector. The coalition Government, in their response, accepted the need for a dedicated research exemption to ensure that public research bodies, including universities and colleges, would be able to protect their research findings prior to publication.

As well as providing public sector researchers with additional reassurance that their sensitive research information would not be exposed to premature release, the new exemption provides them with the opportunity to validate and analyse their research results before putting them into the public domain or before any related patent application has been filed. Indeed, the Intellectual Property Bill was chosen as the legislative vehicle for the new

exemption because it relates closely to intellectual property, especially in its protection.

In detail, clause 20 of the Bill inserts a new exemption into the Freedom of Information Act 2000 for continuing programmes of research intended for future publication. The Freedom of Information Act section 22(a) exemption that will be created is a prejudice-based exemption, which means that there must be a likelihood that disclosure of information would cause prejudice to research interests. If harm or prejudice can be established, the exemption is engaged. Prejudice-based exemptions are also qualified exemptions, which means that a public interest test must be carried out. Therefore, although the aim of the provision is to protect research at a key stage, openness and transparency are safeguarded by the requirement to conduct prejudice and public interest tests. These tests will ensure that research bodies have a sound and rational case for withholding information.

Clause 20 has an almost identically corresponding section in the Scottish Act, with two minor differences. The Freedom of Information Act section 22(a) exemption will require the exemption to be engaged if the information will or is likely to cause prejudice, rather than "substantial prejudice", as in the Scottish Act. Section 22(a) will allow public authorities, under certain circumstances, neither to confirm nor deny that they hold the requested information, unlike the Scottish Act. These differences will ensure that section 22(a) is in keeping with the wording of our Freedom of Information Act while providing parity with the Scottish Act in the protection of pre-publication research.

Coalition Ministers fully consulted the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the proposed amendment to the Freedom of Information Act. As the provisions are of particular interest to the Department for Employment and Learning, the parent Department for the higher education sector, OFMDFM officials consulted colleagues in that Department. No issues were raised. Furthermore, the Assembly's Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was briefed on the new exemption, and its support was obtained.

I hope that I have sufficiently outlined the nature and scope of the provisions requiring the consent of the Assembly, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, at its meeting on 9 October 2013, was briefed by departmental officials on the freedom of information provisions contained in the UK Intellectual Property Bill. Officials advised members that clause 20 of the Bill created a pre-publication exemption that will bring the Freedom of Information Act 2000 into line with the equivalent Scottish legislation. The exemption will provide assurance to the higher education sector that sensitive research information will not be subject to early release. During the briefing, the Committee sought clarification that further education colleges would also be covered by the exemption. The Committee also requested examples of when the exemption could be used.

provisions in the UK Intellectual Property Bill on the protection of pre-publication research to Northern Ireland.

On Thursday 10 October, the Department responded to advise that further education colleges would be covered by the exemption. The Department also provided the Committee with further information on examples of when the exemption had been used in Scotland. However, the Department had to highlight that the exemption had not yet been tested in Scotland with the Scottish Information Commissioner and, therefore, it was not possible to be categoric as to whether the exemption was applied correctly or would have been upheld. That said, the Committee was content with the responses from the Department and went on, at its meeting on 16 October 2013, to agree that it was content to support the legislative consent motion.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I appreciate the cooperation of Executive Ministers and the OFMDFM Committee's prompt consideration of the issue. I would also like to thank the Member for his contribution. The freedom of information provisions in the Intellectual Property Bill seek to provide the higher education sector with additional reassurance that its sensitive research information will not be exposed to premature release. With your support, a consistent approach to the use of the exemption is achievable. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the Freedom of Information

Committee Business

Standing Order 20A(1)

Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

In Standing Order 20A(1) leave out "first" and insert "last".

Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to the House today. It proposes a single change to Standing Order 20A(1) relating to topical questions.

On 1 July, the Assembly agreed that a facility for asking topical questions of Ministers be introduced, and amendments to Standing Orders were approved. One recommendation included in the Committee's report on the subject was that a review of the process should be carried out no later than six months after its introduction. The Committee has therefore kept a watching brief on the new process since its introduction in September this year. After two full rounds of questions to Ministers, there is now sufficient data collected to allow the Committee to take an informed interim review and address any urgent issues that have been highlighted.

A number of comments, together with feedback and suggestions on how the topical questions process could be improved, have been received by the Committee. However, although those will be fed into the wider Committee review, one issue seems to have been raised consistently and to be of more immediate concern, and that is the purpose of today's motion. Comments suggest that a general concern had arisen that topical questions preceding oral questions leads to a risk of Members pre-empting or duplicating an upcoming oral question, which I am sure the Deputy Speaker has witnessed.

Having considered comments and the data available, the Committee on Procedures is of the view that many of the concerns can be addressed by altering the order in which questions are put to each Minister. The motion before the House reflects that view and proposes a simple change to Standing Orders so that topical questions are taken by the Minister during the last 15 minutes of the time allocated for questions for oral answer.

One issue with the motion is that amendments to Standing Orders usually take immediate effect. However, as Question Time has already

been scheduled for later today, it may be more practical for any agreed change to be implemented only from 18 November, which is next week.

In conclusion, I remind Members that the proposed change brought to the House in no way affects the wider review that the Committee on Procedures will conduct of the topical questions process, which will, it is hoped, help ensure that topical questions become an even more effective way to challenge and scrutinise Ministers. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McCarthy: I am happy to row in behind the Chair of the Committee. I support the proposals on the table.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Trevor Clarke to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Clarke: I do not think that there is any need to make a winding-up speech, Mr Deputy Speaker, given that only one other Member spoke. However, like others, I know that the issue was brought before the House and that Members were made aware of the process. Members were quick to criticise how that process was rolled out, but they had the opportunity to comment at the outset. The Committee has listened to the concerns raised, and I am sure that we all recognise the problems with having topical questions before Question Time as opposed to after. I commend the amendment to Standing Orders to rectify that wrong.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 20A(1) leave out "first" and insert "last".

Public Accounts Committee: Reports and Memoranda of Reply

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes in which to propose and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members called to speak will have seven minutes.

Ms Boyle (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee reports:

Committee Reports

Report on the Use of External Consultants by Northern Ireland Departments: Follow-up Report (NIA 43/11-15)

Report on the Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners (NIA 45/11-15)

Report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute (NIA 48/11-15)

Report on the Transfer of Former Military and Security Sites to the Northern Ireland Executive and Ilex Accounts 2010-11 (NIA 58/11-15)

Report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings (NIA 64/11-15)

Report on Statements of Rate Levy and Collection 2009-10 and 2010-11 (NIA 88/11-15)

Report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Management of Response Maintenance Contracts (NIA 99/11-15)

Report on the Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts (NIA 102/11-15)

Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools (NIA 116/11-15)

Report on Invest NI: A Performance Review (NIA 109/11-15)

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

Report on the Use of External Consultants by Northern Ireland Departments: Follow-up Report

Report on the Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners

Report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute

Report on the Transfer of Former Military and Security Sites to the Northern Ireland Executive and Ilex Accounts 2010-11
Report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings

Report on Statements of Rate Levy and Collection 2009-10 and 2010-11

Report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Management of Response Maintenance Contracts

Report on the Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts

Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools

Report on Invest NI: A Performance Review.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It gives me great satisfaction to move the motion today and to take the opportunity to share with you and the House the work of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). I must recognise the independence and evidence-based work of the Audit Office in giving the Committee a strong base from which to take a bird's-eye view of government.

I have been Committee Chairperson for over a year and a half now. In that time, I have heard the Committee described in many ways as I underwent initiation in the lore of the Public Accounts Committee: it is the watchdog; it is the Rottweiler; it is the guardian of the public purse; it is a paper tiger. I do not know why it is seen as such an animal. It is a media glare and a beacon into dark corners. In ways, it is all those things. The Committee is at its best in a system such as ours, with an independent Audit Office and high standards of stewardship of public money. However, we cannot be complacent. Public financial government is at its most effective when all the participants are thinking, eager and striving for excellence: the auditors, the Committee members, the secretariat, the accounting officers, the civil servants. We can really make a difference if our recommendations are well measured and are implemented properly and promptly. We can really make a difference if public money is spent as carefully and thoughtfully as private money is. We can really make a difference out there if it is all weighed up against waste and lost opportunities.

Although the Committee was very displeased with four memorandums of reply (MORs) some time ago, the standard of response and the level of acceptance of recommendations has been very encouraging over the past year. We will continue to monitor that as measure of the system's effectiveness.

12.00 noon

My experience in a rural constituency makes me even more aware of certain realities in the limits of public funding. I live in a valley of winding roads and small settlements, where everyone helps one another, where the unemployment and suicide rates are rising and where local services to support mental health and community resilience are threatened and depleted. In my experience, public money often touches lives by being lacking. So, when I read of fraud —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There appears to be a mobile phone in the Chamber. Will Members check that their mobile devices are turned off? I invite the Chairperson to continue.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. When I read of lofty projections and unrealistic business cases of maladministered reform projects and an over-reliance on consultants by public bodies whose culture resists transparency and good governance, I wish desperately for some learning to take place. I cannot help thinking of the benefit that my constituents could get from that public money.

I want to shine a light into the dark corners to reveal what went wrong and what must be learned. I want public services, which touch so many people, to demonstrate care as well as efficiency, and I want Departments to learn. For that reason, I have chosen to speak about patient safety and progress on reducing the Government's reliance on consultants

I wish to refer, first, to the Committee's follow-up report on the use of external consultants, which was completed in June 2012. The report looked into the use of external consultants in the Civil Service here and at the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) good practice guidance. The Committee was pleased to find that, in contrast to a previous investigation on the use of external consultants in 2008, there had been a significant reduction in expenditure in this area, from £42 million in 2006-07 to £14 million in 2012, and that the level of compliance with DFP guidelines had improved. However, over a six-year period from 2005-06 to 2010-11, Departments, including agencies, non-

departmental public bodies and health trusts, spent more than £150 million on external consultancy. It was also found that there are still many examples of poor practice across the public sector when it comes to recruiting external consultants.

One example was the Account NI consultancy project. That was a reform initiative in the NICS that was devised to introduce a centralised accounts system. The original contract value was £970,000. The final total was £9.6million and, further, it was delivered four years late. That money was spent on external consultancy recruitment. It was clearly a project that had begun to spiral out of control and, in effect, it presented an open chequebook to the external consultants to ensure that the project was completed. That was clearly a financial overrun that was not helped by a distinct lack of competition in the recruitment processes of the consultants. DFP, however, did not accept that it was an overrun. Rather, a representative from that Department said:

"it was an elephant rather than a horse."

This is just one example that shows failings in the Department to implement good practice and to follow appropriate procedures to ensure that value for money was achieved. The Committee found that 40% of contracts ended up costing more than was initially stated. Further contracts were found to have been extended, sometimes repeatedly, which caused great concern to the Committee.

The preparation of robust business cases by Departments is vital when considering contracts to ensure that maximum value can be achieved from the money that is spent. It was shown that DFP has improved in that regard. However, that element was missing from a number of projects, and the poor quality of those that were produced was concerning to the Committee. That was a vital oversight when it came to the recruitment of external consultants and was a key factor in explaining why there was no justification for the way those consultants were recruited. It is of intrinsic importance therefore that DFP and other Departments work on improving that.

Value for money can also be measured through post-project evaluations. The Committee found that there is room for improving the way in which those evaluations operate to enhance the quality of their work and make them more useful to Departments. DFP has been encouraged by virtue of its position to exert its influence on that matter.

The Committee also stressed the fact that single-tender actions should be the exception and not the rule at all times. That should have been the case when it came to external consultant recruitment. The C&AG's report found that one in five of the contracts it looked at was awarded through a single tender. That should not have happened. The Department failed to ensure that all the necessary steps were taken to ensure that maximum value for money was achieved, and the result was a cost of millions to the public purse.

The Committee recognises that, on some occasions, it is necessary to bring in expertise from outside. The intention of that is not only to bring in specialist skills to assist with projects but to have a transfer of skills from those experts to the permanent staff, which in turn should further reduce the necessity for such vast numbers of external consultants being called upon in future. Projects that require external consultants should be designed to facilitate that. It was found that two thirds of contracts were let without any documented evidence on whether opportunities for skills transfers existed or could be put in place.

The Committee noted that, since the previous hearing on this matter in 2008, there has been a marked improvement in the way that the Department operates when it comes to recruiting external consultants. However, any improvements, while welcome, must be made in the Department to ensure that the greatest value for money is achieved.

The PAC conducted an inquiry into the safety of services provided by our health and social care trusts. That is a very important and emotive topic, as we all expect and deserve health and social care services to be delivered safely. That, however, cannot be guaranteed by the health and social care sector. Indeed, each year, the health and social care trusts report around 83,000 adverse incidents. Those are incidents that could or do result in the harm or even the death of a patient or client. However, that is not the complete story. The Department informed the Committee that under-reporting of incidents continues to be widespread, particularly in the acute sector.

Each year, around 250 adverse incidents are classified as "serious". In almost eight years, up to March 2012, there were 2,084 serious adverse incidents, including 813 deaths in circumstances relating to those incidents. While the deaths may not necessarily be a reflection of issues with the care delivered — for instance, 488 of the fatalities reported related to suicide — the Committee considers

that the numbers of deaths suggests that the standard of care being provided still requires continued close scrutiny.

The Committee was disappointed by the Department's continued reluctance to undertake research to estimate the potential level of harm caused to patients and clients. Without robust estimates of the extent of harm, we cannot say that we have safer care than we did 10 years ago or that we have a sound basis for setting priorities for harm reduction efforts going forward.

In the Committee's view, there are some health and social care systems and practices at odds with the open, fair and learning culture to which the Department aspires. We were shocked to discover that nurses or any medical staff would have reservations about raising concerns about safety. The Department and trusts must do more to embed a widespread culture of safety in which honest reporting is encouraged and genuine learning can take place.

In respect of patients and clients, the Committee was disappointed to learn that, in less serious cases of adverse incidents, the individual will not always be well informed. We felt strongly that the sector needs to be more proactive in obtaining feedback from patients and clients to identify areas for potential improvement or to highlight good practice, and the current reporting of adverse incidents needs to be enhanced and made publicly available to enable the public to assess the relative quality across the service providers.

The Committee considers that achieving substantial improvements in patient safety will also require a management information system that captures data on all adverse incidents and near misses and uses that information to design care delivery systems. While the Committee noted the Department's plans to introduce a new regional adverse incident learning management information system, with a pilot scheduled for 2014, we are concerned that, prior to its full introduction, comprehensive information on adverse incidents will continue to be unavailable. Furthermore, the Committee remains unconvinced of the need to develop a stand-alone, specific management information system when a national reporting and learning system has been operating across the NHS in England and Wales since 2003.

A small number of those who are dissatisfied with the treatment or care that they received from the sector will take legal action to obtain an explanation of, or an apology for, their experience or seek financial compensation for

an injury suffered as a result of their experience. The latter can have significant financial implications. In five years up to March 2012, it has cost the Department £116 million. The Committee considers that further action is required to speed up the claims handling process and that serious consideration is given to the feasibility of developing formal dispute resolution procedures as an alternative to litigation.

In conclusion, while it is not possible to completely eliminate the risk of harm to Health and Social Care patients and clients, the challenge for the sector is to ensure that its patient safety systems minimise the risk of harm and to take steps to maximise the competence, knowledge and skills of health and social care professionals.

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

Ms Boyle: I must recognise the independent, evidence-based work of the Audit Office in giving the Committee a strong base from which to take its view across government. The Committee has 11 members; it is not just me. We are working well together, and we are all keen to do the best that we can.

Mr Easton: I rise to speak on the PAC's report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's management of response maintenance contracts. The report raises very serious concerns about the capability and competence of management in the Housing Executive over a number of years, particularly at a senior level. It also highlights significant and serious breakdowns in corporate governance and accountability in one of Northern Ireland's major non-departmental bodies.

The Public Accounts Committee met on 12 September 2012 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's management of response maintenance contracts. The witnesses were: Mr Will Haire, permanent secretary of the Department for Social Development (DSD); Dr John McPeake, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE); Mr Jim Wilkinson, director of the housing division in the Department for Social Development; Mr Gerry Flynn, director in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; Mr Kieran Donnelly, Comptroller and Auditor General; and Ms Fiona Hamill, Treasury Officer of Accounts in the Department of Finance and Personnel.

In taking evidence, the Committee focused on three main areas: management of response maintenance contracts; whistle-blowing, investigations of breaches of discipline and reported suspected fraud; and corporate governance and accountability.

12.15 pm

The Committee found that, during the report, there had been serious weaknesses in contract management in the Housing Executive over many years and this had been clear to senior management. However, the management regime failed to take the necessary and timely action required. For example, contracts were inappropriate, out of date and not fit for purpose; recommendations from the Comptroller and Auditor General aimed at addressing shortcomings in contract performance were totally ignored; management placed too much emphasis on a partnership approach and not enough on scrutinising the work done by the contractors; and senior management failed to equip staff with the skills to manage response maintenance contracts. As a result, many district maintenance teams were not delivering the required standard of service and were failing to challenge the poor performance of contractors. There were serious flaws in how jobs were selected for inspection, how inspections were carried out, the timeliness of the inspections and how the results were recorded and reported. There were also widespread and systemic weaknesses in the setting and using of key performance indicators. It is very likely that performance data was being manipulated and that reports were actively withheld from the board or audit committee or not fully responded to.

Despite a clear warning from the PSNI in 2006 about the inadequacies and weaknesses of its systems, the Housing Executive did nothing. That undermined its ability to effectively manage its contracts and guard against and tackle fraud. There is a real concern that the weaknesses and failings identified in response maintenance are systematic and extend into other areas of the Housing Executive, such as planned maintenance, kitchen replacement, heating schemes and land deals.

The Committee made the following recommendations:

"In the Committee's opinion it is vitally important that both the Department and Housing Executive use the bedding-in period for these new contracts to critically evaluate how they are working in practice.

The Committee recommends that emerging lessons are shared with the Housing Executive's Board and the wider public sector through the Central Procurement Directorate within the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Procurement Board.

The Committee recommends that detailed information on the results and timeliness of inspections is reported to the Housing Executive Board and Audit Committee who must also assure themselves that payments are being made promptly to all contractors.

This is not a recommendation that the Committee should have to make. However, given what has taken place the Committee is compelled to recommend that senior management within the Housing Executive, together with the Board, recognises and upholds the Corporate Assurance Unit's independence from the operational divisions, and ensures that it continues to be protected and that its work is not undermined.

In light of what has transpired within the Housing Executive, the Committee recommends that the Central Procurement Directorate's review of the accreditation process for Centres of Procurement Expertise should also address the need to improve the level of contract management skills within the public sector in Northern Ireland.

The Committee recommends that the Housing Executive and the Department undertake the necessary investigations across the Housing Executive's business areas to establish the full extent of the contract management problems and the potential exposure in financial terms; and ensure that weaknesses are identified and eradicated."

The Committee also recommended:

"that senior management in the Housing Executive must send out a clear message to staff that the organisation is not a cold place for whistleblowers".

It also recommended:

"that the Housing Executive should be alert to former employees taking up employment with a firm or contractor providing services to the Housing Executive, and should ensure that there are no conflicts of interest or inappropriate working relationships

involving former employees and current Housing Executive employees.

The Committee reiterates that it is the responsibility of a sponsor department to regularly review its processes for gaining assurance on sponsored bodies' management of risks to ensure that effective controls are in place. The Committee recommends that departmental Governance Statements provide confirmation that this has been done."

The Committee also recommended:

"that the Department publicly reports on the outcome of its review of the progress being made to implement the recommendations from its governance review as soon as it is completed. The Committee also expects the Department to continue to monitor progress and report annually on this."

The Committee welcomes the Department and the Housing Executive's commitment to introduce the substantial changes needed to improve governance, accountability, contract management and value for money. However, the Committee considers that the Housing Executive has nothing to be complacent about. Action is required to tackle the systematic weakness in governance and contract management that has been exposed.

Although proposals to restructure the Housing Executive have been announced, that should not be seen as an opportunity to slow down or suspend the essential programme of change that is under way. The Committee expects the necessary changes to be implemented quickly.

The Committee also looks to the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that the lessons from the report, alongside those identified by the Comptroller and Auditor General and through the DSD reviews, are promulgated to and acted on by boards, audit committees and senior management across the public sector.

Finally, I pay my sincerest tribute to the Public Accounts Committee Clerk and staff for their guidance and organisational skills, which have led to such an effective report.

Mr Rogers: I welcome to the Public Gallery ladies from Ballymartin and the group of schoolchildren, who will be particularly interested in this one.

I wish to speak about the inquiry into improving literacy and numeracy achievement in schools.

I declare my interest in education, first and foremost as a parent but also as a teacher, a former school principal and as a member of the Education Committee. The report is extremely important for two reasons: education forms the foundations on which we build a strong and vibrant economy, and numeracy and literacy are the cement that make those foundations strong. The Public Accounts Committee is about accountability, value for money and ensuring the very best in service delivery. I will put that in an educational context: a good school is child-centred, has high-quality teaching and learning practices, has effective leadership and is an integral part of the community. However, this will happen only where there is efficient and effective deployment of staff and resources. Literacy and numeracy are fundamental skills necessary for our young people to reach their potential at school and to live a rewarding life. Although there has been some improvement in the level of pupils achieving the expected standard in literacy and numeracy, progress has been slow. The Committee is particularly concerned that there is a strong link between low levels of achievement and social deprivation. In 2010-11, there was a 33 percentage point gap in achievement at GCSE between pupils with free school meal entitlement and those without. As someone who spent their best days in the classroom, I know that free school meal entitlement does not accurately reflect the level of social deprivation in our families. Further disparities exist, with girls generally outperforming boys, and, among disadvantaged communities, maintained schools generally outperform schools in the controlled sector.

The Committee also found that there can be a wide variation in the results achieved by schools with apparently similar intakes, indicating that the problem is not insurmountable providing the correct intervention is applied. We concluded that the operation of a number of key elements consistently underlies the performance of schools that achieve high standards of literacy and numeracy: a belief that every child, regardless of their background, can learn and build on basic literacy and numeracy; and systematic and sustained intervention in a child's early years. Although I am delighted that over 200 teachers have been appointed to address literacy and numeracy issues at the end of Key Stages 2 and 4, the issue needs a strategic approach right from the first day of school. We know from experience that it is extremely difficult to address these issues with an 11-year-old or a 15-year-old. The engagement of parents is key to the educational development of our young people.

Strong leadership and management practices, involving whole-school approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy are also very important, as is the provision of high-quality teaching and learning by teachers who have acquired, during their pre-service training and in-service professional learning, evidence-based teaching practices that are shown to be effective in meeting the developmental needs of each child. How can we provide that ongoing professional development when the Department has cut over £15 million from the staff development budget and our CASS services are basically decimated? It is also extremely important to have effective school governance based on a balance between supporting and challenging a school leadership team.

The Committee concluded that the Department must implement measures to ensure that it achieves real and sustained improvements in literacy and numeracy. That should help to equip our young people with the skills required to participate in an increasingly competitive global economy. Specifically, we felt that the Department should target the number of pupils achieving well below the expected level in literacy and numeracy, in order to target the rate of performance of the most vulnerable pupils. To do that, we need baseline assessment when children start school. We need to know where a child is before we can see how that child can improve. The allocation of funding should be reviewed to ensure that higher levels of funding are directed towards the development of literacy and numeracy competencies in the early years of a child's education. Certainly, the proposed change to the common funding formula that would leave 80% of primary schools worse off does not address the issue.

The next recommendation is to support and encourage good teaching and leadership and put in place measures to identify and assist teaching staff whose performance has fallen below acceptable standards; ensure that there are opportunities for high-quality professional development for all teachers; and encourage and support innovative practices, both locally and from international experience, to promote literacy and numeracy. Good practice, such as Achieving Derry and Achieving Belfast, has to be disseminated across the Province.

In the report, the PAC made a total of 16 recommendations, all of which were accepted by the Department of Education. The Committee looks forward to seeing the full and timely implementation of the recommendations made and to ensuring that there are benefits.

In the words of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation in Holland:

*"Many things can wait, the child cannot.
Right now his brain is being formed
His blood is being made,
His senses are being developed.
To him we cannot say Tomorrow.
His name is Today."*

Time is of the essence. The Department must adopt a strategic approach to raising standards in numeracy and literacy now in order to ensure that young people have the skills to meet the demands of work in the 21st century.

Mr Hussey: I wish to address the report published this year by the Committee in respect of the transfer of former military and security sites to the Northern Ireland Executive. I declare an interest in this specific topic because of the fact that two barracks in my constituency of West Tyrone — St Lucia Barracks and Lisanelly Barracks — are not included in the report. I will keep an eye on them over the coming months and years.

The Public Accounts Committee examined the regeneration and redevelopment of six former military and security sites that were gifted to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in 2003. The six sites are at the Malone Road; Magherafelt; the former army base and prison at Maze/Long Kesh, which we have heard about at some point during the past few weeks; Ebrington; and Crumlin Road Gaol. They offered the opportunity for economic and social regeneration either through using the proceeds from their disposal, which was the case at the Malone Road and Magherafelt, or through developing masterplans and the establishment of appropriate bodies to develop and deliver them.

The Committee recognises that regeneration is a long-term process. Equally, it is important that tangible benefits are seen from the considerable investment that has already been made. Up to 31 March 2012, OFMDFM spent £62 million preparing the sites for redevelopment by private companies or government bodies. Despite that expenditure, we found that progress had been disappointingly slow. Masterplans had gone through a number of iterations and were not finalised, as agreement had been difficult to reach.

The Committee welcomed the Department's actions to put strategic oversight arrangements in place. However, the report highlighted the need for improvement in the standards and

quality of performance reporting on the regeneration through clear and transparent targets. They should be measurable and linked to expected outcomes for the sites. That is essential to demonstrate the value for money of the substantial investment of public funds in the sites. They must also include strategies for engaging with local communities and their representatives.

The Committee was also concerned about the disposal of the Malone Road and Magherafelt sites. The Committee's investigations into the sale of the Malone Road site for £3.8 million found that neither OFMDFM nor Land and Property Services were aware, until the Audit Office and Committee's investigations, that the purchaser was acting on behalf of another developer who provided the finance for the purchase and to whom the site was immediately transferred on the day it was sold. We consider that the Department could and should have got more for the site. Our report makes important recommendations on the disposal of public land and buildings, ensuring that any sale process is both transparent and well documented.

We were concerned that the Department could not make use of the £870,000 achieved from the sale of the Magherafelt site. Of greater concern was that the Department was unable to state definitively that the £870,000 had not been lost to the Northern Ireland block.

Finally, the Committee was disturbed and frustrated that papers supporting many of the key decisions made on the sites were either not available or were made available only late in the day. The establishment and maintenance of a complete and proper public record, apart from being a legal requirement, is a key aspect of open and transparent accountability and is one of the principles at the heart of good administration.

The Public Accounts Committee report made 11 recommendations — I do not intend to read them out — which, it believes, will deliver significant improvements in governance arrangements that will help drive forward the regeneration process and ensure that sound financial and administrative procedures are in place and adhered to.

Like other Committee members, I pay tribute to the Committee staff, who have assisted us throughout our investigations and whose cooperation has been first-class. Like the Chair of the Committee, I also thank my colleagues on the Committee for their support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. When we return, the first item of business will be Question Time, and this debate will continue after Question Time at 3.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Civil Service: Jobs in Derry

1. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why the proposal to outsource Civil Service jobs from Waterside House in Derry developed almost under the radar, given that he is probably aware that the civil servants involved have been distressed to learn of the plans and the fact that he might make a statement on the matter, which I am sure he was not trying to keep secret, in the near future. (AQT 341/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I welcome the Member to the House. It was a very timely and efficient arrival.

I take exception to one of the terms that the Member used, which was that this has happened "under the radar". Trade union staff in Waterside House, in our Civil Service pensions branch which is based in Londonderry, have been consulted throughout the process. The Member also said that there was a proposal to outsource the work that they do. This gives me a useful opportunity as, indeed, will, I am sure, the Adjournment debate on public sector jobs in the north-west later this evening, to clarify a few points that, I think, have been whipped up for some particular purpose by some ill-informed public comment on this topic. I can understand the concerns that staff in pensions branch might have — if I were one of them — when they read some of the comments that said that 80 jobs in their branch could be made redundant because of the outsourcing of the work they do.

Let me make it clear to the Member and to the House that the work that we are doing for a future service delivery project comes out of necessity. The IT systems that we have that pay and administer pensions are run on two separate IT systems at the minute, and they are coming to the end of their life. Although it is not a determinative factor, it is an issue that pension reform across the water is necessitating that we streamline what we do. Therefore, we are having to procure one new IT system to pay and administer pensions.

I believe that I am duty-bound to provide the best service that I possibly can for everybody in Northern Ireland and to do so in a value-for-money way. I would be remiss in my duties, and the Member would, perhaps, be the first to attack me if in seeking solutions for the future delivery of pensions in Northern Ireland I did not look at all the options that were there, including outsourcing, if, indeed, that provides the best value for money, the best service and the best outcomes.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answer. I assure him that, although I might criticise him, I will not attack him.

He and I have done some useful work over the years on the Finance Committee. I have to say that this came as a bit of a surprise to members of the Committee. I spoke to some of those civil servants in Derry, and it is they, not somebody whipping it up, who are seriously concerned. Will the Minister indicate whether outsourcing is one of the options in the mix? Will it affect the wider Civil Service as well? Is that an option?

Mr Hamilton: I have no ideological problem with any form of service delivery model, whether it means doing it in-house, as a joint venture with the private sector, or outsourcing it to, perhaps, the private sector or the third sector — the voluntary and community sector. I have no dogma that drives me in one particular way or another. The only ideology, and the only dogma, that drives me in respect of this is getting the best service that provides the best outcome for the people who elect us to serve them.

I understand the concerns of the staff in Waterside House, but let me make this clear: they have been informed throughout the process that, because of the necessity to produce a new IT system, there will be a requirement for fewer staff. No matter what option is chosen, there will be a requirement to have fewer staff in Waterside House. Let me make this clear as well: no matter what outcome is chosen and no matter in which direction the outline business case suggests we head in this matter, there will still be the necessity for a pensions branch, because there will be high-level work, particularly in terms of policy, financial accounting and other areas, that will still be required, and those people will be civil servants.

Some people will not be required in pensions branch in the future. They will not be made redundant. They will be moved around the system in accordance with

the customs and practice of the Civil Service. Those who are publicly saying that 80 civil servants will be made redundant are wrong with their numbers and are wrong to say that those people will be made redundant. I hope that now, and later, I can give some assurance to those people that the concerns that have been whipped up through public comment are not valid.

Civil Service: Car Parking Costs

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given the amount of money that Executive Departments spend each year on car parking spaces in the Belfast area, whether his Department has any plans to increase the number of staff who use more sustainable transport. (AQT 342/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I appreciate that there is a desire across society to try to be more sustainable and more environmentally friendly in our use of transport. By necessity, the Civil Service, and particularly my Department in its stewardship of all properties across the Civil Service, will have a number of properties that have car-parking spaces attached, but the Member will be aware of many schemes that we run in the Civil Service, including a cycle-to-work scheme and car-sharing initiatives that the Minister for Regional Development is responsible for, that encourage civil and public servants right across the board to be more considerate about the mode of transport that they choose to use. However, we have to accept that, in many cases, using motor vehicles to get to a place of work is the best and only option available to people.

Mr McElduff: I suggest to the Minister that one way of reducing such costs and the number of car-parking spaces would be to have a serious approach to the decentralisation of public sector jobs to towns such as Omagh. Are we serious about the relocation and decentralisation of public sector jobs or are we merely paying lip service to it?

Mr Hamilton: The Member will be aware that his party colleague the Minister of Agriculture intends to decentralise headquarters jobs from the Department of Agriculture to Ballykelly. I think that he would welcome that. The town of Omagh, which he is obviously fond of, given that he lives there and represents it, has one of the highest levels of people per 100,000 of the working population working in the public sector. In that respect, there has been a decentralisation of jobs to that area.

I do not accept the argument that, if we were to take all our Departments and put them all in provincial towns, we would suddenly see the end of people driving into work. My experience in Northern Ireland is that people will drive even very short distances to work, so, in that respect, there will still be a need for car-parking spaces whether the headquarters or agency is in Omagh, Belfast, Newtownards or wherever.

Ulster Bank

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has any concerns about the review of the Ulster Bank and its operations here that was announced last week by its state-owned parent bank, the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), and whether he has sought a meeting with RBS to discuss the review. (AQT 343/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I would have been more concerned at the outcome of the announcement had the decision that was taken by the Government in conjunction with RBS been one of the options that was being talked about publicly. We know that the Ulster Bank has been a serious problem within and for the RBS group. Indeed, much of the detail behind the report shows the extent to which Ulster Bank is a problem in the group. We would have had more cause to be concerned today if the option of hiving off the Ulster Bank and all its assets, whether good or bad, and establishing it as a bad bank, either internally or outside of the group, had been taken. We would have more cause for concern if that were the case.

I therefore welcome the fact that the Treasury has taken the decision to retain the Ulster Bank as a core part of RBS's operations. The Member has acknowledged that it is our biggest lending bank, with over 30% of the market. It is the only nationally owned bank, and therefore it is the only bank that takes forward national lending initiatives such as funding for lending and the export finance guarantee scheme in Northern Ireland. It is essential that we have a properly functioning Ulster Bank here. That has been recognised by Treasury.

Do I have concerns? Absolutely. There are areas in the report that cause concern. The second review to establish Ulster Bank on a long-term and sustainable footing is, I think, code for a further restructuring of that bank. I think that it is probably inevitable that there will be further job losses in Ulster Bank and, indeed, other banks before they get to the position where they are functioning properly.

I have some concerns about the timescale of three years for the sale of assets. As the Member will know, doing that in a depressed property market, such as that which we currently have in Northern Ireland, is cause for concern.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I am banking the first part of it. It is reassuring to hear Treasury and RBS's view of Ulster Bank. However, when I hear the word "review", particularly from banks, I think that I am right to be nervous, given that, over the past number of years, the banks have butchered branches and staff numbers. I, therefore, ask the Minister to have direct contact with RBS and —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr A Maginness: — to say to it, "No more branch cuts, and no more staff cuts".

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. It was remiss of me not to address whether I have met Ulster Bank. I have spoken to senior management in Ulster Bank, and I am scheduled to meet them next week. Following on from that meeting, I hope to meet the new chief executive of RBS, Ross McEwan, because I think that there are points, such as those that the Member made, that we need to reiterate.

I think that the report gives us the argument, which we can take to RBS and Treasury, that there is an acknowledgement of Ulster Bank's importance to the Northern Ireland economy. We need Ulster Bank to function properly, because, as the Member and the House will know, businesses are starting to see signs of recovery, and if that continues to be the case, they will want to get the sort of credit that they need to develop their businesses. So, in that respect, we need Ulster Bank to do its job, which is to lend money to people who have viable propositions. So, I also hope to meet Treasury, and I have already spoken to it on the telephone. The joint ministerial task force, on which Arlene Foster and I sit, will, I am sure, concentrate on and drill down into that issue.

In meeting Ulster Bank, I hope to try to influence, as best I can, this new bad bank creation, because Northern Ireland's property market is not the same as that in London and the south-east. Flooding our market with assets over a very short three-year period, which is, of course, distinct from what NAMA is doing in taking a much longer view to distressed assets, could have a seriously

detrimental impact on a property market that is languishing close to the bottom but that is at least showing signs of some improvement. We do not want to kill that stone dead before it has even started.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ceist uimhir a ceathair. Question 4.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topical questions. Just ask the question directly to the Minister.

Mr F McCann: First of all, I congratulate Simon on his recent promotion to Minister.

Air Passenger Duty

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what he will do to deal with the serious problems that the South's decision on air passenger duty will no doubt cause in the North. (AQT 344/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question and his congratulations. The announcement in the Republic of Ireland Budget that the Government will eliminate air passenger duty (APD) has obviously brought the issue to the forefront of people's minds once again. In itself, I do not think that the elimination of APD from €3 down to zero will have a massively significant effect on traffic from Northern Ireland's airports down to Dublin Airport. In fact, that was reflected in public comments that Belfast City Airport made after the Irish Government's Budget announcement. I think that it is fairly transparent why that is the case. Saving €3 on a flight is not enough justification to go down to Dublin Airport considering that you have to pay for petrol, the toll and parking and so forth. However, I accept that having APD in Northern Ireland causes a problem and a distortion.

APD is the very definition of an unfair tax, because it works against regions of the United Kingdom, such as Northern Ireland, Scotland and some parts of northern England as well. In that respect, I am sure that the Member would echo my concerns and join me in saying to Treasury that it is time that it eliminated APD for all flights — it has already been done for long-haul flights — so that we can have a fairer tax situation in Northern, encourage more airlines to operate out of Northern Ireland and increase and enhance our connectivity to the world.

Mr Speaker: That concludes topical questions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. We now move to oral questions to the Minister.

2.15 pm

Rating Review

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what considerations will be given to businesses in town centres when conducting the non-domestic rating review. (AQO 4970/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thought that we had got rid of you earlier.

The ongoing revaluation exercise involves the interpretation of open-market rental evidence, and that will dictate the new rateable values that my Department will publish by the end of next year. The legislation requires that businesses in town centres are treated in exactly the same way as businesses elsewhere, and, therefore, Land and Property Services cannot give special consideration to any location or sector of business. The valuation process is entirely evidence-based and, naturally, that rental evidence reflects the relative advantages and disadvantages of particular trading locations. At the end of the day, it is the open market that establishes current rent levels and thus the new rateable values as well. That alone will determine who pays more and who pays less following the revaluation.

Mr Speaker: Questions 2, 11 and 13 have been withdrawn.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his answer, which was quite rigid and did not suggest much flexibility. I would like to think that the Minister is a listening Minister. Among businesses that are under pressure, rising energy costs and rates are often quoted. Can I ask the Minister this directly: will he agree to meet, either here in Stormont or in Omagh, a representative group of town centre businesses from that area to hear at first hand their concerns about rates?

Mr Hamilton: I am more than happy to meet any group of traders, including those from Omagh. Indeed, since assuming office three months ago, I have met traders from Ballymena, Ballymoney, Belfast and everywhere. I am, in that regard, a listening Minister.

What I am able to do for those people is perhaps a little bit more limited, although I would point out to the Member the raft of initiatives that predecessors in this post have brought forward to try to assist the sorts of businesses that he is talking about. The likes of small business rate relief has been of great assistance to businesses right across Northern Ireland, and, wherever I travel, businesses tell me how important that has been to them. In some cases, it has ensured that they have remained in business and, in some cases, that they have retained some staff.

I accept entirely that there are problems and difficulties in many town centres across Northern Ireland and on many high streets, and I think that some of those will continue. However, we would be in a far worse position if it had not been for the small business rate relief scheme, which has given £1.5 million in relief to properties in Omagh. Of course, his constituency extends beyond Omagh, in case I need to tell him that, and the Strabane District Council area has seen almost £1 million in relief through the small business rate relief scheme.

My Department has also frozen the non-domestic regional rate — I think that we are into the eighth year of that freeze — and, of course, we have introduced empty properties relief to tackle vacancies that are dotted right across town and city centres across Northern Ireland. In the West Tyrone constituency, eight new businesses in Omagh and Strabane have benefited from that 50% rates concession.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. The Minister mentioned in his response the small business rate relief scheme, which is a time-limited scheme, as far as I remember, governed by a sunset clause. Will the Minister consider extending that scheme at the end of its present period?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I am very fond of the small business rate relief scheme, as I mentioned in response to Mr McElduff's question. It has done a lot of positive things for small businesses right across Northern Ireland. That has been recognised by this House, which has approved not just one but two extensions of the small business rate relief scheme to the extent that over half of all business properties in Northern Ireland now receive at least 20% off their rates bill. Compared to similar relief across the United Kingdom, it is an exceptionally extensive and positive scheme. He is right that it is time-limited, but on the question of extending it, I will

conduct a valuation of the scheme next year, and I want to do that after the revaluation has reported its initial findings to see what impact the revaluation has had. The small business rate relief scheme was brought in partly in acknowledgement that we had not had a revaluation for a number of years, and that there were potentially some distortions in the market. If those distortions are ironed out by the revaluation, then the necessity for a small business rate relief scheme may be eliminated. But if it has not been, I am certainly not averse — resources depending, of course — to reintroducing something similar to what we already have.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer so far, but in relation to the 2015 sunset clause which was referred to, if a further extension were to be looked at, would there be any possibility that the rates valuation figure could be increased? I appreciate that it started at £5,000 of rateable value and went up to £10,000. However, we understand that there is still a small number —

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

Mr Girvan: — which require some assistance as well.

Mr Hamilton: As this very successful scheme comes towards the end of its life, there will increasingly be a conversation about what we do beyond 2015. As I said to Mr Bradley, I am not against having a small business rate relief scheme, but there must be a need for it. We must also see the extent of the positive benefits that the scheme has had. I believe that it has had positive benefits, and I am sure that the Member could report from his own constituency that many traders and businesses have benefited from the scheme. It is not that I am against doing it, but I want to see evidence that it has worked. I want to see, through the results of the revaluation, that there is indeed a need for it. If we have seen, as some might anticipate, a correction, move or shift in the balance of where rates are payable to, say, edge-of-town or out-of-town shopping centres or complexes, that might then be to the benefit of small businesses in town and city centres. Therefore, there may not be a need for a relief scheme at all, or to the extent of the one that we have had.

The Member's question allows me, once again, to reiterate my message to people who expect that, because their rents have gone down, their rates will automatically go down as a result of

the revaluation. As the Member knows, that is not necessarily the case. It is an average taken right across Northern Ireland that determine whether they go down or not. I await the results of the revaluation, and then the evaluation of the small business rate relief scheme, to decide what we should do beyond 2015.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer, and certainly I welcome any rate relief schemes. Paying rates will always be painful. Is the Minister thinking outside the box? Is he working with the Treasury to think of completely new ways to finance our councils?

Mr Hamilton: No one likes to pay rates, ourselves included. No Member in the House wants to pay rates.

Mr Kinahan: Especially me.

Mr Hamilton: The Member declares a personal interest there. I would not like to be paying the rateable value of his house, I would like to say. *[Laughter.]* It is a lovely house, though.

Mr Bell: It is a castle, is it not?

Mr Hamilton: I am not sure. House, castle, stately home — I am not sure whether that shows up on the rates bill. It is a lovely property nonetheless.

The Member is right to identify a longer-term problem. Well, it is not even a longer-term problem, because we are starting to see the effect of it now. In their rates bills, retail properties probably pay a higher than proportionate amount, in respect of their contribution to the economy. As we all know, and it does not matter to what part of Northern Ireland you go, town centres are under pressure. They are under pressure from changes in lifestyle and shopping trends, and they are under pressure, as well, from the fact that all of us are using more and more online shopping. Obviously, if you have a shop, the bricks and mortar is a cost, not just in the maintenance and keeping of it and paying for it, but also in the rates bill.

The Member is right to identify that the Treasury, perhaps, has a role and responsibility in this. One of the suggestions mooted is that we move to something where we put a tax on online transactions. I would be interested to see what money this Administration would get from that. By the end of this revaluation, it will be close to 10 years since we in Northern Ireland have looked at our non-domestic taxation system. It would be a timely

opportunity, given those other changes and the moment that it is, once again to look at the options that there might be to amend our non-domestic taxation system.

Without prejudicing that review, I am not entirely sure what system we should move to and whether there are any systems available that would be massively better than the rates, which is a fairly understandable and easy-to-implement system.

However, I am happy to look at any and all options. It might be timely to do that once we get through the revaluation.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Rate Relief

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what rate relief is available in town centres where a significant proportion of retail premises are vacant. (AQO 4972/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am tempted to refer the Member to the answer that I gave some moments ago. A range of rate reliefs can apply in town centres. The small business rate relief is now awarded to almost 25,000 business premises that get at least 20% rate relief. The empty shops rate concession introduced by my predecessor in April 2012 has been extended until 2015. More than 170 new businesses across Northern Ireland have now received a 50% first-year discount. Owners of empty properties benefit from a 50% reduction in rates, unlike the position in the rest of the United Kingdom. Another unique measure is specifically targeted at improving the appearance of town centres. It allows the use of window displays in empty shops for non-commercial purposes without triggering the full occupied rate.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the plight of town centres throughout Northern Ireland, has the Minister made any assessment of making it easier for owners to convert shops that have been lying empty for some time for other uses, thereby reducing the rates that would be demanded?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. From the people in towns and chambers of commerce that I have already visited, I frequently hear of their belief that, in the future, our town centres cannot be so dominated and led in development by retail.

That is because, as I said in response to Mr Kinahan, our retail habits and behaviour are changing. Therefore, town centres need to change. They need to become much more commercial and have a lot more office space. They certainly need to have more residential space, and they probably need to have a lot more cultural and leisure space as well. If our town centres are to survive and thrive, they need to be different from the ones that entered the downturn. Indeed, many traders will openly admit that there were far too many shops in their town centres. Although some might have been sustainable when we were going through boom times and there was a lot of money about, it was a false sustainability in the longer term. Unfortunately, we have seen that in many town centres across Northern Ireland.

There is a planning element to converting retail premises for other uses through change of use. The Member should take that up with the Minister of the Environment. I would be keen to see more residential use, particularly of the space above shops. A good scheme was run by the Department for Social Development a number of years ago. Perhaps you could take up with that Department. That, resources permitting, would be a good scheme to diversify our town centres. I again point the Member to what we have already done with empty property relief to get vacant retail units back into use. In our Ards Borough Council area, seven shops have availed themselves of £15,000 worth of relief in their first year of operation. Although it is only seven and he and I know that there are many more than seven vacant units across the area, it is at least a start.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. How does our non-domestic rating system compare with the rest of the UK?

Mr Hamilton: I like to think that it compares favourably. I would not for a second stand in front of the House and say that Northern Ireland has by far the best non-domestic rating system. The nature of devolution is that devolved regions and Administrations will choose what they think is best for their area. However, I think that we compare exceptionally favourably with what happens in the rest of the United Kingdom. I will give two examples of that. One is the 50% relief that we give to empty premises. I am not talking about those that are occupied in the first year, although, that said, our empty property relief has been replicated in Scotland and Wales, so, sometimes, Northern Ireland is in the vanguard and is doing innovative things that others copy. The relief that an empty property gets in Northern Ireland is 50%. That compares exceptionally

favourably with England and Wales, where such ratepayers pay 100%, and Scotland, where they pay 90%.

Another positive of the business rate system that we have in Northern Ireland is that increases in GB are determined through the September retail price index (RPI) figure. For this year, that was 3.2%. In Northern Ireland, we set the increase for the regional rate part of our bill using the lowest inflation measure that there is, which is the GDP deflator. For this year and next, that is set at 2.7%. When rates and regional rates rise, the rise is lower in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. I would not argue that we are by far the best, but we have shown by our innovation in the Department that we are prepared to listen and respond to the problems. As a result, we have a very favourable and comparable non-domestic rating system in Northern Ireland.

2.30 pm

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses so far. In Belfast city centre, along with all the pressures that were addressed today, there was an extended period of disruptive protests. Will the Minister accept and promote the fact that, this incoming year, especially pre-Christmas, we need a city centre that is free from such disruptive protests?

Mr Hamilton: I do not wish to get into who caused it and who started it all; I do not think that that would get any of us anywhere. I am sure that the Member will join me in protecting and defending anyone's right to protest in Northern Ireland. There are plenty of Members in the House who, down through the years, have protested about a lot of things. I agree to the extent that I do not think that anyone wants our city centre or, indeed, any part of Northern Ireland crippled during the important trading period over Christmas by repeats of any of the scenes of violence that we saw last year. I absolutely defend and protect the right of anyone to protest, but it must be done in a lawful and peaceful way.

Mr Allister: The Minister may be aware of the news today that, according to a survey, Ballymena is now in the unenviable position of having the highest proportion of empty shops across Northern Ireland, with a staggering 27% of shops being empty. What can the Minister do to address that? I appreciate that he cannot rig the rating system, but, if the present concessions are not arresting the decline, surely he can do more. Is his mind open to

doing more on relief for town centre shops so that we can arrest the situation in a hitherto prosperous town such as Ballymena?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his comments, and I agree. I can remember, many years ago, as a child being taken to Ballymena by my parents. It was a vibrant and dynamic shopping town. Across Northern Ireland, we can see changes in shopping trends and behaviour and the impact of edge-of-town and out-of-town retail, and Ballymena is one of the first places to spring to mind. I was in Ballymena a couple of weeks ago and met the mayor, several councillors and the chamber of commerce. Although I do not deny that there are many vacancies in Ballymena town centre — I have seen them for myself — I was somewhat surprised in that the message that comes from the publication of the report today does not chime with what I heard from many retailers in Ballymena, who accept that their town is under pressure and that there are vacancies but are reporting to me that, through many initiatives that the council is leading, they are seeing trade start to go up, particularly in and around the town centre. I understand that the report is not just about the town centre but about peripheral areas, and that, as the Member will know, will sometimes distort the figures and make them look far worse than they are.

What assistance and support can the Executive give to Ballymena? It is about towns right across Northern Ireland and not just Ballymena, but I will highlight what we have done in Ballymena. Through the small business rate relief scheme, 1,183 properties have got £1.7 million of relief on their rates bills. Ballymena was slow to start on the issue of empty properties and trying to address some of the vacancies. That is uncharacteristic of the Ballymena area, given that there was free money on the go. Four new premises are now open in Ballymena that are availing themselves of £11,000 of relief in the first year of their operation. I accept that there are probably other things that we could do, but I operate with a very defined spending envelope, and, no matter how many things I could do, even if I eliminated rates for some businesses, having no rates bill at all is no substitute for not having sufficient turnover. If you do not have a viable business and do not have a turnover that is enough to keep you above water, there is nothing that I or anyone else can do with the rates bill to keep a business in operation.

Fiscal Powers

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the review of fiscal powers, which forms part of the economic pact, including details of the terms of reference and the proposed programme of work. (AQO 4973/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. DFP is undertaking a scoping exercise to examine the Scottish Calman and Welsh Silk commission reports and the positions taken on the possible devolution of each individual tax or duty in those jurisdictions. After that, a work programme will be developed to progress the exercise in order to put recommendations on the possible devolution of additional fiscal powers to the Executive by autumn 2014, in line with the commitment in 'Building a Prosperous and United Community'.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Are there any plans to involve external experts' opinion in the review?

Mr Hamilton: There are no specific plans at this stage, but people have already come forward with opinions. I think particularly of the recent NICVA report, which looked at additional tax-raising powers that the Stormont Assembly may wish to take upon itself. I am by no means against listening to outside voices and involving those in giving some evidence to any review, but, ultimately, as the Member will appreciate, the final decision rests with us in the Assembly about whether we want to take the powers upon ourselves.

Mr Humphrey: Is the Minister pressing the national Government at Westminster for Northern Ireland to be treated the same as Scotland and Wales?

Mr Hamilton: The nature of the devolutionary settlement is that we will all want to be treated in slightly different ways depending on what our particular objectives are as regions. So far, we have pursued the devolution of tax powers that would be of economic advantage to Northern Ireland. So, we continue to pursue corporation tax powers, and work is ongoing in respect of ensuring that, should a positive decision be taken by the Prime Minister next autumn, we are ready to devolve those powers as quickly as possible. Obviously, the Member and the House will know the positive economic benefits that being able to reduce our corporation tax rate would bring for Northern Ireland. The other

power that we have already devolved is air passenger duty for direct long-haul flights. Although we did not pursue that as a tax per se to devolve for Northern Ireland, it was the solution to a problem that we had and brought economic benefit to Northern Ireland by retaining the direct connection between Belfast and New York.

The approach adopted by other regions such as Scotland and Wales has been much more dominated by politics in trying to increase fiscal accountability there and was particularly aggressively pursued in Scotland by the Government for, I think, more political reasons than we have here. Regions will want to be treated in different ways for different reasons. I am not against devolving more tax powers to Northern Ireland if there is a defined benefit for Northern Ireland in doing so, but we always have to be mindful of the gap that it might cause in the revenues that we receive as an Executive and, therefore, our ability to spend on providing services to the people who elect us.

Mrs Cochrane: Does the Minister believe that we in Northern Ireland can learn any lessons from the recent Calman commission and Silk commission in Scotland and Wales respectively? Is there any danger that they could now outflank Northern Ireland on tax-varying powers?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question. I do not think there is any risk of us being outflanked, for the reasons that I mentioned to Mr Humphrey. I think that regions will want to choose different powers depending on their particular interests. What has come out as a result of the announcement in Wales in the last week following on from the Silk commission is that, in some respects, Wales is just catching up with where we are. The biggest thing that it got were borrowing powers, which we have had for the past number of years and have maximised over the past decade or so in order to deliver more capital infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

There is a frequent demand to devolve more powers, but it may not always be the case that Treasury will want to give you those powers. It appears from Silk and Calman as well as the response from Treasury that the only powers on offer are land-based powers, such as stamp duty and landfill tax, which cannot be easily moved across boundaries.

I do not fear that we will be outflanked or fall behind other regions. In many respects, particularly on APD, we are well ahead of other regions. The ability to adjust APD for direct

long-haul flights is something that the Welsh and Scottish Finance Ministers look at covetously.

NAMA

5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his level of engagement with the National Assets Management Agency's Northern Ireland advisory committee, including the issues he has addressed with it. (AQO 4974/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I met NAMA's chairman, Frank Daly, and the Northern Ireland advisory committee on 7 October as part of my regular engagement with the agency and other banks. We discussed a broad range of issues around NAMA's management of its Northern Ireland assets, including the importance of ensuring that they are released at a suitable time and without having a negative impact on the market here, which is beginning to show some first signs of recovery. The committee assured me that its approach is to encourage a phased and orderly realisation of the assets while seeking to avoid saturating the market with additional unwanted supply.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra. How will the Minister ensure that NAMA's Northern assets are redirected? How will the NAMA committee be stepped when it comes to efficiency and accountability?

Mr Hamilton: I will take those points in reverse.

The committee is accountable to the Government in the Irish Republic, who established it, and to its board; it is not accountable to me. I have to say that I do not have any particular desire for any element of NAMA to be accountable to me, given the headache that that would involve. However, as the Member will, I am sure, want to hear, I am prepared to engage with NAMA at any and all times on any and all issues because of the importance that it has for Northern Ireland. NAMA holds assets with a nominal value of around £3.5 billion spread across Northern Ireland but primarily in Belfast and in Counties Antrim and Down. Those are assets that I would like to see put into the market at an appropriate moment, because NAMA has some very good properties that could be developed and could benefit Northern Ireland's economy.

My biggest concern and one that I will always engage on — my predecessor did likewise — is to ensure that, when releasing those assets, which we ultimately want to see developed, it is not done in a way that would harm the property market in Northern Ireland in the way that I talked about to Mr Maginness earlier. RBS seems to be heading towards moving its assets on very quickly, in contrast to what NAMA has said that it would do. To be fair, NAMA has shown, through its behaviour, that it takes a much longer-term approach to the assets that it has. That is encouraging.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for that detailed answer. Will he update us on NAMA's portfolio in Northern Ireland and outline what efforts the Executive will make to encourage it to engage in public projects that would be to the benefit of all of us?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. Overall, NAMA's Northern Ireland portfolio had a nominal value of about £3.5 billion; its acquisition value is, I understand, £1.3 billion, which is, as the Member will appreciate, a substantial holding in a Northern Ireland context. We have better information about NAMA's assets than we do about some of the banks' assets. I understand that 18% of what it has is office accommodation, 17% is retail, 10% is residential, 5% is development and 3% is hotel and leisure. The balance is made up from land, at about one quarter of the portfolio, and 22% is made up of other investment assets. As I mentioned to the Member opposite, 46% of the assets are in Belfast, and 80% are located in Counties Antrim and Down, with the balance being elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

As for encouraging NAMA to do some specific projects, I can, to be fair, think of two projects in different areas. One was moving forward with a residential project on the outskirts of Belfast at Millmount, Dundonald, where 95 properties are being developed and which will create 100 jobs during the construction stage. The other significant one was moving forward with Lanyon Plaza and the Soloist in the centre of Belfast, which brings much needed grade-A office accommodation that we can utilise for the growth of existing companies or for attracting foreign direct investment.

Mr A Maginness: NAMA has done some very good development work, particularly in the South and in Britain. I know that the Minister referred to development at Dundonald and so forth, but did he get any indication that NAMA

would expand that work? It is important that that investment takes place.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his third question on the topic today.

I encourage NAMA and will continue to encourage it to do so in a sensible and prudent way. Interestingly and to follow on from what I said to Mr Craig, NAMA has lent around £140 million to businesses in Northern Ireland so that they can add value to the assets that it will ultimately realise value for in the longer term.

As we know, it has a lot of cash at its disposal. It has employed that elsewhere and is starting to employ it in Northern Ireland. I encourage NAMA to do that in a sensible, measured and prudent way over the years to come.

2.45 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Speaker: We start with topical questions.

Heart Attack Survival Rates

1. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to improve the survival rates for those people who suffer a heart attack. (AQT 351/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank the Member for the question. We are taking a number of actions to improve survival rates from heart attack.

First, my Chief Medical Officer is devising a community resuscitation strategy to ensure that people are better equipped to respond when a heart attack takes place, and especially where defibrillators are available that they can make full and best use of them in a safe way. Very importantly, we have also established percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) units on a 24/7 basis. The Belfast PCI unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital has been launched. It will cover 75% of Northern Ireland's population and make a massive difference. The other unit will be in Altnagelvin Hospital and will be in place from next summer. It will cover the rest of Northern Ireland, and it will probably also offer a service beyond Northern Ireland. We will have 100% coverage for PCI.

The difference that PCI can make is absolutely fantastic, and we are looking at a reduced mortality rate of around 2%, which equates to around 20 people living as a result of having the PCI unit in place. Not only that, but for every hour after someone has had a heart attack without having such an intervention, it does damage to the heart muscle. Having PCI units in place to respond very quickly to the needs of people will ensure that the heart muscle is not damaged. Consequently, people who suffer heart attacks and receive PCI will live considerably longer.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for that. That is good news. Will he comment on how cardiac catheterisation laboratories — cath labs — might be rolled out across Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: We have a series of cath labs. The cath labs that I referred to — the PCI units — will be provided on a 24/7 basis in the Royal Victoria and Altnagelvin hospitals. Cath labs will be available in other parts of Northern Ireland but will not be provided on a 24/7 basis.

Interestingly enough, PCI works by pushing a very fine wire through the patient's artery. Medical staff can then identify where the blockage is, and the procedure takes the blockage out. All that it leaves behind is a small mark on the patient's arm. It is a non-traumatic intervention, but it is hugely effective. I know that our consultants and others are looking at the possibility of using that intervention on stroke patients. If we ever got to that point, it would have a massive impact.

Currently, if people suffer from what are known as ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI) heart attacks — in other words, they have in their bloodstream a blood clot or a piece of fat, which people generally bring upon themselves by eating the wrong foods — we have the ability to remove that very effectively if we get them to hospital on time. By setting those units up in the Royal Victoria and Altnagelvin hospitals, we will be able to get people into hospital very quickly.

Accident and Emergency: Recommendations

2. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he plans to respond to the recommendations in the recent report from the College of Emergency Medicine. (AQT 352/11-15)

Mr Poots: I had a look at the report from the College of Emergency Medicine, and it was

certainly not the negative report that was reported in the press and other media. It identified that a lot of good things were happening in our emergency departments.

The report identified that, right across the United Kingdom and beyond, there is a problem with getting emergency medical consultants. The royal colleges, in particular, need to look at how we can ensure that adequate numbers of emergency medicine consultants, registrars and doctors are available to carry out the care. I think that many of the things that we have done will help us to make best use of the available resources. Certainly, although many people criticised us when the City Hospital closed initially, it is recognised that, when you have two hospitals in such close proximity, you are better to have your consultants based on the one site where they can support each other, provide cover for each other and ensure that there is adequate cover on a 24/7 basis.

Ms Ruane: The Minister may or may not be aware that there are 10 different recommendations. Given those 10 recommendations, will the Minister outline what additional resources will be allocated? We want to see safety for our patients right across the island of Ireland and, indeed, in this part of Ireland. Will the Minister let me know what additional resources he is going to provide to the hospital to ensure that it can fulfil the recommendations?

Mr Poots: For the Belfast Trust's emergency departments, there were 7,700 attendances in September 2013. Of that number, two people had to wait for more than 12 hours. So, we can see that turnaround is working quite well. It is recognised that safety and performance are very good in the Royal Victoria Hospital and, indeed, across our hospital sites.

You talked about resources, and we have ensured that we have supported additional nurses across the system. We are very keen to support all the hospitals that are looking for additional consultants. Altnagelvin is struggling to get those additional consultants; nonetheless, we as a Department are supporting the trusts in identifying consultants, having those people there and having that qualitative medical resource to carry out the necessary performance. So, I think that there are actually a lot of good-news stories on emergency departments.

Antrim Area Hospital was constantly in the headlines when I came into office, but you are not hearing about that now because of the considerable good work that has been done by

the people, the management, the staff, the doctors, the nurses and everyone else to ensure that they are turning that facility around and are using it well.

City Hospital: Medical Assessment Unit

3. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an assurance that 5 North, the medical assessment unit in Belfast City Hospital, will remain open and be further developed. (AQT 353/11-15)

Mr Poots: The medical assessment unit works well in conjunction with the emergency department in the Royal Victoria Hospital. The medical assessment unit enables us to take in people who require treatment in which the City Hospital specialises. It enables that to happen in a way that is very convenient for the public and that causes less trauma for the individual who is receiving care. That is important.

I have not heard anything to suggest that there is any threat to the medical assessment unit. No one has mentioned that to me. The Member might have heard something different, but, as far as I am concerned, the medical assessment unit is working well and, to the best of my knowledge, that will continue to be the case.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his assurance. Does he agree that not only does 5 North provide very necessary rapid and targeted early intervention for patients, especially older people, but it reduces overcrowding in A&E, which is in keeping with the aims of Transforming Your Care?

Mr Poots: Direct admission to key wards such as that is very important. If GPs can refer people to medical assessment units and avoid emergency departments and all the others who are in those emergency departments, all the better, particularly for older people. As we know, the City Hospital specialises in urology, and an awful lot of older people will have infections in their bladders. So, it is very important that we can treat those people with dignity and respect. That is not always the case in the health service, I have to say, but we need to ensure that it is the case as often as possible. I would like it to always be the case that those people are treated with respect and dignity. I get very positive feedback on the medical assessment unit from people who go through the facility and into the City Hospital.

Homosexuality: Treatment

4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given his responsibilities, whether he still holds the view, expressed by him and by members of his party, that homosexuality is an illness treatable by medical or psychiatric means. (AQT 354/11-15)

Mr Poots: I do not think that I ever said that.

Mr Lunn: I will try to find the reference for him. I will ask the same question again: does he think that homosexuality is an illness treatable by medical or psychiatric means or does he think that, as has been expressed by another Member of his party, it is an abomination?

Mr Poots: I do not think that it is an illness, in the first instance. I think that many people have various elements to their lives. When it comes to sexuality, many people who are heterosexual desire lots of other folks, and those of us who are married should not be doing that, so people can resist urges. I encourage people to take a sensible, rational view on these issues. I know that there have been a number of challenges about me and the various stances that I take. I will make it very clear that my stance on blood safety is purely about safety.

When it comes to my stance on adoption, I have just come from a midwifery-led unit in Lagan Valley, and all the people who were giving birth in that unit were women, and all those women were not impregnated by other women. So, whether one believes in God or in evolution, the natural order is for a man and a woman to have a child. Therefore, that has made my views on adoption and raising children very clear; it should be a man and a woman who raise a child. People can criticise me for that, and they can challenge me for that and say that it is backward. The truth is that still today, in this modern era, it is only a man and a woman who can produce a child. Therefore, it is in the best order for a man and a woman to raise a child.

Jobs: Health Sector

5. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the report by the economy and jobs initiative task and finish group. (AQT 355/11-15)

Mr Poots: That work has run on from Connected Health and the work that our Department does with the Department of

Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We want to ensure that every opportunity is taken to enable us to maximise the benefits to our economy associated with our healthcare. Healthcare accounts for around 10% of jobs in Northern Ireland and about 9% of spend in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is very important that we identify how best we can use that resource, how we can encourage that resource to be spent and maximise the spend that happens in Northern Ireland in respect of the development of drugs, procedures and innovation, so that a lot of that takes place in Northern Ireland. We have done a lot of work on that. We have established an ecosystem, which will involve the universities, the health and social care trusts and the business sector. It is looked on quite enviously by lots of other bigger areas. For example, I am in negotiations with the state of New York on a memorandum of understanding on these issues. We have three-star reference status in the European Union, which is the highest status that has been awarded thus far. Thirteen regions fitted into it, and Northern Ireland is one of those. We are making huge progress on this front, and Northern Ireland is being seen in Europe and the United States of America as a place that is hugely progressive. Sometimes, our media wants us to be demonstrated to be a place that is backward and regressive, when others are looking to us and saying that Northern Ireland is leading the way.

Mr Speaker: That concludes topical questions to the Minister of Health. We now move to oral questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Questions 5, 8, 10 and 15 have been withdrawn.

3.00 pm

Elective Care

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether elective care was his Department's priority for the October monitoring round. (AQO 4985/11-15)

Mr Poots: Elective care was one of three DHSSPS priorities in the October monitoring round, alongside clinical negligence settlements and Transforming Your Care (TYC) transitional funding. For the purposes of the monitoring round process, clinical negligence, at £20 million, was ranked as the top priority, as it is inescapable and, therefore, has a direct impact on the scope to meet the wider pressures across Health and Social Care (HSC) in 2013-14. The bid for the TYC transitional costs, at

£18.7 million, was ranked second on the basis that it is the most important strategic change programme being undertaken within DHSSPS. The bid for elective care was ranked third. It is aimed at assisting in addressing backlogs in elective care waiting times across a range of specialties.

However, the final prioritisation of bids is ultimately determined by the Executive when they approve the outcome of each monitoring round. I received some £14 million of my £26 million bid for elective care in the October monitoring round, and intend to resubmit the bid for the remaining £12 million in the January monitoring round.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister enlighten us as to how the Executive changed his priorities, as he outlined them, from clinical negligence, Transforming Your Care and elective care, to come out in a different order when it came to resources?

Mr Poots: It might be above my pay grade to do that. I ask for the money, and they give it to me. I ask for it for my priorities, and they might see it somewhat differently. Very often, that is the case, and it has been the case in other Departments that I have been in. I think that it is the case for other Ministers in other Departments, too. Sometimes what we might see as a priority, others might view differently and look on it more strategically, in a sense, and think that a wider view can be taken by the Executive than by a single Department.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. What progress has been made with elective waiting times in his time as Minister?

Mr Poots: The number waiting for an outpatient appointment, for example, has been cut by 4,182 since June 2011, with excess waits reduced by 12,277. The number waiting for an inpatient admission is down by 7,361 compared with what it was in June 2011, with excess waits reduced by 5,936. However, I think it is very important that I state here today that we are not complacent. Things are going in the right direction, but there is considerably more work to be done. We have excellent people working in our health and social care trusts and our systems, turning things around very, very well. We need to keep the momentum going, build on the momentum and ensure that we can continue to reduce waiting times to a time in

which people should reasonably expect to be seen, without having to have excessive waits.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the community care and treatment centre play a role in providing healthcare in Newry in the future?

Mr Poots: Obviously, we have said that we would support Newry with a proposed £40 million health treatment centre. That is something that has been advertised and on which we are working. I know that there has been some degree of reluctance from some of the GPs on the issue. I think that we need to iron that out, because if Newry does not want to proceed with that, there are other places that, obviously, would. If Newry wants to do something that is a bit different, which might involve doing something close to the existing GP site that has, I know, a Roads Service car park close to it, and involve us doing a scheme there, that is something that we would be happy to look at. We are not interested in imposing solutions on Newry; we are interested in delivering solutions with Newry, and that is something that we will continue to do.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that elective treatment using National Health Service assets in a planned fashion can be better value for money than contracting out healthcare?

Mr Poots: Yes, I do. However, in some instances where you do not have the requisite consultants or surgeons, are we to sit and wait until new people are appointed? Very often, the market can be quite limited and, therefore, the appointment process can be quite slow. Do we allow others to wait while that happens? Or, will we go out and ensure that people get care at the appropriate time? I am not prepared to say that I will never use the private sector. By using the private sector occasionally, we can ensure that waiting lists are shorter and that people do not suffer pain for longer because of someone's socialist viewpoint that the private sector is evil and we can never use it, whereas the public sector is good and we should always use it. We need to be practical, sensible and rational as we move forward and use services that are best value for money and can deliver for us within an appropriate time frame.

Waiting Times: OT Referrals

2. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he will reduce the current waiting times for an occupational therapist referral visit in the

Western Health and Social Care Trust area, which is currently approximately 18 weeks. (AQO 4986/11-15)

Mr Poots: Occupational therapists (OTs) use a variety of activities and/or equipment — for example, specialist seating, wheelchairs and adaptations — to enable recovery after illness or injury and to support independent living and health. A number of actions have been taken forward over the past few years to improve waiting times. Standardised access criteria are in place across Northern Ireland to ensure that all trusts have a consistent approach. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has commenced a capacity and demand analysis for occupational therapy services in the Western Trust to understand more clearly the reasons for the deterioration in waiting times. In the interim, the HSCB has provided non-recurring funding to the Western Trust, which is expected to ensure that the current waiting time for assessment is reduced and that, by March 2014, no patient will have been waiting more than nine weeks for assessment.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his response and welcome the standardising of waiting times. Will the Minister also assure the House that a process will be put in place to ensure that reports from OT visits will be speedily completed and forwarded to the appropriate bodies without undue delay?

Mr Poots: I think that occupational therapy is hugely important. Anyone who knows someone who has received the services of an occupational therapist will recognise how important it is. Many people need reablement and many have suffered major traumatic incidents in their healthcare. A few years ago, the OT waiting time target was 26 weeks. It was then reduced to 13 weeks, and I have reduced it to nine weeks. It is important that we seek to ensure that we can deliver. In March this year, 127 people were waiting for more than nine weeks. That is transformationally better than a few years ago. I remember, as an MLA, often trying to get an OT to visit someone who had had a stroke. The person had fallen quite ill and was unable to get about as they had previously and so forth, so they really needed this, but it was delayed.

I am not responsible for other Departments. When an OT provides a report to, for example, the Housing Executive, it is for the Housing Executive to respond within an appropriate time frame. I am responsible for the trusts. So, if OTs refer issues to trusts and the equipment does not come out in time, I would certainly be

happy to ensure that it does, but I do not believe that to be the case.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Will the Minister update us on the implementation of the allied health professionals' strategy?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. I launched Northern Ireland's first allied health professionals' strategy, and a lot of work has already taken place in implementing that. A good example of the work of OTs in delivering on the strategy is reablement. OTs are working in and, in many cases, leading reablement teams in the community. The reablement model promotes greater independence. It reduces unnecessary reliance on statutory services. The ethos of reablement is to provide planned, short-term care support that is person-centred and promotes daily independence in personal and domestic activities.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answers and acknowledge his endeavours to reduce the waiting time for assessment. Does the Minister agree that bed blocking is still an issue and that the waiting time for assessment contributes to that, hence displacing other patients?

Mr Poots: The issue of bed blocking is considerably improved and was improving even before I became Minister. We all recognise it as a problem and one to which the trusts have, I think, been trying to respond.

It might still happen on occasions, but we are in a considerably better place. In many ways, we are envied across the UK because we have a wholly integrated health and social care system. In England, councils and local authorities look after social services. The result of that is that, when people get out of hospital, councils very often do not facilitate things as quickly as they should because the cost burden is on them. When it comes to costs being transferred, there is not the same issue with our integrated system. It is, of course, hugely beneficial, for individuals and hospitals, to get people out of hospital at the appropriate time. Therefore, bed blocking is not the issue that it was a few years ago, but I suspect that it may still happen on occasions. However, I think that the system works relatively efficiently.

Mr Speaker: Mr Wells is not in his place to ask question 3.

Child Sexual Exploitation Inquiry

4. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the terms of reference for the independent, expert-led inquiry into child sexual exploitation. (AQO 4988/11-15)

Mr Poots: As the member will be aware, in an oral statement to the House on 5 November, I announced the appointment of Professor Kathleen Marshall to lead the inquiry into child sexual exploitation. I also informed Members that, as is normal practice, Professor Marshall was given the opportunity to shape and agree the final terms of reference for the inquiry. As agreed, the inquiry will seek to establish the nature of child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland and measure the extent to which it occurs; examine the effectiveness of current cross-sectoral child safeguarding and protection arrangements and measures to prevent and tackle child sexual exploitation; make recommendations on the future actions that are required to prevent and tackle child sexual exploitation and who should be responsible for those actions; and report the findings of the inquiry within one year of its commencement.

In addition, the inquiry should consider specific safeguarding and protection issues for looked-after children, taking into account the ongoing thematic review by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI); seek the views of children and young people in Northern Ireland and other key stakeholders; and engage with parents to identify the issues that they are facing and seek their views on what needs to be done to help them to keep their children safe from the risk of child sexual exploitation.

The inquiry will not focus on the circumstances of and/or responses to the 22 children who are part of the ongoing police investigation that is known as Operation Owl. That will be the focus of the separate thematic review that is being undertaken by the SBNI. However, available learning that is generated from that review will be taken into account by the inquiry.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. It is unfortunate that he did not go to the Committee before coming to the House because if he had, he may have learned something, and we may have a better inquiry. What guarantees can he give to assure the House that the inquiry will be more than a report?

Mr Poots: There are three inquiries. The police investigation is happening, and it is important

that they conduct their course of work. There is the thematic inquiry into the 22 cases. The inquiry that I have launched will look at the overall scenario and how we could do things better, and it will also look at policy.

Perhaps I would have learned something from the Committee. The Member may think that the former Scottish commissioner for children's health, who is an eminent professor and hugely qualified to conduct that work, also needs to learn something. I think that Professor Marshall is very well placed to conduct the inquiry. She is a very knowledgeable individual who has the requisite skills to identify the issues that we should look at. I tend to take a lot of cognisance of what she might have to say.

Mr Campbell: Given that there is a land border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, will the Minister outline what steps might be taken in the future to try to ensure that cross-border child sexual exploitation is prevented as far as possible?

Mr Poots: Predators, of course, do not recognise borders as blocking them. They will, in fact, often use borders to assist them. It is important that we are aware of that and work closely with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that the border does not become a barrier to child protection. We have a cross-border work programme that is taken forward by a cross-border steering group on child protection. It was agreed in July 2012. The steering group has identified key areas in which, together, our respective jurisdictions can continue to make significant progress over the next few years.

3.15 pm

The work programme will promote shared learning and contribute further to improving practice in specific areas of safeguarding and child protection, focusing on five work streams.

Work stream 1 is a knowledge exchange forum, which will promote continued learning through the use of research and evidence-based practice. Work stream 2 is quality and effectiveness, through which we will progress initiatives to build workforce capacity and improve the quality and effectiveness of social work and social care work, interventions and practice.

Work stream 3 deals with the deaths of children in care and will contribute to the learning about the deaths of children in care by developing an overview and analysis of the features of deaths

of children in care in both jurisdictions. Work stream 4 is cultural competence and safeguarding and will assist in developing common guidance for practitioners who work with other cultures. Work stream 5 deals with specialist services, exploring opportunities to develop cross-border specialisms.

So, there is clearly a course of work that is being done. We have seen evidence in recent days of those who have sought to use the border to evade prosecution. I am glad that that was overcome and that, recently, someone was prosecuted for that very action.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for his replies thus far. While these inquiries are taking place, what interim processes are there to ensure that children in care are appropriately looked after and not put in vulnerable positions?

Mr Poots: The children are being looked after and, as far as possible, the staff in our residential care homes will seek to ensure that they are not put in vulnerable positions. Some of the children will believe that they are in a loving relationship. I believe that, sometimes, that is misplaced. In some instances it may be a 16-year-old with a 19-year-old — try to convince them that it is anything other than their boyfriend and so forth — but it is still wrong. We need to assist the young people in their learning and knowledge of the risks that might be brought upon them.

There is much more serious stuff out there as well. Children might go to party houses where high levels of abuse take place. The majority of people in this House, if not all, would find that wholly repellent. We need to ensure that we protect children as far as possible from those circumstances.

If learning becomes obvious to us during the inquiry, we will not wait until the end of the inquiry to implement it. Implementation will take place immediately where we are advised that we should change procedures for the benefit of children.

Mr Beggs: In your September statement on child sexual exploitation, you indicated that you were open to the involvement of the Education and Training Inspectorate for the benefit and protection of children. Given the apparently dysfunctional relationship between you and the Minister of Education, what makes you so confident that he will approve the involvement of the Education and Training Inspectorate in working with the inquiry?

Mr Poots: The Education and Training Inspectorate helped us to draw up the guidelines. What makes me confident is that Minister O'Dowd told me he would. *[Laughter.]*

Paediatric Cardiac Surgery Services

6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on making a decision on the future of paediatric cardiac surgery services for Belfast. (AQO 4990/11-15)

Mr Poots: I met the Republic of Ireland's Minister for Health, Dr James Reilly TD, on 12 September 2013 to continue my discussions on the potential for a two-centre model that would provide paediatric cardiac surgery services in Belfast and Dublin. Consideration of that proposal is continuing at an official level to determine whether such a model would be feasible. I will inform the Assembly of the outcome when I announce my decision on the future commissioning of that service, which I hope to do as soon as possible.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that now, more than a year since restrictions were placed on children's heart surgery in Belfast, the lack of clarity and the ongoing delay of an outcome causes increasing distress for families? Will he give us a more concrete timescale for the completion of the review? Does he accept that an all-Ireland network of children's heart surgery, with a footprint in Belfast, is what is needed?

Mr Poots: I accept that the delay is undesirable and that it causes further consternation to families. That is not what we wish to have. However, I need people to cooperate with me and to be agreeable to what this House wants, and that is what we have been working on. That is a course of work that will have to be seen through if we are to be successful.

I urge people to be patient a little longer. Time is of the essence. Professor Wood leaves his role in December, so we need to have something in place before that happens. That is a course of work that we are continuing to engage in. I hope to be in a position to give the House a full update in the not-too-distant future, bearing in mind that we are losing one of our surgeons in December.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware of joint services such as those that operate in Toronto and Ottawa and other parts of North America. Has he given any consideration as to how that type of model could work with regard to how the

service is delivered in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic?

Mr Poots: We have, and Minister Reilly and I agreed that we would look for some international expertise that could give us advice on the issue. On a recent trip to Boston, I met an eminent surgeon who has overall responsibility for around 1,000 procedures taking place in his hospital. We are jointly seeking his help to give us advice and to provide advice to the clinicians as to how best we can continue to support the children in Northern Ireland who require congenital cardiac surgery. I think that that has the potential to be a significant advance forward.

Mrs McKeivitt: Does the Minister think that the new funding recently announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the new children's hospital will change the context of the debate?

Mr Poots: No. I think that we will be able to provide a better facility for people to be cared in. However, at this moment, the care received, certainly in cardiology, is world class and second to none. The care provided in the surgical side, again, is a very safe service. We want to ensure that we can continue to provide the full cardiology service and continue to provide a surgical service in Belfast.

Children's Hospital

7. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the new regional children's hospital will allow for children's heart services to be located on site. (AQO 4991/11-15)

Mr Poots: The future provision of children's heart services at the new children's hospital is a matter for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in conjunction with the Health and Social Care Board. However, I can advise that the new children's hospital has been sized to accommodate children's heart services, and it is the intention that all paediatric cardiology services currently provided in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children will be provided in the new children's hospital.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. I wonder whether he can provide us with clarity around a timeline for a decision on children's heart services.

Mr Poots: The clarity is that a timeline has to be delivered before the end of December. Therefore, I will certainly bring something to the House in this term to make very clear how we are proceeding with congenital cardiac care.

I am delighted with the funding that is coming from the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the children's hospital. It is something that I have been working on consistently for the past two and a half years. The facility is not as good as we would like it to be with regard to the care that is being provided for our children and young people. When I took the Minister down there, he had the same reaction and has supported the proposal.

I was criticised some time ago for saying that roads were not as big a priority as other things. I know that Mr Allister and others criticised me for that. This, I believe, is the number one priority for capital spending in Northern Ireland, and it should be the number one priority, because it is wrong that children are being cared for in a facility that is wholly substandard in its physical capacity. I am delighted that we are able to respond very positively on this front.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I am pleased to hear that paediatric services will be retained in Belfast, but will he say more about the outline business case for the new hospital in Belfast?

Mr Poots: The Belfast Trust has developed an outline business case for the construction of a new 155-bed regional children's hospital. In addition to the services currently provided in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC), bed and theatre modelling for a new hospital also includes provision for services for children up to 16 years of age, with flexibility to increase that to 18, as the outcome of the review of paediatric services recommends; activity currently undertaken outside the RBHSC; and activity currently transferred to other facilities because of insufficient capacity there. In addition to the enabling works and decants to facilitate the development of the hospital, site infrastructural updates including an energy centre are required. As I said, existing facilities are cramped and unfit to deliver healthcare in the 21st century. It is critical that we do all these things.

A lot of children in hospital, when they become teenagers, are transferred to adult hospitals, so there could be 14- and 15-year-olds lying side-by-side with very elderly people. It is not a good mix for either the young person or the older person, so expanding and extending the

service that is offered at the children's hospital will, I believe, be positively received.

Mr Gardiner: My party warmly welcomes the Minister's announcement on the children's hospital. Can I push you a wee bit further, Minister, and ask you to tell us when it will come into operation? Will it be this year, or do we have to wait until next year or the following year?

Mr Poots: That is a very good question, Mr Gardiner. By the time we go through all the processes and engage in decant and demolition — the hospital will have to be rebuilt on the existing site — and engage in the development and commissioning of the facility, it will be 2019. I would like that time frame to be shorter, but that is a reality that I have to accept. It is all the more incumbent on us to get the announcement out there and develop the funding cycles to ensure that all the funding is available. Minister Hamilton has made an initial £15.5 million available, which gives us the basis to move forward and complete all the consultancy work that will take place beforehand and allow us to start the programme that will ensure that we have a state-of-the-art children's hospital that we in Northern Ireland can be proud of.

Abortion: Guidelines

9. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the recent cases around severe foetal abnormalities, what steps he is taking to revise the guidelines on abortion for women whose pregnancies have been diagnosed with severe foetal abnormalities. (AQO 4993/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the interest that the Member has in this area, and I thank her for responding to the Department's consultation on the draft guidance. I remind her that the law in Northern Ireland does not address the issue of lethal foetal abnormality. It is clearly a difficult area, and we must fully support our health staff. However, they can act only within the law, and, ultimately, only the Executive and the Assembly can change the law.

My views on the issue are well known. I am opposed to the liberalisation of the law, but I will consider any proposals put forward by the Minister of Justice that seek to address some of the issues that have recently come to the fore. As the Member is aware, the position on the termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland is provided for in the body of criminal law as it has been interpreted in the courts. Any guidance

document produced by my Department can only reflect existing law; it cannot change it. The recent consultation has been successful in highlighting the concerns that health professionals and others have about this sensitive issue. I have asked officials to consider all the consultation responses, with the aim of producing a document capable of supporting our health staff as they deal, every day, with difficult issues faced by women and their families, often in tragic circumstances.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. That concludes Question Time.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think that sackcloth and ashes are in order. I inadvertently missed my question to the Minister of Health. My only feeble excuse is that his productivity is much higher than that of other Ministers and he was getting through the questions much faster. However, I realise that I should have been here for the start of Question Time.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate Mr Wells's coming to the House to apologise so quickly.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Public Accounts Committee: Reports and Memoranda of Reply

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee reports:

Committee Reports

Report on the Use of External Consultants by Northern Ireland Departments: Follow-up Report (NIA 43/11-15)

Report on the Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners (NIA 45/11-15)

Report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute (NIA 48/11-15)

Report on the Transfer of Former Military and Security Sites to the Northern Ireland Executive and Ilex Accounts 2010-11 (NIA 58/11-15)

Report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings (NIA 64/11-15)

Report on Statements of Rate Levy and Collection 2009-10 and 2010-11 (NIA 88/11-15)

Report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Management of Response Maintenance Contracts (NIA 99/11-15)

Report on the Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts (NIA 102/11-15)

Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools (NIA 116/11-15)

Report on Invest NI: A Performance Review (NIA 109/11-15)

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

Report on the Use of External Consultants by Northern Ireland Departments: Follow-up Report

Report on the Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners

Report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute

Report on the Transfer of Former Military and Security Sites to the Northern Ireland Executive and Ilex Accounts 2010-11
Report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings

Report on Statements of Rate Levy and Collection 2009-10 and 2010-11

Report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Management of Response Maintenance Contracts

Report on the Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts

Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools

Report on Invest NI: A Performance Review. — [Ms Boyle (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee).]

Mr Dickson: Given the important issues examined by all of the Public Accounts Committee reports that are before us today, it would, in fact, be beneficial if each of them could be brought to the Assembly on its own for proper examination. However, that is not the case. As party spokesperson on the motion, I will try to cover in an overarching way various points as best I can in the time allotted to this debate.

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

It seems that, if we were to master a very few basic things in government in Northern Ireland, we would perform a great deal better than we currently do and would deliver a great deal better for people. I would like to address three issues: transparency, administration and, quite simply, joined-up working.

The first issue is transparency, which is a cornerstone of good government and good governance. The Committee is to be commended for the reports, which bring further transparency, but it would be much better if that had always been there in the first place. It is concerning to read lines such as:

"It is important that departments can clearly track and report on how funding is spent."

Really, that is a very basic requirement and one that, I am sure, the taxpayer wished was implemented in every Department every day so that it did not need to be highlighted in a Public

Accounts Committee report. However, that is clearly not the case.

Lack of transparency raises its ugly head in several of the reports. There are serious questions to be answered about housing maintenance contracts, and, hopefully, the upcoming inquiry by the Social Development Committee will shed some light on what exactly has been going on there.

There are issues elsewhere. The 'Report on the Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts' says that there is a lack of evidence to show that safety has improved in the past decade. That is 10 years. There is an absence of a robust measure for the level of patient and client harm, which makes it difficult for the Department to demonstrate improvement.

The report on the transfer of military and security sites talks about serious issues with oversight and governance. It is astounding that the Department was unable to tell the Committee whether £870,000 from the sale of the Magherafelt site had been lost to the block grant. Where is the paper trail?

That leads me to the next general problem: administration. It seems as though many of the issues raised in the reports could be mitigated simply by better reporting, better documentation and better processes. How much longer do we have to wait to get those things right? The sale of the Malone site is one of the most striking examples. The report refers to documentation not being clear enough about valuations and advice for officials to make properly informed judgements. It also refers to the importance of retaining all documentation relevant to ongoing office investigations. Those are all simple, straightforward administrative matters. What sort of public service do we have that it requires the Audit Committee to report in this way?

Similar issues are raised in the health and social care report about confusing complaints procedures and the lack of appraisal. As a councillor for over 30 years, I have represented and continue to represent many of my constituents on healthcare issues and problems. As a councillor, I knew who to go to, what to do and how to deal with a complaint. As an MLA, I find it confusing and difficult, and the processes have been made harder and harder. Quite simply, the health service does not want to hear about or deal with complaints in the way in which it did 20 or 30 years ago.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that it was

shocking to read in last night's edition of the 'Belfast Telegraph' that the health service has had to fork out over £400 million in compensation for negligence over the past 10 years? That money would have been better spent providing a better service for our people.

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

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Yes, Mr McCarthy, I wholeheartedly agree with you: £480 million is a substantial sum of money and, when we hear during Question Time today what the Health Minister is struggling with, we can only imagine how far that would go, how many lives could be saved and how many people could have better healthcare. Those are basic things, and clarity, full documentation and evaluation are all key to running an effective administration. If there were improvements, a lot of the problems raised in the report could, quite simply, have been mitigated.

A final point that cuts across all the reports is the importance of cooperation and a joined-up approach. We have talked a lot in the House about the importance of Departments not working in silos but working together to solve problems and share best practice, but it is also clear that those external to central government must also be included, where appropriate. Many of us will know from dealing with vulnerable older people in our constituencies about the trust in the voluntary and community organisations and the potential for them to play a key role in delivering services, including encouraging the uptake of benefits and services. We also know that, to improve numeracy and literacy, schools must involve parents and, to improve procedures in health and social care systems, there must be input and feedback from patients and clients. Increased transparency, better administration and more joined-up working are basic and fundamental matters. They are not novel, and it beggars belief that they have to be repeated time after time in Public Accounts Committee reports. People are not listening to what is in those reports.

One report talks about regeneration being a long-term process but processes being slow. Improving governance in Northern Ireland is also a long-term process, and it is often too slow as well. I note that, among the raft of reports debated in June 2012, there was one that confirmed the unsustainability of the governance model of Northern Ireland Water. To date, no alternative has been brought forward. Nothing has been done. Where do

these audit reports end up? Gathering dust on a shelf, I suggest. It is important that the Audit Committee does not let the reports gather dust but returns to the reports and demands answers on the queries that have been raised. Then and only then will the Audit Committee actually be doing its job on behalf of all our citizens.

Mr Girvan: On behalf of the Public Accounts Committee, not the Audit Committee, I will deal with the subject of safeguarding Northern Ireland's listed buildings. The report highlighted major problems in how the Department of the Environment manages and delivers that function. There are currently some 8,500 listed buildings of one degree or another in Northern Ireland, and a report to be compiled of all the listed buildings was to be completed by 2008. Unfortunately, that report was not completed by 2008, and we are now told that we will not have it until 2020.

During the time between the report supposedly being commissioned and buildings supposedly being on a listed footing, a number of our key and historic buildings have, by one means or another, bumped into diggers, had mysterious fires or have just been allowed to get into a state of dereliction where the only way of dealing with them from a public safety point of view was either to remove the building or just shore it up. Unfortunately, the people to blame for that are those who have been tasked to protect our buildings and ensure that they are not allowed to get into that state. They have a list of buildings to be looked at. Unfortunately, with 60% of the buildings that they are supposedly going to assess, when they assess them they find that they do not require listing in any form, shape or fashion. Therefore, prioritising seems to be a bit of a problem. As a consequence of not doing that, they have wasted roughly £1.57 million — a rough figure — in unnecessarily surveying buildings that neither merited nor warranted listing in the first place.

Certain things have happened, and I will probably move on to an example. There was one building in Sion Mills — a stable block — that had deteriorated to such an extent that immediate action was required to ensure that it did not fall down or whatever. Within the Department's control there is a grant scheme that can be used and applied to by those who own buildings. Private owners can apply for grants and make use of them. Some £20 million of that grant funding has been used by others who have accessed it. Unfortunately, there are no measurable outputs that can tell us whether that was effective or not. That was one

of the things highlighted in the report: for spending that was made through the grants process, were measurable benefits identified? Unfortunately, that was not demonstrated in the Department.

Another example is the Crumlin Road Courthouse, which was in public ownership, albeit in a fairly bad state when it was purchased for a miserly amount of money. I do not wish to make mention of the price, but I am sure that a Mars bar comes close to it. When the building was purchased for that amount of money, it probably was handed over in a very bad state, but inaction over time has let it get into an even worse state, when it could have added to the work that has gone on in Crumlin Road Gaol and link in with what has happened there, as an exhibition centre or whatever it might be. There were some wonderful, grandiose ideas about creating a hotel on that site. If the building is listed, there is merit in ensuring that it does not get into a state where probably the only course of action is to put a bulldozer through it. It is similar to what happens with the listing of trees. They mysteriously bump into JCB diggers for no reason, and then they have to be removed because a tree report comes out and states that it is unsafe to retain the tree. As a consequence, that is what happens. Unfortunately, some well-meaning people — I use that term — deem it easier to let buildings deteriorate to such a degree that a bulldozer is the only solution to the problem.

The report highlighted the total ineffectiveness of the Department in safeguarding some key buildings. Buildings were being surveyed that were not necessarily that worthy of listing. The Department was devoting time to undertaking those surveys, when it should have been prioritising and using surveys in the proper fashion. This comes back to the point made by Stewart Dickson of East Antrim. Seven recommendations were to be carried out. It is vital that we go back, revisit that and ensure that those reports and recommendations are carried forward and that proper use of public money is demonstrated and that we do —

Ms Boyle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Girvan: I will indeed.

Ms Boyle: Does the Member agree that Departments and their agencies should work more closely with councils? Councils want to rectify problems with listed buildings in their area, but they come up against a brick wall in Departments when they try to do so.

3.45 pm

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

Mr Girvan: I thank the Member for her intervention. That brings in the point that some of us, as local representatives, are plagued day in and day out about buildings that cause nuisance because they are used as gathering points for antisocial behaviour and all sorts of things go on in them. Local authorities are trying to address the issue through other measures, but they do not have the spending power to deal with it. They should use their teeth to get the Departments to use their powers to ensure that they deliver what they are supposed to, which is the protection of these buildings.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to address the Committee's report titled 'Invest NI: A Performance Review', which was published in April 2013. It analysed the performance and reporting standards of the organisation as revealed by the Audit Office.

Invest NI was established in April 2002 as the North's main economic development organisation. Between 2002 and March 2011, it spent almost £1.5 billion. The Committee examined Invest NI's performance over that period. Invest NI estimates that its activities resulted in the promotion of 42,500 new jobs, the safeguarding of 19,400 jobs and planned investment of £5.5 billion in the local economy by March 2011. Recent performance was particularly strong in the areas of job quality and encouraging businesses to spend on R&D. However, in the Committee's view, long-standing issues with target setting and the lack of independent validation of performance data are yet to be resolved.

In 2000, the Westminster PAC recommended that the Industrial Development Board (IDB), which was Invest NI's predecessor, report figures for job creation and duration as standard. Although IDB implemented that recommendation, it was not sustained by Invest NI. Instead, it reports on jobs promoted, which are those promised by an investor at the outset of a project. The Committee considers the fundamental test of Invest NI's performance to be jobs on the ground and how long they last. Invest NI provided assurances that it has recently implemented systems that will assist the future tracking of jobs created, but it will be some years before meaningful data becomes available.

Since Invest NI's establishment, some of its targets have been set at lower levels than previous performance achieved, and some have been significantly overachieved. Although the Committee welcomes positive outcomes, these can be undermined if the perception is that the targets are soft. The Committee welcomed the establishment by Invest NI of formal job quality targets in the period 2008 to 2011. Performance improved significantly, with 75% of jobs promoted having salaries above the private sector average, compared with only 50% in an earlier period. However, that performance reporting was based on investors' promises rather than outcomes achieved. From 2008 to 2011, Invest NI comfortably overachieved its target to encourage 70% of FDI projects to locate within 10 miles of a disadvantaged area. The Committee considered that a weak target, however, particularly as it provides no measurement of how many people living in disadvantaged areas gain employment in supported projects. I am sure that many in the Chamber today share the view that this is a weak target.

The completeness and accuracy of Invest NI's performance data are fundamental to demonstrating the value and impact of its activities. The Committee has seen little evidence of meaningful independent validation of Invest NI's performance data. That is a key weakness. The Committee is a firm advocate of benchmarking and considers it a key tool for driving improved performance. However, Invest NI has never undertaken a comprehensive benchmarking exercise with other economic development agencies. We therefore welcome Invest NI's plan to commence the ongoing benchmarking of its efficiency and effectiveness in the near future. The recommendations of the Committee related to developing a system for measuring outcomes in job creation, sustainability, job quality and funds invested. Speaking as a Sinn Féin Member, I call on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to look at that as a matter of urgency. In fact, in the absence of evidence-based policy development, Invest NI cannot claim to have a determining influence on growing our economy.

The Committee also recommended introducing a mid-term review process for its corporate plan targets and the setting by DETI of a fair but challenging target to measure Invest NI's contribution to improving local productivity. It also recommended working collaboratively to identify growth sectors and to make appropriate training available; measuring and reporting key quantitative outcomes through its virtual small business unit; and the urgent development of clear alternative strategies and measures for

measuring and promoting economic development. Again, speaking as a Member, I think that Invest NI should explore the potential of subregional clusters, including the promotion of specific industries in relevant areas where the skills and expertise already exist.

The Committee also recommended the setting of targets to measure the people living in disadvantaged areas who obtain employment in the assisted projects to redress the geographical imbalance in financial assistance offers made to investing companies. Thus far, Invest NI has perpetuated regional investment inequality. For decades, Invest NI and its predecessors have drawn investment into the greater Belfast area, thereby failing people and businesses in areas such as south Down. Again, I say that with my Member's hat on and not as a member of the Committee. Invest NI's regional disparities regarding inward investment and social and economic inequalities are clear indicators that the current economic policy is not delivering for large sections of our community. The Committee recommended the commissioning of annual independent validation of Invest NI's performance data.

The recommendations of the Committee got a mixed response from Invest NI, with only three recommendations accepted, three partially accepted and three not accepted. I believe that this was the first time that DFP used the category of "partially accepted". The Committee discussed the issues at its meeting on 2 October, and it was clear from members' views that the Committee saw a high rate of acceptance of PAC recommendations as essential to good public governance systems. I agree with my colleagues and will wait keenly to see that the recommendations are implemented by Invest NI. Although I joined the Committee only at the point of considering the draft report, I feel strongly, as, I am sure, all my colleagues do, that the recommendations can go a long way to improving the performance of Invest NI. I look forward to the Minister's comments on the report.

Mr Wilson: Let us remind ourselves of what we are debating. These are the reports that are under discussion today. I am holding in my hand £1 million worth of work by the Public Accounts Committee. The reports cost an average of £100,000, and there are 10 of them. There are 109 recommendations, and one would expect from that —

Mr Dallat: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Is there not something in the rule book about the use of visual aids?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that the Member has made his point, and it is on the record. I will take guidance from the Speaker's Office.

Mr Wilson: It is not a visual aid, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, simply my notes. *[Laughter.]* I have only five minutes, so I had better be quick.

Mr Girvan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: No, I am not going to give way.

There are 109 recommendations, and one would expect that, with that expenditure and that number of recommendations, we would have seen some improvement in governance across Departments in Northern Ireland. Let me make something very clear: I believe that there is a role for an effective Public Accounts Committee scrutinising expenditure across Departments. However, when I read the reports and listen to the points that Members have made, I ask myself whether we are improving government or making government more difficult in Northern Ireland.

The report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute was referred to, and there are recommendations on that. Before the report even came out, as a result of some of the discussions that were had, we find that DETI had already introduced a casework committee; guidance manuals were revised on three occasions; there was a biannual quarterly assurance process; there was an accountability and casework branch; and there was a risk management committee. In spite of all that, the Committee asked for more governance to be put in place. For businesses that get a grant of more than half a million pounds, there were test-drilling appraisals, post-project evaluation, memoranda of understanding and internal audit reviews, yet the Committee asked for more appraisals. I ask the Assembly this: is that really the way to make quick and effective government processes and not strangle government processes in Northern Ireland?

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: No. I would lose time, and I do not have much time left anyway.

Secondly, let us just take the one on the health and social care trusts. Look through that and its recommendations and ask yourself what kind of bureaucratic demands that has made on trusts. There have to be safety-related indicators set, then routine evaluation of those safety performances, regional collection of the

relevant information, data on all adverse incidents in the use of wrong drugs, links between the data and complaints and other safety data that presumably, the staff all had to read. When are they going to do their work?

Mr Hazzard referred to the Invest NI one. I found that one really odd. The Committee already indicated that it was almost impossible to collect the data, but, nevertheless, when firms are setting up in Northern Ireland:

"Notwithstanding difficulties in obtaining data, the Committee recommends that Invest NI sets a target which measures the number of people living in disadvantaged areas who obtain employment in assisted projects and reports performance on this basis."

Who collects that information? Is it more information that employers have to collect? Do you live in a disadvantaged area? Some people would not even know whether they live in a disadvantaged area. If there is a turnover of employment, does that have to be reported on a yearly basis — people who have come in and people who have left?

I sometimes wonder whether any thought is given to some of the recommendations in these reports. Let us just look at the one on literacy. There is a raft of things there, with no thought at all given to the expenditure. Look at recommendation 3:

"Early intervention initiatives ... Developing the capacity and capability of schools and teachers ... Rigorous tracking ... Setting targets".

It also refers to continuous mentoring and training of all teachers, no matter what they teach, in numeracy and literacy. I loved this one, because many of the people who recommended it are probably now having a go at the Education Minister for his common funding formula decision: there should be a redirection of funding in the common funding formula to direct money towards schools with specific problems. If recommendations like that are going to be made, all I am saying is that consideration ought to be given to whether we make governance more difficult, more costly and slower in Northern Ireland. Do we ask for additional information that has to be gathered, read and assimilated and slows down the ability of front line staff to deliver what they have to do? Do we impose burdens on firms that we are trying to attract into Northern Ireland because it is a business-friendly environment? Do we make recommendations that have cost

implications, with no indication given in a report of how those costs will be met?

If we are going to have Public Accounts Committee reports and they are going to add value to government in Northern Ireland, let us make sure that at least some thought has gone into them and into the recommendations and that those recommendations are practical in their outcomes and their application, rather than simply saying, "We produced 10 reports: aren't we good? Here are the recommendations, and, by the way, somebody else can live with the consequences".

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to follow the former Minister of Finance. I thought that he was coming in with a list of his MP expenses in front of him today, but obviously that was not the case.

On a serious note, I think this is a healthy debate. The Committee has done a lot of good work on a cross-party basis and continues to do so. We have to provide some oversight, on a cross-party basis, with a constructive approach, as we have done, in order to get down to the nitty-gritty detail. We have done that by having some lengthy meetings — four, five or six hours long — every Wednesday. We have to do some of the work that the other Committees do not get an opportunity to delve into.

My colleague Chris Hazzard referred to Invest NI. I used to be on the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee. Job promotion really annoys me: it is not job creation, but people assume that it is.

Members of the public assume that, when you are talking about job promotion and certain figures, you are talking about actual jobs created. That is certainly not the case.

4.00 pm

Invest NI has to get away from using job promotion as a primary measurement of job creation, because it does not reflect reality. It is a slippery term, and the Committee was right to recommend that Invest NI move away from the trend of measuring jobs promoted ahead of jobs created. Jobs created is what the public are interested in, and it is what we need to be focusing on, given the times that we live in. That is acting in the public interest and something that we need to continue to do.

There was reference to Crumlin Road Gaol by Mr Girvan, I think. That is a fantastic tourism

resource in north Belfast. Over the summer, I went with my family to visit Crumlin Road Gaol — and came out again. *[Laughter.]* When you come out the front door, you see an eyesore. It seems a great shame, given that tourism product and the good service provided by those who work there, that when you come out you are greeted by an eyesore rather than something that should be complementary to the tourism product. Crumlin Road courthouse is something that, as a society, we should be ashamed of. It should be restored because of its architecture and not to its past usage. That is something that the Committee should focus on and follow through on in its work.

I am going to focus on Ilex. Significant expenditure had been incurred by Ilex without proper approvals from sponsor Departments or, in some cases, without business plans having been prepared prior to spending taking place.

Some of the governance issues raised were quite concerning and it was important that we put a focus on that. The practice by Ilex flouted well-established rules governing spending on projects, which we found particularly surprising given the chief executive's previous experience as an accounting officer in two major Departments. To be fair, she was candid in recognising that both she and the organisation got things wrong in applying those controls over several years. There is an assurance that an action plan is now in place to ensure that no new issues will arise in future. In the Committee's view, it is important that the action plan developed by Ilex to ensure that spending rules are followed is fully implemented to prevent new cases of breaches of control arising in the future.

The governance arrangements of Ilex were also problematic, as it was funded by two Departments concurrently. The sponsor Departments shared accountability for Ilex. That arrangement, which essentially meant that Ilex served two masters, was part of the problem. The Committee was assured that, in future, one Department would be established as having a clear lead responsibility for Ilex. I am sure that the Minister will update us on that when responding to the motion.

Clarity of roles is particularly important with arm's-length bodies (ALBs) such as Ilex, even when only one Department is involved. ALBs must be given a clear mandate regarding their responsibilities. The Committee recommended that, as Departments remain ultimately accountable, their accounting officers need to ensure that oversight arrangements are effective in managing and monitoring financial

delegations and that there is adequate information to provide assurance that value for money is being secured for public spending, wherever that spending takes place.

There have been a number of cases where the governing body seems to have been distant from the arm's-length body. The one that comes to mind is the Fire Service. The Department of Health did not have a grasp of the issues or appropriate oversight of some of the scandalous things that took place within the Fire Service, on which the Committee did a lot of work.

Another contributing factor to the problems that arose was the poor quality of financial information provided to the Ilex board. The board agreed to take on the tax liability for travel expenses for one employee even though he travelled from England to do the job. The Committee recommended that non-executive board members should have details of who is responsible for paying any tax liabilities formally agreed before appointment and included in the contract of employment. For wider application and to try to prevent such a situation being paid for out of public money anywhere else, the Committee also recommended that the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) issue guidance that clarifies the tax position of travel expenses that are paid to other non-executive board members throughout the public sector.

In procurement terms —

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to bring you back a wee bit. You spoke about the health service and the shenanigans that went on in the Fire and Rescue Service. The Health Committee explored some of what happened there, as did the other Committee.

Will the Member join me in expressing surprise that, as yet, no one has accepted any responsibility or accountability for what went on in that particular period?

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

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. That is the problem with a lot of the cases that we have looked at. The real focus of our work should not be only on getting the information and reports out. It does not end there, and there needs to be follow-through. I totally agree with the Member that there needs to be follow-through on the

Fire and Rescue Service by the PAC and, if necessary, the Health Committee to ensure that someone is held to account for any wrongdoing in the public service.

There was also learning from the Ilex case in procurement terms. A firm agreed a price of £64,000 for consultancy on the Peace Bridge but then subsequently had its contract extended for a project, which resulted in revised costs of £479,000. It is quite incredible that the extension of those costs was not approved by sponsor Departments, and, of course, it is not acceptable. The extension of the contract without going back to the market also meant that it cannot now be demonstrated that value for money was achieved.

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

Mr McKay: To conclude, the Public Accounts Committee is doing a lot of good work, as can be seen from the amount of paper in front of the former Finance Minister. We will continue to do so.

Mr Copeland: I rose with some difficulty, for which I apologise.

I begin by thanking the Committee Clerk and her staff for the very professional way in which they equip us to do our duty, or job, depending on how you look at it. I also pay tribute to the Chair and the Deputy Chair for the way in which they manage to help us keep party politics out of the way in which the Committee works in order to do what is right for the people who have an expectation that their money will be properly looked after.

Mr Wilson produced large amounts of notes, which he denied were a visual aid. He claimed that they represented £1 million of expenditure. I have two small pages that represent the loss or misappropriation of £2.2 million of public money and £1 million of private investors' money. I think that there is a balance to be held between those two cases.

Unfortunately, it is the Bioscience and Technology Institute (BTI) that I wish to refer to. That case had everything. It could have been made into a television drama. It had foreign travel and offshore bank accounts. It also had the great and the good and those with titles after their names doing something that should have been a good idea. It promised much, with 10 new start-up companies, jobs for 50 Northern Ireland graduates and six new inward investors. It could have been a major success

story for Northern Ireland. Instead, the project failed to achieve any of its objectives. Worse still, as I said, it spent £2.2 million of taxpayers' money, left £1 million owed to the estate of a private investor and left another almost half a million pounds owed to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. It was a devastating end to a venture that had great potential.

In the view of the Committee, the handling of the project was extremely poor by the funding bodies and the BTI board. From beginning to end, the Committee noted a catalogue of negligence and ineptitude —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: Should I risk it?

Mr Wilson: I am glad that the Member has given way. Reading through the report, it is quite clear that the losses were due to human failure on the part of those from the Department who were meant to scrutinise the agendas of meetings and go to the meetings and of those who were in charge of the accounts etc. What recommendation in the report can ensure that those human failures will not happen again?

Mr Copeland: How much time do I get?

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

Mr Copeland: Incidentally, all the recommendations in the report were accepted. The truth is that you can never eliminate human error or malfeasance. It cannot be done. However, what you can do is set the rules to ensure that such risks are minimised where possible.

As I said, the handling of the project was extremely poor by the funding bodies and the BTI board. There was a catalogue of negligence and ineptitude, the nature of which was staggering, ranging from finder's fees to second floor premises being acquired without the rights to use the stairwells. In some respects, the truth is that the average person is pursued to the ends of the earth for £100, £200 or £300 of housing benefit that may have been overpaid, underpaid, falsely claimed or incorrectly claimed, yet, because of the nature of the people who are involved in this, an enormous amount of money went up in smoke.

The Committee has sought to emphasise that it does not want the Department or Invest NI to be risk averse. We emphasised that. Supporting new and innovative projects is a

risky business, and some will fail. In this case, however, the Department completely failed to manage the risks in the existing system, which is the point that I think my colleague was trying to make. More worryingly, most of the shortcomings emanated from a failure to apply existing controls, rather than from an absence of controls.

The Committee has serious concerns about the way in which the Department responded to suspicions of, and I use these words advisedly, fraud and impropriety. The Department adopted a piecemeal approach, particularly in its consultations with the Police Service of Northern Ireland. In the Committee's view, matters should have been dealt with holistically, with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) formally consulting with the PSNI on all matters of concern. Fraud and impropriety, whether actual or attempted, are serious issues that this Committee expects Departments to address comprehensively and professionally, rather than in the disorganised, disjointed and haphazard fashion that was apparent in this case.

One of the issues that the Committee found most disturbing in the BTI project was the extent to which some of the most senior officials in both DETI and the IDB were apparently complicit in the many failings that occurred. In my view, one of the most important messages coming out of this report is the stressing of a particular onus on an organisation's top management to ensure that procedures are followed and that the ethos of their organisation is fully in keeping with the proper conduct of public business. In truth, if this had been a community group or a local voluntary community-based organisation that was dependent on government funding, they would have shut the doors on it.

In the memorandum of reply (MOR) from the Department of Finance and Personnel, all the recommendations in the report were accepted, and we expect to see them implemented in due course.

I want to rectify an omission that I made at the start by thanking the Comptroller and Auditor General and his team for the very valued service that they allow us to provide for people who look to us to ensure that their moneys are well and properly spent.

Mr McQuillan: I will refer to the Committee's work on pensioners' uptake of benefits. Before I do, I will add my thanks to the staff and to the Clerk of the Committee for looking after us so well during the Committee meetings and for

giving us all the information that we required. I thank you for your input to some of the reports, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, before you moved on to greater things.

The main public sector agencies and bodies that are involved in the administration of these benefits are the Department for Social Development (DSD) through the Social Security Agency and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the Department of Finance and Personnel through Land and Property Services.

4.15 pm

People of pensionable age represent an increasingly large portion of the Northern Ireland population. This section of the population is highly dependent on benefits. Almost 20% of Northern Ireland's pensioners — approximately 55,000 people — are classified as living in poverty. That is a testament to the importance of the uptake of benefits.

Benefit expenditure does not come out of the Executive's block grant from Westminster, so it should be clarified at this early stage that ensuring that pensioners receive their full entitlement does not, therefore, compromise the delivery of other public services. It is also a way in which a significant amount of additional funds can be injected into the local economy. Uptake of these benefits is, therefore, important on a number of levels, not least to the pensioners who receive them but also to the wider population. In view of that, the Committee recommended that benefit-paying agencies formally adopt improving uptake as a core business objective.

While there are no accurate estimates of the size of the benefit uptake gap, the Committee was extremely concerned to discover that unclaimed pension credit and housing benefit was most likely to be in the region of £100 million a year. The Committee recommended that the work to produce robust uptake estimates was initiated with immediate effect to inform future uptake strategies and to ensure that challenging targets are set for the future.

The Committee noted the outcomes of DSD's annual benefit uptake programmes from 2005, which targeted over 112,000 pensioners and generated an additional £23 million of benefits for successful claimants. That equates to £11 being gained in benefits for every £1 that was spent on the programmes. However, the Committee found that the targeting used by the Social Security Agency was intelligence-led, which meant that the response and conversion rates of the programmes were disappointingly

low. Less than half of all those contacted replied, and only 9% were successful in obtaining additional benefits. The Committee recommended that DSD develop a range of options to follow up initial contacts in order to improve the success of the programmes.

The Committee values outreach services as a means of reaching the more vulnerable, but members were concerned that the level of resources committed to outreach activities was not significant. Concern was also raised that the outreach work of three benefit-paying agencies is not sufficiently joined up to maximise uptake of the benefits, and, as a result, the work of the community and voluntary sector in that area may not complement that of the agencies. We, therefore, recommended that the benefit-paying agencies jointly review their outreach arrangements, coordinate their work practices and more fully engage with those sectors. Two initiatives taken up by DSD — the Make the Call campaign and the innovation fund — are welcomed by the Committee, but it will be of the utmost importance to watch their performance closely over time and to learn from them in the future.

The Committee also identified that data-sharing across government bodies is an effective means of identifying individuals with unclaimed benefit entitlement. We welcomed the proposed introduction of legislative powers to share the personal data held by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Data-sharing activities need to be coordinated strategically, and it was recommended that benefit-paying agencies develop a joint data-sharing strategy, supported by a detailed action plan. The project needs to be given priority if work in this area is to be progressed.

It was the Committee's view that benefit-paying agencies must offer assurance to the public that benefit entitlement will be calculated correctly first time. It was noted that, often, there can be a reluctance to engage with officials and government agencies when it comes to sharing the personal data that is needed when assessing benefit entitlements. In light of that, agencies were told that the Committee expects all cases of pensioner overpayment to be dealt with sensitively, and a recommendation was made that agencies should revise their guidance to enable that. For example, it was suggested that pensioners should be informed of any large overpayments face to face rather than by letter.

The complex nature of the current benefit system also contributes to the reluctance that a large number of pensioners have about coming

forward to the appropriate bodies about their benefit entitlements. Under future welfare reforms, there will be a move towards a single-tier pension, and housing benefit will be abolished. It is expected that those moves will greatly simplify the system, and the Committee has highlighted the need for the benefit-paying agencies to rigorously appraise the potential implications of the changes on uptake rates. The Committee also recommended that, as part of the reform process, DSD and DFP consider whether a single agency could be tasked with providing a joined-up benefits service.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Trevor Clarke. You have four minutes before I must call the Minister.

Mr Clarke: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. At the outset, I thank the Committee staff and the Comptroller and Auditor General for the work that they have done. At this point, I will disagree with my colleague on the Back Benches, who previously found himself on the Front Benches when he was Minister of a particular Department. I suggest that there is not so much waste. If the Departments managed their Departments much better, in some cases, we would not find the waste that we have come across in the reports. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, you sat on the Committee for a number of years, and for a period since I have been on it, so you will know what I am talking about when I say that.

I am going to stray slightly, and I hope you let me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. We will take the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and another report that is going to come up. A contractor was allowed to strip off a part of a contract with a value of £400,000 and add it in at a later date to give himself an advantage. I think that that is in a recommendation in that report, which is coming forward at a later date.

Yes, I appreciate where the former Minister is coming from on the cost of each of these reports, but these reports are done on the basis that we are scrutinising what is going on with public money within the Departments. In this one, the CPD or the Department itself did not send an official for the opening of the tenders for an arm's-length body. That could have saved hundreds of thousands of pounds. So, yes, the previous Minister is right about the amount of money that these reports cost, but, if the misgivings were not found in these reports, maybe there would not be the same necessity to do that.

My colleague raised another point about the recommendations. I do not know if he used the

word "silly", but I think he took enjoyment out of some of those recommendations. I remind the Member that when these recommendations go, they are accepted by Departments. So, if they feel that they are silly or inconsiderate, maybe the person responsible for that Department should make a recommendation to the Public Accounts Committee, because, you will know, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, from your time on the Committee, that each of the recommendations is carefully considered and debated by all of the members who are on that Committee, and sent to the Department for consideration. Yes, sometimes there is much debate about how we get to a conclusion on those, but, if it has made its way to the report, that suggests to me that it has been accepted by the relevant Department.

I will not diminish the work that the Public Accounts Committee does. It is invaluable work, and it has been enlightening. I have been on the Committee for only a short time, but it has certainly been enlightening. For a person who has been a ratepayer and a taxpayer, it is useful to have that extra layer of scrutiny to make sure that we are getting best value for money from the public funds.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Have we reached the stage at which not only is the Public Accounts Committee the exclusive preserve of MLAs who belong to Government parties, but, when we have this meagre annual debate on its reports, only MLAs from Government parties are permitted to speak? Is that the situation that we have reached in this House?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. The Member is well aware of what is and what is not a point of order.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I think that the volume of criticism that there has been of all Departments from all quarters in the Chamber shows that the PAC is not afraid to attack even its own parties' colleagues. In fact, we had party colleagues attacking party colleagues in the last contribution. I think that that job is being done, whether the Member likes it or not.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate on the Public Accounts Committee reports for the first time in this capacity. Before I move to the main business of the debate, I want to try to get through and respond to as many Members as I can. I would like to note the work undertaken by the Public Accounts Committee and the Northern Ireland Audit

Office since the previous debate, which was held in June 2012. Much has happened in the intervening period, as Mr Wilson's stack of paper shows, so there is plenty to debate.

We are all too aware of the financial constraints that we face today and the need to ensure that every penny of public money is spent wisely. It is equally important that we account for it properly. Since taking up office, I have been setting out my vision for the public sector and our need to push forward with a significant reform programme and an efficiency agenda. In these times of diminishing resources, we all recognise that we need to find new, innovative and better ways to deliver public services. We have to do things differently. We can no longer do what we do and what we have always done just because that is what has always been the way. The status quo will no longer suffice.

The landscape of public service delivery is changing at a significant pace. To enable us to deliver world-class public services, we have to become leaner, more productive and more efficient. We need to identify best practice locally, nationally and internationally, and integrate the best of what we find into the working practices through which we deliver our public services. Reform is the key.

In so doing, we need to determine how we make optimum use of technology, assets and, most importantly, our staff, who, as everyone is aware, are our greatest asset. At the same time, it must not be forgotten that we need to go about our business responsibly and be held properly accountable for it, and I will return to that theme later. However, all that I have just told you is not new. According to 'Managing Public Money' — the "bible" of public expenditure in Northern Ireland — it is what we should already be doing. It states:

“Public sector organisations can and should innovate in carrying out their responsibilities, using new technology and taking advantage of best practice in business efficiency. This could mean new kinds of organisation, new institutional arrangements or new delivery methods.”

More than ever, Northern Ireland needs a public sector that is motivated, energised and ready to take on the challenges ahead. I believe that the staff across the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) are all of those things and that the wider public sector has the skills and drive to deliver the quality of services that the public deserve. The Civil Service has already demonstrated that it can embrace reform, as evidenced by the centralisation of key internal services in

Enterprise Shared Services. However, more needs to be done, and it needs to be done without delay.

In moving forward, we need to create a culture of openness in which ideas from staff at all levels are encouraged and listened to, in order that we nurture and exploit what I believe to be the huge, largely untapped potential and creativity in our public sector. We also need to understand and appreciate, though, that by breaking new ground, doing things differently and striving for those rewarding opportunities, we will not always get it right from day one. We will make mistakes and get things wrong from time to time, but sometimes the eventual rewards are so great that that is exactly what we need to do. So I ask that we understand that mistakes happen when you strive to achieve, when you dare to do things differently and innovate. We must accept those mistakes. They happen in the private sector, too, and they are part of life. They can and do arise, even after careful, risk-based decisions are taken. Although I do not condone reckless decisions, sometimes it is acceptable to make mistakes.

Moving forward, we need to ensure that we eliminate the factors that stifle innovation. One such factor is the fear of making mistakes because of the potential consequences and criticism. However, as the old saying goes, "To avoid situations in which you might make mistakes may be the biggest mistake of all". Constructive criticism is important, if delivered in an appropriate manner. It allows us to learn and to develop, but I suspect that it is sometimes not delivered with those thoughts in mind.

We all have our individual roles, and it is incumbent upon each of us to carry them out responsibly. Although I accept that the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Office have important functions, there are times when I hear members of that Committee speaking to the media, or I read a press headline and ask myself what it has achieved. Does it champion our public servants or promote our public services? Does it motivate our public servants to take the measured risks needed to provide the world-class services that our citizens deserve, or does it do the opposite? I ask you all to consider that.

Let us take one example: for more than five years, the Comptroller and Auditor General, in his annual report 'Financial Auditing and Reporting', has commented that the "standards of financial reporting" across central government "remain high". I view that as a very positive statement and one to be welcomed, but

has it been a headline in the press or championed by the Committee? Unfortunately not.

All too often, when the Audit Office or the Public Accounts Committee publishes a report, some are only too keen to jump on the bandwagon of criticism, say their piece and grab the headlines. In doing so, they can, in one fell swoop, denigrate the very service that others are working tirelessly to promote. The result is that people become even more risk-averse and bureaucratic.

We currently have a perverse situation in which, on the publication of an Audit Office or PAC report, there are those who are only too keen to say their piece to the media, while those who, for want of a better phrase, stand accused, are expected to stay silent. That, however, presents an unbalanced view to the general public, and we need to retain some perspective. I ask whether, before commenting, we should not all be expected to follow the same protocols of waiting until the entire Assembly process has been completed and all have had their say.

Today, we have had reference to a report that has not even been published. That is simply not acceptable. I can inform the House that I will not respect a protocol that the PAC itself is not prepared to respect.

4.30 pm

Let me say, however, that I am not suggesting that we do not uncover wrongdoing or inappropriate practice or that we gag the press. Are there flawed practices in the public sector? Absolutely there are. Is there, from time to time, fraud? Without a doubt. Should they be uncovered and dealt with? The answer is a resounding yes. What I am suggesting, though, is that we take time to consider the repercussions of our words before we speak. I am sure that that will raise some Members' hackles because I recognise that that will require quite a significant sea change for them.

The Public Accounts Committee's scrutiny of officials starts with the Audit Office's glossy blue reports, to which Mr Wilson referred. They are described as value-for-money reports. However, occasionally, when I read them, I question their value for money to the taxpayer. In its 2012-13 annual report, the Audit Office states that the average cost of a value-for-money report — I am afraid that I will have to disappoint Mr Wilson — was close to £150,000. There are 11 reports. Perhaps the former Minister did not get one of them. I am sure that

we can provide him with the one that he is missing. I have to say that this is the first time that I have been in the Chamber while my predecessor has been on the Back Benches. For two years, I tried to persuade him that he had the potential to be a great Back-Bencher. I think that we have all seen that DFP's loss is the Back Benches' gain. The cost is not roughly £1 million; it is £1.65 million if we go by the Audit Office's own estimates. If we were to add to that the cost of departmental officials' time in agreeing those reports and that of the House in completing the Assembly process of each report, I am sure that we would find it to be significantly more, and, in some cases, it could be closer to three or four times that cost.

All too often in those reports, I see a preoccupation with auditing the process of what is being done. Why, I ask myself, is a greater emphasis not placed on outcomes? Instead of focusing on the non-compliance aspect of what is done, should we not focus on and be held to account for what is not being done? It is all too easy for auditors to check and report that a process has not been followed. I suggest that it is more difficult to assess and determine the cost of opportunities that have been missed when perhaps we have been too risk-averse. What is more costly: not following a procedure correctly or not taking advantage of new technology or a more productive way of working?

Would some of that taxpayers' money not be better spent on considering what could or should have been done, for instance, to use better working practices and new technology or to identify alternative, more effective ways to deliver services — in other words, the cost of opportunities foregone? Is that not where real value lies?

I want to take this opportunity to flag up an issue that is becoming a concern to me. Indeed, the issue was discussed at the recent ministerial budget review group meeting. As members of the Executive, we are determined to put in place systems and procedures that allow for the timely delivery of major projects. This follows on from Mr Wilson's point. There is a growing sense of frustration that our accountability protocols delay projects. External stakeholders such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) have expressed frustration about that on many occasions.

The dilemma, however, is really a political one to resolve. On the one hand, we want streamlined, fast decision-making from our officials in the approval and delivery of projects,

yet, on the other hand, some politicians in the House seem to take delight in battering the same officials either over being overly cautious or conservative on issues, such as ensuring value for money, or, alternatively, being cavalier in decision-making. Let us be clear: officials will do their utmost to ensure that they do not have to appear in front of the PAC for a battering. However, the fact that that is what they expect sends them the wrong signal.

I want to highlight some of the key initiatives and actions that have been taken forward by Departments following on from the Committee's evidence sessions and reports, addressing, at the same time, some issues that Members raised.

I will begin with the Chairperson's remarks. She referred to the Committee's report on external consultants. As she noted, the Executive have taken a keen interest in that area of expenditure. There has been a significant reduction in expenditure and a marked improvement in compliance with guidance in recent years. That said, the use of external consultants remains an appropriate and necessary part of our business model, especially when we seek to innovate and use technology.

For that reason, I was very disappointed to hear her raising the Account NI consultancy contract. The report that referred to Account NI was, in large part, a positive one and was about a contract on which my Department and the Committee do not agree. As clearly set out during the evidence session, the use of consultants for that project changed as our understanding of what was required and how it should be delivered changed.

A prime example of this was the shift from a target of payment within 30 days to a target of payment within 10 days. As a result of the changes made to the system, it has been very successful in ensuring that over 90% of all Civil Service bills are paid within that 10-day target.

That is what happens when you innovate, adapt and temper your plans as necessary. That is what we did. We adapted our plans and successfully delivered a world-class shared services facility, which is the envy of other jurisdictions, for the Northern Ireland Civil Service within the contract while responding to changes in the commercial world as the UK went into recession. We changed to what our clients wanted, which was, for example, for suppliers to be paid faster in order to support local businesses. We responded to change, and we responded correctly.

Throughout this, a consultancy contract was managed proactively and in line with procurement procedures, which was underpinned by advice from CPD and the Departmental Solicitor's Office. As Minister of Finance, although I will always stress the importance of good financial governance, I will not allow process to stand in the way of progress or innovation.

The Chair also referred to the Committee's report on the safety of services provided by health and social care trusts. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has a range of management information systems in place and is developing a whole-systems approach to strengthen reporting, analysis and learning, and it plans to introduce a regional learning system.

In addition, DHSSPS met the Health and Social Care Board, the five trusts and the Ambulance Service to remind them of the need for serious adverse incidents to be reported. Revised procedures, effective from 1 October, have been issued to serve as a reminder and encouragement to staff to report serious adverse incidents.

Mr Easton referred to the Committee's report on the Housing Executive's management of response maintenance contracts. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has investigated the full extent of contract management problems, including planned maintenance, which led it to estimate overpayments of some £18 million. Members will recall that the Minister for Social Development made a statement to the Assembly updating it on this issue on 10 June. The DSD has confirmed that it carried out a review of its sponsorship arrangements with the Housing Executive, and new arrangements were implemented at the end of June. The Housing Executive reporting arrangements have been overhauled and its performance regarding responses to planned heating and grounds maintenance contracts is now reported monthly to the board.

Mr Rogers referred to the Committee's report on improving literacy and numeracy in schools. The Department of Education is taking forward a three-stranded approach to address the gap between pupils entitled to free school meals and those who are not. It is doing this using a set of evidence-based policies that are designed to raise standards, a range of additional interventions and through raising parental aspirations. The Department of Education has committed additional funding to a number of projects to provide professional

development for teachers and to encourage the sharing of best practice between schools. It is also working closely with the Department for Social Development to create 20 new nurture units in primary schools that will address early social, emotional and behavioural barriers to learning.

Mr Dickson and Mr Hussey referred to the Committee's report on military sites. The former military sites that were gifted under the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, and which are under the control of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), were gifted on the basis that they would be used for the benefit of the Executive. Given market conditions, OFMDFM consulted on the use of the sites with a number of local stakeholders, including councils, development trusts, the community and other Departments. That consultation will continue and OFMDFM will continue to meet with and encourage commercial interest in the sites where it will have benefits for the local and regional community.

Mr Girvan referred to the Committee's report on listed buildings. I understand that a new three-year contract for the second survey fieldwork, which will identify buildings that are suitable for listing, has started, with extra personnel being recruited, and that the Environment Agency remains confident that it will meet the target of completing the second survey by 2020. I also understand that the Environment Agency is developing a performance measurement framework for its listed building grants scheme and has carried out a prioritisation exercise that has identified the most vulnerable listed buildings.

Mr Hazzard referred to the Committee's report on Invest NI's performance review. In the memorandum of reply to the Committee's report, three recommendations were accepted in full, three were partially accepted and three were not accepted. I can understand how the Committee may have had concerns that more recommendations were not fully accepted, but I hope that it appreciates that each recommendation was considered in great detail and that it was only after considerable discussion and deliberation that a decision was taken not to accept particular recommendations. The rationale for those decisions is outlined in the memorandum of reply.

As regards the target-setting and measuring outcomes that the Member referred to, I am sure that the Committee will appreciate that, although we all have the best interests of the

Northern Ireland economy at heart, we may not always fully agree on the best way of promoting and growing it. The Committee recognised that Invest Northern Ireland's performance over the past nine years showed steady progress. Performance in the period 2008 to 2011 has been the strongest to date, particularly in the areas of job quality and expenditure on research and development, and that is commendable against the background of a severe economic downturn.

Mr McKay referred to the Committee's report on Ilex. As of April this year, OFMDFM assumed sole responsibility for Ilex, and that has resulted in shorter lines of communication and streamlined arrangements for accountability and governance. The Committee highlighted instances of expenditure without adherence to proper rules and procedures. OFMDFM has confirmed that a comprehensive governance action plan has been applied in Ilex and validated by internal and external audit. My Department has now issued guidance that clarifies the position throughout the public sector on the various tax issues raised by the Committee.

Mr Copeland referred to the Committee's report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute. All the Committee's recommendations have been accepted, and DETI has confirmed that it is committed to the highest standards of leadership and management, both in the Department and Invest NI. As many of the issues raised by the Committee occurred a number of years ago — several years ago, in fact — DETI was able to set out both the organisational and cultural changes that have been made in the intervening years. Those include compliance with enhanced processes and effective risk management, annual exercises to ensure that appropriate standards are being applied, and the use of audit and casework committees, all of which provide for a much sounder form of governance.

The issue that Mr Copeland highlighted is one where, absolutely, if there is wrongdoing, it should be exposed. However, economic development, by its very nature, involves risks. There will be successes and failures, and I ask this question: when was the last time that a PAC report highlighted the successes?

Madam Chairperson made the point that she wanted the Committee's recommendations to be well measured and implemented properly, and I understand that sentiment, not least as a former member of the Committee. However, in my opinion, although the Committee chooses to base its findings on the short-sighted,

retrospective Audit Office reports and frequently ignores the evidence presented to it — Mr Dickson referred to reports gathering dust — what I have said over the past 10 minutes shows clear evidence that government does respond, and responds positively, to the reports that the Committee has made. However, by ignoring the evidence presented at hearings and to ignore continually the wider social and economic impact of the matters before it, that is not going to happen. Its recommendations will risk falling short of being well reasoned. Although Departments will strive to respond —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: — opportunities will be lost. Thank you.

Mr Dallat (The Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I can recover from that.

It is my job to wind up the debate, and I thank all the Members who contributed. Certainly, Mr Wilson did not disappoint us at all. We had his usual little bit of theatre, but it appears that the pantomime season has come early this year for the Assembly.

I move very quickly to the Minister. I had written here that I was going to welcome his positive contribution. I am sorry, Minister, that it seemed to be sour grapes, and you are only in the job. The Committee is made up of all parties, and you really need to understand the efforts that we have made to make the Assembly more accountable to the general public, and particularly to the taxpayers. It is an incredibly difficult thing in Northern Ireland to get a Committee representative of all the parties, or most of them, to do that, and I commend my colleagues from the parties represented there for the courage and determination that they have shown to ensure that the Assembly, now into its fifteenth year, has a Public Accounts Committee that can hold its head high. I can say that, because we have visited Committees in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Dublin and Westminster. Therefore, we can stand over what we do.

4.45 pm

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way, and I thank the Minister, in as much as that was a totally unjustified attack on the Committee. I know that Ministers do not like Committees —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address the Chair.

Mr McKay: I know that Ministers do not necessarily like Committees, but he has to recognise the difference between risk taking, on which I agree with his point, and wrongdoing. The PAC's work is about exposing wrongdoing and holding civil servants to account. A culture of risk taking in the Civil Service is a matter for the Minister.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Member. In fact, he has just stolen from my notes.

We have never condemned any Department for doing things wrong, provided that it had the proper assessment, that it monitored what it was doing and that it delivered what it said it would.

We have published 10 reports in the past year, and I thought that that was a very productive time. God knows, if those who criticise us had been here when we were working into the late hours, perhaps they might have a better knowledge of just how serious some things have been and how necessary it has been to address them. I, as an individual, will allow the public to judge me, but what about the idea that we are "battering" officials? That is an awfully emotive term to use. The relationship between the Committee and officials has, for most of the time, been very courteous, and although they did not accept all our recommendations, 87% have been accepted. Perhaps our work is not all that futile, and perhaps there is a need for it. I do not think that there could have been any difference in this — *[Interruption.]* Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I showed Mr Wilson some courtesy when he was speaking, so I would like him to afford me the basic courtesy of remaining silent while I make my winding-up speech.

During this time, the Committee has not shied away from looking into complex issues, nor has it been deterred from treading new ground in exercising its powers. We agree that there is an element of publicity. Of course there is if the work that we do is to enter the public domain and if organisations are to learn from others' mistakes when managing public funds. We would not have asked to debate our work here today if there was no truth in that. The most disappointing element is that several of the recommendations in these reports were made before and were not acted on by the Departments. Do not ask me who the Ministers were, because we are not party political in this. At least, I hope that we are not.

Our Committee, however, does not give primacy over getting the truth about where public money is going. It is our job in the Committee, with the help of the Audit Office and its reports, to hone in on cases where the public purse has been tapped into unwisely; to hold those who are responsible for it to account; and to ensure that measures are put in place to prevent such situations from happening again. Do not tell me that that is not what happens in any democratic part of the world. It might interest the Minister and Mr Wilson to know that developing democracies from eastern Europe and other parts of the world have come here to Belfast to see how their Governments could be more accountable. I hope that they are not picking up some of the observations that are being made here this evening.

We seek in our investigations to identify where the problems lie in the Departments or the bodies that are under scrutiny. Rather than just pointing the finger and saying that we do not want to see x, y or z happening again, we make recommendations that offer guidance about what needs to change to avoid a repeat of those events a number of years down the line. I was here when literacy and numeracy was first discussed in 2002. It is now 2013, and many of those recommendations have been repeated. That is not the only one; there are several others.

The Committee expects that these recommendations are accepted and implemented quickly where there are no robust reasons against doing so. The rejection or only partial acceptance of a recommendation is a worry to the Committee, and it is something that we will keep an eye on.

Although 87% of the recommendations have been accepted, which may seem high, quite a few have been rejected. In recent times, we have, I think, experienced resistance to the work of the PAC. Perhaps that is a good thing, and perhaps we should welcome it, because it may indicate that we are doing our job right.

Of course, all the recommendations in some of the reports have been accepted. That was the case for the report on the use of consultants, and the amount spent on consultants has gone from £42 million to £13 million. Is that not an improvement?

Only eight of the 11 recommendations in the 'Report on the Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners' have been accepted. That is not too good given that £100 million has been lost to pensioners.

In the report on military sites, again, only 11 —
[Interruption.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dallat: Do you know what, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker? At this stage, I do not mind. I will suffer it; not a bother.

The PAC strives to work in the public interest, seeking to ensure that public money is used in the most efficient way possible so as to ensure that the greatest value is achieved for every £1 that is spent. Who does not want that? That is a vital factor for a Committee such as the PAC if it is to achieve success.

The fact that the PAC has conducted 10 inquiries in such a short time shows the extent to which Departments and public bodies are being held to account for their actions. The PAC intends to maintain that impetus in the coming year and has already commenced its planning for inquiries that it will conduct during the remainder of the session.

Accountability is vital, and the Committee has played a constructive role in pointing out the lessons that need to be learned to improve performance. Whilst our inquiries tend to be specific to a particular Department or body and the issues pertaining to it, there are lessons to be learned throughout government, and I hope that others are taking note of what we have said and the recommendations that we have made. I, as Deputy Chair, would certainly like to see greater partnership between Departments and the Public Accounts Committee. That having been said, I have been impressed by the extent to which a positive response to our recommendations has been shown by promising a much more active effort to improve public sector spending. However, we will continue to monitor the progress of reports in order to ensure that those are promises are fulfilled. That may take care of some of the constructive criticism that has been made. So, we will monitor that.

Michaela Boyle, the Chairperson, spoke of the independence of the Audit Office, and that is absolutely vital to this democracy. So you can forget any plans, past or present, to try to absorb it into the Department of Finance and Personnel. The people of Northern Ireland have, for many years now, had an independent Audit Office, and it is going to stay that way.

Michaela spoke about several issues that affect her constituents, not least patient safety and mental health. She highlighted the fact that money could have been better spent in helping

those people, and I can think of nothing more honourable than saving money for that reason.

Ross Hussey has obviously seen what has happened to military sites, because he lives in the Omagh area. There are lessons to be learned for the future. There is a military site in Ballykelly, and I hope that the same mistakes are not made there.

Stewart Dickson certainly did not get the name of the Committee right. The Audit Committee is a separate Committee, but we all make mistakes.

Paul Girvan obviously has an interest in listed buildings, and rightly so. Again, that is part of our heritage, and I cannot think of anything more honourable than trying to protect our heritage and ensure that the money for preserving those buildings is spent wisely. I do not need to repeat everything that Paul said, but, my God, there is some scope for improvement there.

Chris Hazzard spoke about Invest Northern Ireland and focused on the difference between job creation and job promotion. I think that the public at large have at last cottoned on to the fact that you cannot, forever and a day, keep recycling promotion and claiming it as success, which, of course, it is not. Promises are one thing; achievements are another.

I am not sure whether I should afford Mr Wilson another platform or not. The only thing is, it gets boring after a while, because this was not the first time that Mr Wilson brought a pile of books into this Assembly. On the last time, Lord Alderdice threw him out for it, or told him to get rid of them. Do you remember that? Of course.

Daithí McKay spoke about the oversight of Departments and referred to job promotion and job creation. He spoke about coming out of Crumlin Road Gaol, and I am glad that he did get out all right and had time to notice the courthouse, which is a splendid building — bad management, and look at the mess that it is in.

Ilex came in for criticism, and rightly so, in the area of business planned. Last night, I tried to book a hotel in Derry for the weekend and could not get one. They were all booked out. The Public Accounts Committee accepts that, at times, mistakes were made, but we perhaps want to give credit for the end products, and Ilex played a major role in the regeneration of that town, which was so badly on its knees. All the recommendations in relation to it are totally valid, and the Public Accounts Committee has

not spent all its time damning and criticising people. We have recognised good practice when it has taken place.

Michael Copeland made a very positive contribution — one of the best — on the question of biotech, all the money in the offshore accounts and the £2.2 million and all that stuff. How many of our unemployed people could have been skilled with the money that was wasted? The people who benefited from that are not here, of course.

Adrian McQuillan spoke about the role of Land and Property Services.

I was taken somewhat aback but, as the longest-serving member of the Public Accounts Committee, I can assure this Assembly that we value our role very much, and I can look the public straight in the eye and say that anything we did was not for press or publicity but to make this place workable. I cannot think of any more honourable a thing to do in this Assembly than to make some contribution to ensuring that we can justify a regional Assembly that works, and I hope that, when the new Minister has got his feet under the table, he will reflect on some of the things that were said today, because they ain't fair.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee reports:

Committee Reports

Report on the Use of External Consultants by Northern Ireland Departments: Follow-up Report (NIA 43/11-15)

Report on the Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners (NIA 45/11-15)

Report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute (NIA 48/11-15)

Report on the Transfer of Former Military and Security Sites to the Northern Ireland Executive and Ilex Accounts 2010-11 (NIA 58/11-15)

Report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings (NIA 64/11-15)

Report on Statements of Rate Levy and Collection 2009-10 and 2010-11 (NIA 88/11-15)

Report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Management of Response Maintenance Contracts (NIA 99/11-15)

Report on the Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts (NIA 102/11-15)

Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools (NIA 116/11-15)

Report on Invest NI: A Performance Review (NIA 109/11-15)

and the following Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply:

Report on the Use of External Consultants by Northern Ireland Departments: Follow-up Report

Report on the Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners

Report on the Bioscience and Technology Institute

Report on the Transfer of Former Military and Security Sites to the Northern Ireland Executive and Ilex Accounts 2010-11

Report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings

Report on Statements of Rate Levy and Collection 2009-10 and 2010-11

Report on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Management of Response Maintenance Contracts

Report on the Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts

Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools

Report on Invest NI: A Performance Review.

Private Members' Business

Prostate Cancer: Public Awareness Campaign

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 to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the rates of prostate cancer; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a public awareness campaign to raise awareness of the disease and to introduce a screening programme.

I thank the Business Committee for allowing this motion to come before the House and thank the Minister for attending.

In Northern Ireland, prostate cancer accounts for almost a quarter of male cancers — 23.9% — excluding the common non-melanoma skin cancers. An average of one in 85 men are diagnosed in Northern Ireland each year with prostate cancer. Indeed, there are a number of men in this Chamber today, and just think that one of us could have it unknowingly.

5.00 pm

There has been a sharp increase, almost a doubling, in the number of new cases diagnosed each year, from 593 in 2000 to 1,006 in 2011. However, the number of deaths has remained constant at an average of 216 per year, despite an ageing population.

Members, I am one of 6,646 men living with a diagnosis of prostate cancer and whose cancer was diagnosed over the past 18 years in Northern Ireland. Many of us were diagnosed through a blood test for the prostate-specific antigen, known as the PSA test. The introduction of that blood test led to a huge increase in the number of prostate cancer cases diagnosed, investigated and treated here. However, it may not be entirely a good news story.

Before I delve into screening and aftercare, I will speak a little about the cancer. The prostate is a small gland in the pelvis. Found only in men, it is about the size of a walnut and

is located at the bladder. It is around the urethra, the tube that carries urine from the bladder. Cancer of the prostate develops very slowly. You may have no sign of it for years as symptoms do not arise until the cancer has become large enough to put pressure on the urethra. Nevertheless, it can affect your life by causing anxiety or depression because, in many cases, when the cancer is at an early stage, a process of watchful waiting is common.

The prostate's position means that symptoms of the cancer include needing to urinate more frequently during the night; needing to rush to the toilet; difficulty in starting to urinate; straining or taking a long time to urinate; feeling that the bladder has not emptied fully; pain when passing urine; and, in some of the rarer forms, blood in the urine. If the disease has spread outside the prostate to the bones, that is secondary cancer, which can cause pain in the back, hips and pelvis.

It is very difficult to narrow down diagnosis to a single test. There is no single definitive test. The role of GPs cannot be underplayed. My GP's instinct is the reason why I was diagnosed. If a GP believes that you are at risk of this cancer, he has two options: he can ask for a urine sample to check for infection; or he can take a blood sample to test the level of prostate-specific antigen. PSA is a protein produced by the prostate gland. All men have a small amount of PSA in their blood, and it increases with age. Prostate cancer can increase the production of PSA, so the test looks for a raised level of PSA in the blood that might be a sign of the condition in its early stages. However, PSA testing is not a specific test for prostate cancer. Most men who have prostate cancer do not have a raised PSA level. More than 65% of men with a raised PSA level will not have cancer, as the level rises in all men as they get older. If there is a high level of PSA in the system, as in my case, you will be referred for a biopsy and/or CT scan.

Treatment depends entirely on the cancer's type, size and grade: low to medium, medium to aggressive or aggressive. In my case, the cancer was aggressive. It also depends on whether the cancer has spread to other parts of the body. As I said earlier, in rare forms, it may move into the bones. In my case, Members, doctors are watching me because a slight spot is showing on one of my ribs, though it is too small to treat. So they are in the mode of watchful waiting in my case, and that may continue for three to five years. After that period, it might be deemed necessary to remove the prostate surgically, or there may be radiotherapy or hormone therapy.

There is a downside to PSA testing. We hear, rightly, that it is important to have cancer diagnosed as early as possible so that treatment is easier and a cure more likely: bowel cancer screening, for example, will reduce deaths from that cancer. However, PSA testing for prostate cancer does not meet the well-defined and internationally accepted criteria for a screening test. It can be deemed unnecessary to many men as it is not very sensitive to picking up the disease, and nor is it specific in defining what is wrong. It may not be cancer of the prostate but infections.

A study in Europe examined 182,000 men and found a high risk of over-diagnosis of prostate cancer. It was estimated that 1,410 men would need to be screened and 48 men diagnosed and treated for prostate cancer to save one life. PSA tests should be used only in a clinical situation and not as a screening test. The public need to be made aware that a PSA test to diagnose prostate cancer should be considered only after consultations with clinicians, during which the risks and benefits can be discussed.

Seven out of 10 men with the cancer are over 65 years of age when diagnosed. It alarms me that I was not in the age range in which that type of cancer is more common, so I was not seen as being at risk. In that age group, death from prostate cancer is infrequent compared with other causes, even when initial PSA was markedly elevated. A conservative approach to invasive investigation is appropriate for the majority of men older than 65. There are, however, at least 7,000 men living here who have had a diagnosis of prostate cancer. Many of those men are experiencing the side effects of treatments, including bowel, urinary and sexual problems. There are also associations with depression and anxiety. An assessment of the needs of those men is required so that services can be planned and delivered to help them with the symptoms, some of which are very distressing.

My point, Minister, is not to do with new screening projects, and nor is it to change the current screening process, although I see the PSA test as being quite unnecessary. My issue is with the aftercare of men after they are subjected to the screening and diagnosis process. I went to the doctor for my usual blood test, which was when my GP became worried and sent me to the hospital. A blood test and a biopsy were done. Within two weeks, I was sitting in the hospital, and the doctor read out the chilling words, "You are confirmed as having cancer". That is how it is put. There is no other way of putting it, and I

accept that. Depression sets in with a lot of men when they are told that they have cancer. I went for bone MRI scans, which were all done very well. My diagnosis meant daily treatment for seven weeks at the City Hospital. When you are in the City Hospital, it is an average of 200 or 300 a day.

I am conscious of the time. My area of the glens in the East Antrim constituency has a very high rate of prostate cancer. The figures are also very high in the Larne area. That needs to be looked at. I would like you, Minister, to look at three things out of the debate today. The first is to have a screening process for men who have been diagnosed for after-treatment, which is vital. That is not happening at present. A major publicity campaign needs to be carried out to make more men aware of the disease. Men in general do not go to the doctor and do not like —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McMullan: — to do that sort of thing. I hope that you, Minister, take this on board today. Thank you all again for being here to listen to the debate.

Mr Wells: It never fails to impress me that, when Members have had bad news medically, rather than remaining silent, they have been prepared to come forward, raise the issue in the House and try to educate others about the warning signs and to advocate better treatment. Any of us who listened to Mr McMullan's contribution could not fail to be impressed by his honesty and bravery in raising his journey with prostate cancer. We had Mr Jimmy Spratt from South Belfast telling his story of bowel cancer, and I remember that Pauline Armitage, a former Member of the House, was very open about her cancer experiences. I am very glad to say that she has made several recoveries.

Prostate cancer is one of those very difficult areas, because many men will die with prostate cancer rather than because of it. Indeed, one study in the United States showed that 80% of men over 70 who were examined and who had died of other causes had had some form of prostate cancer which had not contributed to their death. So, that makes this a much more difficult issue to deal with than normal cancers.

It is the sixth leading cause of cancer death in the world, but there are huge variations that are difficult to understand. There is a very high level of incidence and death among Afro-Caribbean men in America, but, in the

Mediterranean areas, there is a remarkably lower figure. There is a huge degree of research to be done on that.

There are very clear risk factors: diet, genetics, obesity and lack of exercise. There seems to be a very clear and direct link between a diet that is high in red meat content and prostate cancer. Normal meat consumption does not seem to be a factor, but people for whom a very high proportion of their diet is red meat seem to have difficulties.

Genetics are incredibly important. Indeed, if someone in your immediate family has prostate cancer, that doubles your chances of contracting the disease, so it is somewhat like breast cancer in that there is a very definite genetic element. We do not understand what produces that, but it means that people who have immediate relatives with this condition need to regard it as urgent that they get in and get checked.

There is also a strange link between exposure to light pollution and prostate cancer. No one has yet come to any firm conclusion as to why this is, but the statistics show that it is a risk factor. Lack of exercise comes up time and again in many cardiovascular and cancer ailments, and it leaves one open to this condition.

As Mr McMullan said, there are very clear warning signs, but the reality is that 66% of people diagnosed with prostate cancer have none of those warning signs, and that is what makes this disease particularly difficult. Frequent urination, blood in the urine and painful urination are very clear indications of prostate cancer, but, in the cases of many men who are eventually diagnosed with prostate cancer, none of these signs showed up, and they had no warning.

I must congratulate Mr McMullan, and I think that he is absolutely right. The tendency is to demand widespread screening and PSA tests for all. Unfortunately, unlike other cancers, such as ovarian cancer where screening can improve life expectancy by 90%, mass screening for prostate cancer does not work. It leads to over-treatment, anxiety, biopsies and other forms of treatment that can be as dangerous as the condition itself. Therefore, there is no silver bullet or magic solution where you can simply decide to test every man over 60 for prostate cancer.

I was tested last Christmas as part of my normal medical examination. The PSA test was quite low, but even if a PSA test shows up

early, that does not improve survival chances. The statistics show that you are no less or no more likely to die from prostate cancer even if you have the PSA test. Therefore, I think that Mr McMullan has been very responsible in saying that the key is aftercare and follow-up after diagnosis. I think that that is the best way forward.

We are making successful steps in Northern Ireland cancer treatment. Many more men are not dying as a result of prostate cancer than, say, 20 years ago. We have a long way to go, and I welcome the fact that this issue is being aired on the Floor of the House.

Mr McKinney: I support the motion and commend the proposer for bringing this important issue to the House. I echo the words of Mr Jim Wells on how other Members have reflected publicly. Too often we stay quiet on these issues, and it is important that they are reflected in a way that leads to better provision.

We have heard that the rates of prostate cancer have risen at a worrying rate over the past number of years, and we urgently need the Minister of Health to introduce a public awareness campaign. Such a campaign, coupled with a proper screening programme, would help stem the increasing rates of that particular cancer.

5.15 pm

Today, we heard a very moving account from Mr McMullan on his cancer. Taking this opportunity to raise awareness is very important. We know that much more needs to be done if we are to encourage men to avail themselves of a new screening programme. However, the inequity that exists between cancer patients in Northern Ireland and those in England must be addressed if we are to tackle the rising rates of prostate cancer. Crucial and lifesaving medicine must be readily accessible to people living in this region. There are three prostate cancer medicines, across four indications not available in Northern Ireland, that are available through the cancer drugs fund.

Almost two years ago, the Health Minister pledged that people living in Northern Ireland should have access to the same level of care that patients in England receive. Patients in Northern Ireland have limited access to new cancer medicines. Health technology assessments lead to a high percentage of rejections for cancer medicines. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

(NICE) has rejected 11 of the 12 cancer medicines that it appraised in 2013. The individual funding request (IFR) process allows access only where a patient's condition represents an unusual or rare circumstance.

The Rarer Cancers Foundation produced a report in 2012 that suggested that clinicians here are hesitant to submit to the IFR process because they feel that it is overly onerous. The impact of those barriers can go beyond individual patients and also affects Northern Ireland's suitability as a destination for clinical research. It is not just medicine but surgery. I understand that there are advanced keyhole surgery procedures available on the NHS. Although there is some expertise, those facilities and that process are not as available here. Perhaps that is something that the Health Minister can look into as well.

An urgent action plan is needed to improve cancer patients' access to the medicines that their clinicians think that they need. Clinicians must be empowered to request access to the latest cancer medicines available that they think will be effective. We urge the Minister to explore options to improve the access for cancer patients, including those with prostate cancer. Those options include potentially reforming the current IFR process so that it supports clinical decision-making; working with NICE and the Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC) to review the way in which they currently assess cancer medicines; and introducing a cancer drugs fund for Northern Ireland.

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) has estimated that the cost of removing the inequity in accessing cancer medicines and ensuring that cancer patients in Northern Ireland have access to the same medicines as patients in England would be somewhere in the region of £7 million. In my constituency of South Belfast, there is the world-class cancer centre, staffed by highly trained and dedicated staff who provide a truly excellent service. As we attempt to raise awareness of prostate cancer, we must increase the provision of services offered by the NHS.

In conjunction with raising awareness, I also acknowledge that lifestyle factors can contribute significantly to the disease. To that end, there is a need for the creation of clear public health messages and an effective public awareness campaign. We must seek to provide a holistic approach to the treatment of prostate cancer — an approach that focuses on both prevention and cure. Men must be educated in ways in which they can reduce their personal risk

factors and be able to readily access robust information to allow them to make informed choices about their lifestyle and the services available to them.

Mr Beggs: I support the views expressed by the Members who spoke previously, and I thank Mr McMullan for bringing his personal experience to the Chamber to highlight the issue and make more people aware of the condition.

The Cancer Registry indicates that prostate cancer is the fourth most common cancer in Northern Ireland in 2012. It is the most common cancer in men by a long way, yet men are generally not good at talking about their health or being aware about their health, and they are perhaps slower to seek the help of a GP. Therefore, it is important that they are aware of the risks involved with that particular type of cancer.

As others said, with it affecting one in eight of us, we all should be aware of and look out for the symptoms that have been highlighted, particularly bladder control. The risk factors greatly increase as you go over the age of 50, which is something that I and many others need to be aware of. The average age for diagnosis is between 70 and 74. Prostate Cancer UK has been very useful in providing those statistics and those on other risk factors, which also must be highlighted. If you have a brother or father who has been diagnosed, that increases your risk by a further two and a half times. If a close relative has suffered from breast cancer, particularly if it was linked to faults in genes BRCA1 and BRCA2, that is an increased risk factor.

The current testing largely starts off with the prostate-specific antigen test, which can detect a cancer before the symptoms develop. One constituent has made me aware that he believes that his regular testing, which identified a change and then allowed for further treatment to diagnose his cancer, is responsible for his still living today. So, it can be a very powerful test, particularly when changes are noted.

However, the test is also problematic. I understand that it will detect benign conditions of prostate cancer. Such cancers may not necessarily be of ongoing concern for anyone, yet their detection will heighten concern. I also understand that about 15% of men with normal levels of PSA may actually have prostate cancer. So, it is not a definitive test. We need better tests and more research.

A wide range of subsequent tests, such as the transrectal ultrasound (TRUS), kick in if the first test highlights areas of concern. However, we learn that even that is problematic. I understand that about two thirds of TRUS biopsies that are carried out as a result of elevated PSA find no detectable cancers. That means that there is ongoing anxiety for those who have been warned that they may have a cancer that has not been detected. They may well have it, but it may not have shown yet. A prolonged follow-up is then required, and concern goes with that. It is important, therefore, that there is awareness of not only the benefits but the limitations and risks that are associated with the various tests.

I was very struck by a quotation that I came across from Professor Dan Berney from Queen Mary University of London. He told the BBC that:

"We need a better test as we are over-treating many men; most will die with, not of, prostate cancer."

Mr Wells made that point earlier. Dr Berney said that there is an urgent need to try to:

"discriminate between the aggressive forms and those that will grumble along and just need monitoring."

That would be the wish list, if you like.

There have been problems elsewhere with overdiagnosis. I noticed that a recent review in the Irish Republic concluded that:

"Currently available evidence is insufficient to recommend a population based screening programme because of concerns that it may not improve survival or quality of life and may ultimately cause more harm than good."

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

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for raising the issue, and I hope that more will learn from it. I also hope that the Assembly and our Health Department will contribute to the research that is necessary to bring about improvement.

Mr McCarthy: I am very happy to support the motion. In doing so, I express my solidarity with our colleagues Mr McMullan and Mr Spratt, and anyone else who has been fighting their own battle with cancer. I think it right that we thank Mr McMullan for his openness and frankness

this afternoon. I wish him every success with a speedy recovery back to health.

The motion reflects a general theme that has cut across a range of motions in the House in recent months, and that is the changing health needs that arise from changing demographics and, in particular, the welcome fact that more and more people are living longer, with the consequence that the range of conditions that our health system must address is evolving and challenging. In tandem with that, the particular elements of a much more general focus on public health and early intervention and prevention are brought into sharp focus, as opportunities to highlight and manage the factors that enhance the risk of certain conditions become apparent.

As mentioned, the rates of prostate cancer are increasing in Northern Ireland. As the motion points out, that is an outworking of people living longer. It is a condition that is particularly apparent in older men, and, indeed, it is one of the most frequent forms of cancer for men.

Relatively little is known about the causes of prostate cancer, but diet and obesity are likely to be major factors. That highlights the importance of early testing and the opportunities that lie with the greater provision of screening. However, as I understand it, there are downsides and dangers with the interventions that are involved in universal screening. Therefore, the scope of any revised regime will probably have to be defined and shaped on the basis of risk management.

It is also worth stressing that Northern Ireland has a strong research base in cancer studies, for which we are very grateful. Our excellent scientists are involved in important work, and the Executive and the Assembly should give them the full support they deserve.

In conclusion, I express my sincere gratitude to the Assembly's Research and Information Service, particularly the assistant librarian Kristine Gillespie, for the excellent insight into all aspects of prostate cancer that she provided in the booklet for the Assembly. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I fully support the motion.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion on a very important matter that affects so many people across Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, prostate cancer is a growing problem across our country. This motion is a useful opportunity to highlight the condition and to actively explore the ways in which we can try to reduce the number of sufferers and, importantly, support those who

have prostate cancer. I recognise the courage of Mr Oliver McMullan, who is battling cancer, for tabling the motion. We wish him well in his recovery.

A lot of work is ongoing in support of those with prostate cancer, and I trust that we will see further advances in treatment in the near future. The shocking statistic from Cancer Research UK that boys in the UK who are born in 2015 will be almost three times more likely to be diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime than those who were born in 1990 is alarming, and it really brings home how big the problem of cancer is.

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

We must ensure that the provision of services is of the highest quality for the people who are diagnosed with this form of cancer and make sure that early detection is always to the fore. Early detection is crucial in ensuring effective treatment and increasing the chances of survival.

Every year in the UK, some 40,000 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer, with over 900 men diagnosed in Northern Ireland annually. Prostate cancer is set to become the most common cancer in the UK by 2030 unless some radical and wide-ranging effective action can be developed.

I would like to pay tribute to and commend the local charities and organisations that work with cancer sufferers and their families and provide daily support during such a difficult time for anyone who suffers from this terrible condition. Education could be improved and better targeted in our communities through public awareness campaigns and outreach programmes to raise awareness of prostate cancer, its symptoms and measures to decrease someone's chances of developing the condition.

5.30 pm

Much work has been done on highlighting other forms of cancer, such as breast cancer, with various charities leading very powerful, prominent and successful public awareness campaigns. Prostate cancer is one of the lesser known cancers and is often not spoken about. We need to change the mindset of men and encourage more men to be tested for the condition. The more encouraging statistic is that death rates have fallen in the UK by 18% in the last 20 years, largely due to earlier diagnosis. That shows some hope that

together we can help tackle this terrible condition.

Health promotion and public awareness campaigns that encourage healthier living all have a key role to play in helping to tackle prostate cancer. Encouraging a healthier lifestyle, better diets and exercise and reducing smoking and alcohol consumption are all measures that should be worked on and fully encouraged. It is vital that we broaden the scope of detection to tackle this terrible condition.

I trust that the motion will go some way to bringing improvements on this important matter and, importantly, raise awareness of the condition and help support those who are affected by it, both directly and indirectly. I look forward to the Minister's response this evening.

Mr Rogers: I support the motion and congratulate Mr McMullan on bringing it to the House.

Like him, I have had this experience. I know only too well the devastation when you get the diagnosis to both you and your family. Your emotions run riot. It is the word "cancer" that sticks in your mind. Like others, I tried to shield it from my family until my eldest daughter happened to intercept a phone call from a consultant one evening. Obviously, she asked, "Daddy, why is a consultant ringing you?".

At that stage, I knew little about prostate cancer. It was a cancer, as far as I was concerned, and that was enough bad news. I was just 50 at that stage, with a family between the ages of 12 and 22, some of whom had barely left school. I had had a few bad experiences of cancer: my father, my father-in-law and my sister-in-law had all died from cancer. Was I going to be next? No, I was not. I got inspiration from many places, but — I know I mentioned this in the last debate, too — one of my sources of inspiration was a daughter of mine who had leukaemia when she was six. She battled for two years to make a full recovery. I went through the radical surgery, and then 35 sessions of radium in the cancer centre. Eight years later, thank God, I am here to tell my story.

The bottom line in all this is that prostate cancer can be a killer if it is not got in time. In the last 40 years, the incidence of prostate cancer in the United Kingdom has tripled. In Northern Ireland, prostate cancer is by far the most common form of cancer in men. Many statistics have been mentioned today, and I will not bore you with any more.

Cancer Research UK says that early diagnosis and new treatments, such as hormone therapy and radiotherapy, are beating the trend but more work needs to be done to reduce deaths from the disease. However, with access to proper screening, early detection can be made, resulting in more cancer survivors and positive stories like my own. I was one of the 60% that Mr Wells talked about: I had no symptoms; I just had a very persistent wife. I use the word "persistent"; people could use other words, but I dare not. After losing her father to the disease, she was going to make sure I got myself checked out. In my case, the simple PSA check worked. That had to be followed up with other investigative procedures.

There are two aspects to the healing: the physical and the emotional. I thank my doctors, Daisy Hill Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital and the cancer centre at the City Hospital. I attribute much of my emotional healing to the support I had from my family and from prayer. Getting your head around your diagnosis is clearly the thing that gets the glass half full. Your body is not designed to take 35 blasts of radium in seven weeks, but I am quite happy to live with the consequences. The Chamber needs to send out a clear message to the public today. We need to encourage men to come forward and get tested, as early diagnosis can save lives. The PSA test does not work for everyone, but it helps. I have told my story on a number of occasions, and I know that it has made a difference to others.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: Yes, I will, surely.

Mr Wells: We are obviously all delighted to hear of your success. I omitted the Member from my earlier comments about those who have had the courage to come to the House and tell the story of their journey with cancer. I should have mentioned his name as well. I understand that the SDLP is about to give you another 40-year contract and review your status at the end of that.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Mr Wells.

I have told my story, and I use today to tell it again because I know that it has made a difference to others. It has encouraged men like me to get checked. It has also encouraged men who were making up their mind about whether they should go for 35 sessions of radium treatment to go ahead.

I trust that the media will pick up the stories that we have told here today and ensure that they send out the message that prostate cancer is treatable, if caught in time. For all men, access to urologists and curative treatments has improved since the mid-1990s. I call on the Minister to support and adequately fund an awareness campaign designed to inform men of the benefits of proper screening for the disease. Further clinical trials are needed, specifically of treatments for older men. We must provide services that support the patient and the family circle. The family, as caregivers, need to feel that they can access services that will provide information to help the patient on their cancer journey.

Recognition must be given to the exceptionally high standard of care that our National Health Service staff provide. We must ensure that cancer units receive the support that they need to continue to provide this vital care to patients. My hope is that the debate today highlights the issue of prostate cancer and helps to increase awareness of the disease in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gardiner: At present, four screening programmes operate across the Northern Ireland health service. In general terms, I believe that screening is a valuable exercise, and I encourage the Minister to consider the clinical possibilities of a screening programme. As far as I know, the National Health Service in England has not introduced one because of a report carried out for it by Sheffield University and based on British Association of Urological Surgeons data from 2008.

The United Kingdom National Screening Committee is responsible for reviewing screening policies every three years and making recommendations to Ministers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on whether a screening programme for a certain condition should be set up. The Sheffield study suggested that screening from the age of 50 resulted in only a marginal overall increase in life expectancy. The screening committee considered four options: a single scan at the age of 50; screening every four years from the age of 50 to 74; screening every two years from the age of 50 to 74; and screening every year from the age of 50 to 74. It found that only a small marginal increase in prostate cancer identification was gained through moving to a policy of annual screening. There is also some evidence that, if men are screened for prostate cancer early, beginning treatment can lead to the early onset of symptoms, with men having to live with those symptoms for longer.

I do not know the specific figures for Northern Ireland. Nationally, the total additional cost of a policy of screening once at the age of 50 would be £58 million, rising to over £1 billion for an annual screening policy from the age of 50. On the basis of population, screening in Northern Ireland would cost £20 million or slightly more. So it seems to me that cost and only a marginal increase in survival times are the reasons why the screening committee has not recommended prostate cancer screening. Those are issues that the Members who framed the motion will have to consider. Although I support the aims of the motion, I think that we need to look seriously at the reasons why the National Screening Committee has not gone down this route. Perhaps the Minister could elaborate on that.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): It is important that we all realise the scale of the challenge that cancer presents. Mr McMullan set out clearly, in a very personal way, how cancer has impacted on him. I trust that he receives good care and recovers well.

One in three people in Northern Ireland will be diagnosed with cancer at some stage in their lifetime, so everyone is or will be touched by it directly as a patient or through the experiences of friends or relatives. Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in males, and the chances of developing a prostate cancer increase as you get older. Most cases develop in men aged 65 and over.

Figures from the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry show that the number of men with prostate cancer has increased steadily from 486 in 1994 to an average of 1,000 new cases annually. That, of course, coincides to some extent with people living longer. Although incidence has increased, it is important to note that survival rates have also improved. The latest Cancer Registry figures indicate a five-year survival rate of over 84% for patients diagnosed between 2002 and 2006. That is a very significant improvement on rates from 1993 to 1996, when only 56% of patients survived more than five years.

The increase in the number of cases diagnosed over recent years reflects the increase in the use of prostate-specific antigen (PSA) testing in Northern Ireland. A PSA test involves giving a blood sample, and, if the level of PSA is raised, it may mean that you have a prostate cancer. However, other conditions that are not cancer, such as an enlargement of the prostate or a urinary infection, can also cause higher PSA levels in the blood. Further tests are required to

diagnose prostate cancer, and about two out of three men with a raised PSA level will not have the disease.

There are other issues with the PSA test. It cannot differentiate between fast- and slow-growing prostate cancers, and, although most are slow-growing, a proportion advances more aggressively. The test can miss cancer and provide false reassurance, and it may lead to unnecessary worry and medical tests when there is no cancer.

The UK National Screening Committee had previously reviewed the evidence on screening for prostate cancer and advised that screening should not be introduced. Following the publication of two new research papers in March 2009, the National Screening Committee was asked to consider the evidence on prostate cancer screening. One of the papers showed that the risk of dying from prostate cancer was reduced by 20% among those screened, but around 48 men had to be treated to save one life. The other paper showed no benefit from screening.

Following detailed analysis of the two papers, the National Screening Committee concluded that a national screening programme for prostate cancer was not recommended, as the potential harms from prostate cancer screening using the PSA test are likely to outweigh the benefits. Although the National Screening Committee has advised against a prostate screening programme using the PSA test, it acknowledges that men without symptoms of prostate cancer may request a PSA test, and it has advised that an informed choice programme should be available to them.

A prostate cancer risk management programme has been developed nationally. It aims to help primary care give clear and balanced information to men who ask about PSA testing. In October 2009, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride, issued a chief professional letter to relevant health professionals, including all GPs, informing them of the prostate cancer risk management programme.

It is important to bear it in mind that the lack of an effective screening programme does not mean that we are powerless against the disease. We have more effective treatments for prostate cancer than were available even a few years ago. They include surgery; radiotherapy, externally or with radioactive implants, which is brachytherapy; active surveillance or watchful waiting, which involves regular check-ups to check that the cancer is not growing; hormone therapy; and chemotherapy. Belfast has been

at the front line in the testing and development of new treatment techniques, and prostate cancer is one area that will benefit from the £4 million Northern Ireland clinical research facility at the Belfast Trust, which I opened in September. The new facility will increase our capacity for high-quality clinical research studies undertaken in the safety of a hospital environment and at the greater convenience of patients and staff.

5.45 pm

In addition to that progress in treatment, we must do all we can to ensure that patients are aware of the signs and symptoms of the disease, as early detection allows for treatments to be more effective and improves outcomes for patients. The Public Health Agency is currently planning a cancer awareness campaign to be launched in 2014-15. There is a wealth of evidence internationally and from elsewhere in the UK that awareness campaigns can have a significant positive impact on the number of people who visit their doctor with symptoms, and we all know how crucial that can be in improving outcomes for cancer patients.

Although the signs and symptoms of prostate cancer — such as having to rush to the toilet to pass urine, difficulty in passing urine, passing urine more often than usual, particularly at night — are similar to other prostate problems, I would always encourage any man who experiences these to discuss them with his GP. It is vital for everyone to understand that early detection of cancer greatly increases the chances of successful treatment. We all have a responsibility for our own health.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for being here and thank all those who participated in this important debate.

It is interesting to note the postcode district with the largest number of cancer deaths is BT34, which covers Newry in my constituency and quite a lot of South Down, including Annalong, Ballymartin, Cabragh, Hilltown, Kilcoo, Kilkeel, Mayobridge, Poyntzpass, which, is, again, in my constituency, Rostrevor, Warrenpoint and, basically, the whole area of Newry and Mourne. There, 1,150 people died from cancer between 2001 and 2010, compared with fewer than five deaths in the less densely populated Titanic Quarter in the Belfast docks area of BT3. It is an interesting statistic, because Newry and Mourne has, for instance, one of the highest incidences of multiple sclerosis in the world.

That was documented in research carried out by the Mayo Clinic about 25 years ago. It is worth pointing out that, as the crow flies, Carlingford lough is approximately 67 miles from Sellafield/Windscale, and I just want to make the point that changing the name does not necessarily change the effect.

Mr McMullan gave very personal testimony of his circumstances. Prostate cancer accounts for almost a quarter of cancers in the North. There was a sharp increase in diagnosed cases, which rose from 593 in 2000 to 1,006 in 2011, although, thankfully, the death rate of 216 a year has not increased. One man in every 6,000 here lives with prostate cancer, which can be diagnosed with a specific blood test. Mr McMullan gave some details of prostate cancer. Initially, there are no symptoms of the cancer, but then there is increased frequency of urination, pain in passing urine, sometimes blood in the urine and the possibility of secondary cancer. He also stressed how important the GP's role is, and that cannot be overplayed. Mr McMullan was fortunate to have a perceptive GP who was able to send him for specific prostate cancer tests. However, further tests, a biopsy etc, were needed. Further surgical procedures may be carried out, for instance removal of the gland. He talked about prostate cancer being more common in older men and about living with the attendant bowel, urinary and sexual problems.

One of the things that Mr McMullan emphasised and that, I think, the Minister may take on board was the issue of aftercare once someone is diagnosed. For instance, many people can suffer from depression etc. MRI scans obviously need to be carried out, and Mr McMullan went through daily treatment for seven weeks. He praised the cancer unit in the City Hospital for the treatment he received there and its high quality. He talked about his own area of the glens having a very high incidence. He talked about the screening process and aftercare. He said that a major public awareness campaign was needed.

Mr Wells talked about the bravery of Members who came forward with issues that affected them and were prepared to talk about them in order to raise awareness. Prostate cancer is a difficult area. It is the sixth leading cause of cancer in the world. There is high incidence in the Caribbean and a low rate in Mediterranean countries. He talked about diet being a factor, particularly red meat. I am sure that Mr Wells will not have that problem. As we all know, red meat is anathema to him. I understand that white meat is as well. He also talked about family history. He mentioned light pollution,

which, I have to say, is a new one on me. He said that there were statistics that showed that light pollution can be a risk factor. Maybe, at a later stage, he will elaborate on that. He said that often the condition is symptomless. He mentioned widespread screening and PSA testing. He said that mass screening for prostate cancer does not work and there is no magic solution. However, he commented that fewer men die now than were dying 20 years ago.

Fearghal McKinney commended the proposer and echoed the words of Mr Wells. He said that rates of prostate cancer were rising. He talked about the need for a public awareness campaign and said that much more needed to be done to encourage men to come forward for testing and so on. He said that medicines need to be made available and that patients here should have access to the same level of treatment as those in England. He talked about advanced keyhole surgery procedures being available there but not necessarily here. He said that clinicians must be empowered to have access to the most modern and effective drugs for treatment. He mentioned the world-class cancer centre in his constituency. I think that we would all agree with that sentiment. He talked about lifestyle factors contributing to the condition and said that informed choices must be made.

Mr Beggs also thanked the proposer. He said that more people need to be made aware that prostate cancer is common in the North, that men are not good at dealing with health issues and that one in eight men is affected by prostate cancer. He said that risk increases with age and that the average age at diagnosis is between 70 and 74 years, that family history increases the risk, that PSA testing can detect the condition before symptoms manifest themselves and that it is not an easy condition to diagnose. He described different types of tests that can be carried out and said that better tests are required. He said that sometimes there is overtreatment and overdiagnosis of patients, which can lead to attendant problems.

Kieran McCarthy expressed his solidarity with Mr McMullan and Mr Spratt. I am sure that he would have solidarity with Mr Rogers as well. He acknowledged Mr McMullan's frankness about his condition. He talked about changing demographics. He said that prevention and early intervention are so important, that people are living longer and that diet and obesity can be major factors. He mentioned the importance of early testing and said that any regime put in place has to consider risk management. He

expressed his gratitude to the Assembly's Research and Information Service.

Gordon Dunne said that the matter is a very important one for many people here and that the motion is important. He acknowledged the bravery of Mr McMullan. He talked about the shocking statistic that boys born in 2015 will be three times more likely to be diagnosed with prostate cancer than people who were born in 1990. He talked about early detection being crucial. He said that some 900 men are diagnosed here annually and that effective action needs to be developed. He rightly praised the organisations that deal with cancer patients. He said that there are high-profile awareness campaigns for other types of cancer but not necessarily for prostate cancer. He talked about encouraging healthier lifestyles, which he said is so important, and said that we need to broaden the scope for detection.

Sean Rogers also gave a very personal testament of his experience of prostate cancer and the effect that it had on him and his family. He talked about the importance of support from the medical teams who treated him and the support of his family. He talked about his persistent wife. I think that the word that he used was "persistent". He may have used other ones in a private capacity, but I do not think that I will go into that. He talked about how important it is for men to be encouraged to be tested. Mr Wells talked about a 40-year contract. I imagine that he must have at least a 50-year contract with the DUP. However, that is only speculation on my part.

Mr Rogers also talked about prostate cancer being treatable if caught in time, and he called on the Minister to support a screening-awareness campaign.

Sam Gardiner talked about the UK National Screening Committee making recommendations on screening programmes and the different options that are available. He also talked about men being screened too early and how they can often live longer in a worrying situation with the symptoms. He said that screening here on a population basis would probably cost about £20 million. So, it seems that, in many of those cases, cost, as opposed to the type of treatment, is the issue.

The Minister talked about prostate cancer being the most common cancer in males. He discussed the registry here and said that 486 cases were registered in 1994, which has increased to 1,000 new cases annually. He said that, although incidence has increased, survival rates have also fortunately increased.

He talked about the PSA testing that is used for diagnosis but said that further tests are often required, as PSA tests can sometimes give a false reassurance. He mentioned the figure of 20% and said that people who are screened are more likely to survive. He talked about the National Screening Committee and said that the screening programme is not recommended because of the nature of testing and its effects. He also said that, in 2009, Dr McBride, the Chief Medical Officer, informed GPs of prostate cancer risk-management programmes. He said that more effective treatments are now available, and he talked about the types of therapy, including chemotherapy, hormone treatment etc.

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

Mr Brady: He also said that the clinical research facility would have benefits for the diagnosis and treatment of prostate cancer. He said that early detection is so important and that awareness campaigns can have significant positive effects.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the rates of prostate cancer; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a public awareness campaign to raise awareness of the disease and to introduce a screening programme.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Public Sector Jobs: North-west

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who are called to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to speak at this late hour on what is a very important issue for Derry and, indeed, the wider north-west.

As Members may or may not know, Civil Service pensions administers a number of occupational pension schemes on behalf of members of the Civil Service, and it has been based in Waterside House in Derry since 1993. Members might be aware, through, I suppose, local media initially, that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is considering proposals on the future service delivery of the Civil Service pensions branch.

There are two options. The first is to outsource the computer system completely, which would involve replacing the current system but would allow Civil Service pensions staff to operate it at Waterside House. I have been told that that option will allow pensioners to carry out tasks online. Such tasks would include updating personal details and requesting benefit statements, which would lead to a reduction in the overall number of staff.

The second option is to outsource the computer system and the administration function of Civil Service pensions, with the projected loss of up to 80 public sector posts. Effectively, that would mean, in my view, the privatisation of public sector jobs and the loss of potentially £1 million to the local economy.

Although I agree that we need a new computer system, I oppose the privatisation of public sector jobs and the outsourcing of the work that is currently carried out in Waterside House and, indeed, the redeployment of staff with no guarantee that they will be based in Derry. It could mean that several staff members will be forced to resign if they are unable to work in, for example, Belfast or Bangor.

Members may be familiar with the fact that, 20 years ago, Civil Service pensions jobs were relocated to the north-west as a direct result of lobbying and pressure from politicians at the time. That was done to ensure a fairer distribution of Civil Service jobs throughout the North and to boost the local economy. The loss of approximately 80 jobs will undo that positive work and have a major detrimental impact, in my view, on the local economy.

6.00 pm

We know too well the prospect of the job losses looming due to the threatened closure of the Coleraine vehicle licensing office. Therefore, the north-west can ill afford to lose a further 80 posts. There is also concern that staff and unions were not consulted properly about the project, other than information being passed to local representatives. That does not constitute real consultation. Real consultation would have seen unions being given sight of the key consultation document at each stage of the process so that they could input into the discussion. I know that NIPSA has been very concerned that the outline business case, which will set out and recommend the preferred option, will be approved by the Minister prior to staff and the representatives having had an opportunity to consider and comment. NIPSA would suggest that that is grossly unfair and unjustified. As it points out, that flies in the face of the project's communication strategy and totally contradicts it.

The Finance and Personnel Minister is expected to sign off on a preferred option within the next few weeks. It is expected that a notice will be advertised in the European procurement journal by December 2013. Even if the posts are privatised, that will have no benefit for the local economy, as many of those with pensions expertise who are expected to bid for those jobs are based in England.

I am aware that NIPSA is currently balloting members in pensions branch about industrial action, and members feel that they may have no option but to embark on a series of protests. That, again, is because of management's refusal to share information. I suggest that industrial action can be avoided if the Minister gives a commitment to protect those public sector jobs. The Minister has previously declared that he is keen to strengthen the link between the public and private sector. However, the outsourcing of those pensions posts will have very little or no benefit to private companies in the North.

We realise that, recently, the Minister's party sent a delegation to Westminster to meet the Transport Secretary in an effort to save the 350 posts at Coleraine, which we very much welcome. However, why is his party so keen to save the Coleraine posts and show disregard for the Derry posts? Minister Hamilton has a responsibility here. We are being told that the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) decision is being made by Westminster, so does that make it easier? Why has he or his party not shown the people of Derry and the north-west that they are committed to protecting public sector posts in Derry, as they have done in Coleraine?

In summary, although there has been no mention of redundancies or pay-offs, the fact is that, in Derry, there is a risk to potentially 80 public sector jobs. Staff will be moved, there will be an adverse effect on the local economy and staff are worried about the future. There has been no meaningful consultation with unions; management updates to staff have not allayed any fears or concerns; and staff and unions do not know what the preferred option is, which is, they suggest, because management refuses to share the information.

The DUP Finance and Personnel Minister was previously very vocal in his support for the private sector, yet the privatisation of the north-west posts are unlikely to provide any benefit to the private sector in the north-west. Although we have seen a particular focus — a very welcome focus — on Derry and the north-west over recent years through the One Plan and the investment of £0.5 billion by December 2012, and the major investment yet to be calculated in relation to the City of Culture, and, thankfully, we have now good news for the allocation of the 600 Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) jobs to the north-west, we must ensure that the commitment in the Programme for Government to decentralise public sector jobs is prioritised.

In conclusion, therefore, before making his decision, I ask the Finance Minister to consider the following: the impact on Civil Service pension staff, their families and the local economy if any decision is taken to remove those jobs from the north-west; the hard work and successful track record of the current staff in maintaining a high standard of service in administering the Civil Service pension schemes; and the lack of real, meaningful and constructive consultation with NIPSA on this most important of issues. Why has NIPSA not been permitted to see the important and relevant documentation at the key stages of this project? I put this to the Minister.

Mr G Robinson: I hope that the Member will not be averse to my bringing Coleraine DVA jobs into this debate, because it is a fact that the workforce is drawn from the entire north-west and not just the area surrounding the city of Londonderry, which has benefited from the City of Culture celebrations. That is why it is essential that the jobs that the Transport Secretary at Westminster is trying to remove are kept in Coleraine for the sake of the entire north-west economy.

Thankfully, there has been a united front to protect those jobs. Staff have visited Westminster to put their case, and the First Minister, whom I congratulate, met staff and pledged to bring the issue to the attention of the Prime Minister, which he duly did at a recent economic meeting. It is most important that we protect the public sector jobs that we have, as well as seek to bring new ones to the entire north-west and wider area.

As I was the first MLA to contact the then Agriculture Minister proposing the former Shackleton Barracks site in Ballykelly as the base for the new DARD headquarters, it is with pleasure that I hear of the slow but continuing progress in securing those jobs on site. We have been fortunate that the two Ministers involved have appreciated the value of the site for their Department's purposes. Indeed, due to the magnitude of the site, more jobs for the north-west will hopefully be created there in time. Therefore, I see a more positive trend for public sector jobs than in other areas. I am grateful for that, and will continue to hope for further developments.

It is fair to state that Londonderry was once a more economically productive place than it is today, but, like so many other areas, it was heavily dependent on the textile industry. It has suffered from the global downturn and cheap production abroad. I am thinking of firms such as Desmonds and Daintyfit, based in my home town of Limavady, which has suffered from the economic downturn. Of all the textile firms that were once present in Coleraine, very few have survived the global financial crisis that our economy has undergone. That is why public sector jobs have gained such an important place in the local economy: due to the loss of the private sector employment.

I wish to congratulate the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment as well as the current and previous Finance and Personnel Ministers, who have been tirelessly selling Northern Ireland abroad. However, in future, firms will pick and choose where they will set up business within Northern Ireland. We must be aware of opportunities from the public sector

and make sure that we sell the area at every possible opportunity. Perhaps DARD's decision to relocate to Ballykelly will be the catalyst for our share of public sector jobs in the entire north-west.

I encourage all Members and Ministers to work together to try to rectify the devastating effect of the deep recession that we are hopefully recovering from. As I said, we must congratulate the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment as well as the present and former Finance and Personnel Ministers on the work that they have done to hopefully alleviate the jobs crisis in our local economy. I support the motion.

Mr Durkan: I thank Ms McLaughlin for bringing forward this topic, which is very important and topical, particularly in our home city, given the cloud of uncertainty hanging particularly over those working in Civil Service pensions jobs in Waterside House. Incidentally, some of these posts were brought to Derry by the SDLP, highlighting the SDLP's commitment to decentralisation and to Derry.

That commitment has been reaffirmed by subsequent SDLP Ministers, not that we have had that many, and manifested itself in the location of pension jobs in Carlisle House, when we held the Social Development Ministry. There were also initiatives by my predecessor as Environment Minister Alex Attwood with the creation of new posts in taxi operator licensing and enforcement, and in the administration of the carrier bag levy. Those jobs, too, are located in Derry. As Minister of the Environment, I intend to build on that commitment, and I am looking at options for job dispersal, particularly to the north-west. So, having been the only party to bring Civil Service posts to Derry, we will certainly fight to keep Civil Service posts in Derry.

The north-west is an area with huge unemployment and has, historically, been afforded little investment in comparison with that in other regions. We note the Executive's commitment to address regional economic imbalance and decentralise Civil Service posts, and we support that. However, some will question it, and it is easy enough to see why. The latest proposals to install the new IT system and outsource the managed service could ultimately result in a loss of 80 posts to the city. That is a real and genuine fear for the workers, and I implore Minister Hamilton to give us any assurance he can this evening that this will not be the case.

Last week, I went to London, with the endorsement and support of all parties in the Assembly, to defend public sector jobs in the DVA, particularly those in Coleraine, as you are well aware, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Assembly accepts and agrees with my argument that it would be completely counterproductive for the British Government to take those jobs from Northern Ireland and that it would have a devastating impact on Coleraine. As a region, we cannot use that argument against the UK Government and then proceed to do something similar to Derry workers.

Perhaps it is a bit easier — Ms McLaughlin beat me to this point — for some not to call for the retention of those jobs because the blame cannot be passed on to Westminster. Although I accept that these are only proposals, staff morale is very low, and they are getting little advice or information. Trade unions, as Ms McLaughlin pointed out, have been denied access to the outline business case and cannot, therefore, consider the proposals, properly make their case and plan for their future, nor can we properly assess the potential impact of the removal of those posts on the local economy.

The SDLP recognises the valuable service provided by public and civil servants through the years across the North, the west included. We cannot accept the removal of one job from Derry at a time when we need more. No party or Minister can stand by the Programme for Government and One Plan commitments or targets to reduce unemployment if they allow the removal of vital public sector jobs from a region of low employment and high deprivation.

We should be building on the success of our year as City of Culture with more investment. More needs to be done to help our local economy to grow and our new and local businesses to flourish. Any attempt to remove public sector jobs from the north-west will be met with a fight. I hope that all parties here unite, as we have for Coleraine, to protect all workers in the north-west and across the North.

Mrs Overend: As an MLA from a neighbouring constituency, I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. Londonderry is celebrating its year as the UK City of Culture, which it is almost three quarters of the way through. So we have much to celebrate about the city, and there is a good desire to improve the city's cultural aspect and economic development. Significant funding has headed to the north-west for the City of Culture, the redevelopment of Ebrington Barracks and the potential for additional university places,

particularly for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

6.15 pm

The Ulster Unionist Regional Development Minister has shown his commitment to the north-west through improvements to the railway line from Coleraine to Londonderry as well as the infrastructure improvements that he is committing to and, depending on finance, the A6 and A5. If you consider Coleraine as being in the north-west, that also includes flexibility on road closures for the North West 200.

There is a desire and a commitment to improve the future of the north-west in many aspects. There is a great appetite for that. However, many in the north-west feel that they are being left behind, not only with public sector jobs but with jobs more generally. The success of the Regional Start initiative and the work of Invest Northern Ireland in that region has been called into question. There was the recent announcement of nearly 1,000 jobs in Belfast by Stream Global Services, which appeared, on the face of it, to follow its scaling-down in the north-west. The perception that Invest Northern Ireland paid that company nearly £3 million to relocate from the north-west to Belfast feeds the narrative that the region is being overlooked.

There is also the issue of Ballykelly, and I feel that the Agriculture Minister has not made enough progress in establishing timescales to move agriculture jobs in the public sector to Ballykelly. The number of jobs and even her general intentions for the Ballykelly site are not particularly clear at this stage, and we must make more definitive progress in that area. The Rivers Agency is also meant to be moving to Cookstown, and I am disappointed about the lack of progress on that in my constituency.

There is an ongoing debate on whether public sector jobs are being transferred or whether people will lose jobs and new jobs will be created. That question needs to be answered in each specific case. My colleagues from the city referred to Civil Service pension staff in Waterside House, and I await with interest the Finance Minister's response on that issue and any other issues that he can address.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Maeve McLaughlin for securing the debate and welcome the fact that the Minister is present to hear the concerns. By now, he has got the

flavour, and there is not much that I will be able to add to what might appear to be a wish list.

The backdrop is that there is absolutely no doubt that there is public concern about this issue. A recent public meeting in the city was well attended by workers, their families and people with a wider interest in the city. That should send a signal to the Minister that the issue has touched the public mood in Derry because of the fear of losing these jobs in circumstances in which we believe that they can be retained; Mark Durkan mentioned that.

There is another backdrop, which is that, over the years, we have welcomed the number of Civil Service jobs that have come to the city as part of trying to tackle the feeling that such jobs can be located only in one part of the North, and any undermining of that would send the wrong signal. The One Plan laid out clearly that we like jobs to be attracted to the north-west, including to areas in the broad interpretation that was used today, and I believe that DARD's suggestion for Ballykelly would be welcomed by all parties that serve the constituencies concerned.

George Robinson, Mark Durkan and Maeve McLaughlin brought the DVA jobs to our attention.

There was cross-party support, across the whole community, against the idea that those jobs could be lost because of the introduction of a centralised computer system. There was amazement at the particular logic that was brought to the situation to justify the fact that 300 jobs would be lost in the north-west. We have to avoid the situation where, in one day or in one breath, we make the case that this is counterproductive, wrong and a massive blow to our economy, which it undoubtedly would be, while on the next day or in the next breath, we try to justify computerisation as the way forward, and as the way forward that — I do not say that they do not count; it would be wrong to say that — jobs do not have the same priority as perhaps we gave them in relation to the DVA. We have to be consistent, and we have to follow it through. As Mark Durkan said, we have all campaigned to ensure that the jobs are retained and we have laid out the logic. That logic should be followed here.

Maeve McLaughlin talked about the clarity of the consultation process, and I think that there was genuine concern at the public meeting — this has been played out in the local media, be it on Radio Foyle or in the local papers — that the process of consultation needs to be more robust. Workers need to be better informed

about the Department's intentions, and, obviously, I know that the Minister has to make a decision about the options in the coming weeks. There are two options. No one has spoken against the need for a new system, a better system etc. However, we need one that can be serviced without the loss of jobs in the north-west. With the second option, people are frightened and concerned that they may have to leave Derry to seek employment, with all the disruption that comes with that, albeit that it would be in another part of the Civil Service. There is also concern that perhaps another company will be brought in. Workers will tell you that the record of some of the companies, particularly with HR Connect, has not been what was promised.

Our appeal to the Minister is, in the first place, to ensure that the consultation process is rigorous and robust. There will be complaints if people have not seen the business case, and seeing it would help to inform them. The second and most important thing is about Derry. People have said that, with the City of Culture and the One Plan, the mood in the city is vibrant and the city is projecting itself for the future. That mood can be undermined if a decision is made in the Assembly to move jobs out of Derry. Those jobs were welcome in the first place. People see not only the welcome jobs being moved but the strategic decision that Civil Service jobs can also be allocated elsewhere. I say to the Minister that we would like to see him choose the option that brings in a new computer system and keeps jobs in Derry.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I take the opportunity of speaking to the House on this important issue, and I thank my party colleague Maeve McLaughlin for bringing the motion to the House. With your indulgence, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I thank the Minister for being present for the debate. I apologise to him for not thanking him earlier, when we had the debate on the Public Accounts Committee, at the top of my motion. Thank you for that.

The Programme for Government commits the Executive to address the imbalance in public sector jobs across the North. The Minister of Agriculture is the only Minister who has taken steps to begin that process in any meaningful way by proposing the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's headquarters to Ballykelly. In saying that, I recognise that jobs from other Departments exist in the north-west. Although, in general, the numbers are small, they contribute to the economy of the north-west

and, indeed, to my constituency of Strabane in West Tyrone.

As an MLA from West Tyrone, I can say that having to travel to work puts an additional strain on family life for a lot of people in West Tyrone. It often means that the mother or father has a longer working day and, therefore, the costs of childcare often rise as a result of that. As a working parent who experiences long hours of travel to the Assembly, like my party colleagues from the north-west, I have total empathy for those employed in the public sector who travel long distances. If my family were still very young, I would find it extremely difficult to do that. Travelling a long distance to work can be very demanding. It is not fair that my constituents have that burden placed on them. If they wish to work in the public sector, they should not be asked to travel for two or three hours to do so. They have the right to equal opportunities to avail themselves of the public sector jobs that should be equally dispersed throughout the North.

Many public sector workers leave the west Tyrone area each day. Many of them feel aggrieved that they do not have the opportunity to work locally. Many of them feel that there is little understanding from management when they request a transfer to local jobs. They feel that the same standards are not applied to those from the greater Belfast area who live in other areas. There is a feeling that many of those workers get preferential treatment and are transferred back, sometimes within a matter of weeks. I say that as a result of speaking to those in the public sector who have to travel a long distance to work.

Earlier this year, I wrote to all Ministers to ask, in the context of the Programme for Government 2011-15's commitment to address the regional imbalance, what consideration they are giving to creating, decentralising and relocating public sector jobs from their Department to the Strabane district of the north-west. I pointed out that the Strabane travel-to-work area continues to have the lowest distribution of public sector jobs across the 26 council areas. Strabane district is also consistently ranked number one in the NISRA multiple deprivation league tables. That imbalance and socio-economic disadvantage has been further compounded by the loss of a significant number of private sector jobs in the district since the beginning of the year. The redistribution of public sector jobs to Strabane, west Tyrone and the north-west as a whole is one of a number of key measures needed to break the negative economic spiral in the west. I urged each Minister to prioritise ways in which

their Department could assist in that redistribution process. Any other loss of jobs in the north-west will have a knock-on effect in Strabane and in my constituency of West Tyrone and will add to the problems that the people in my constituency experience.

Mr Eastwood: Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that the issue is close to your heart as well.

We have had a fantastic year in 2013 up until now in the city of Derry. It has been a tremendous opportunity for the people of the city to engage in cultural, artistic and musical events and to prove to the world that we can move forward in a positive light and use our shared cultural traditions and some separate cultural traditions to do that.

It has also been an economic opportunity. We have shown the rest of Northern Ireland, the rest of Ireland and the rest of the world that, when Derry sets its mind to it, we can do something very powerful. You just have to look at the examples of how the city was able to accommodate the Apprentice Boys at the beginning of the all-Ireland fleadh and the PSNI pipe band during the biggest Irish cultural event in the world or at thousands of young people dancing and singing in a former British Army base. My argument is that, when the people of Derry are asked, they step up and do their bit. They are the people who have made sure that the City of Culture has been a fantastic success. However, as others have said, that cannot happen in isolation. The City of Culture will end in a couple of months' time, and the fundamentals are still not right. We still do not have the infrastructural development, whether it is around roads, rail or our university. We still do not have the infrastructural development that we need to embed the positive steps forward that the people have taken this year.

6.30 pm

There are a number of ways that you can develop employment. One is to attract investment from outside, and I think that Invest Northern Ireland's record on that has been atrocious. There has been a real failure on Invest Northern Ireland's part and, I argue, a failure on behalf of the Executive in not making sure that the proper targets were in place to ensure that those kinds of investments were made outside the city of Belfast and greater Belfast.

Decentralisation is another tool that can be used to encourage employment. The SDLP has played its part, whether when we were in

the Departments of Finance, Social Development or Environment, in trying our best to bring to the city the jobs that have been in our control. Unfortunately, that has not been replicated across other Departments and other parties, and I am glad to hear of the suggestion or announcement — whatever it is — for Ballykelly. I hope that that can come to fruition, and I hope that those hundreds of jobs can be created in the area.

If these jobs were to be moved from our city, it would send out the worst possible signal to the people of our city who get themselves educated and try their best to get employment. It would be a bit like the signal that was given a number of weeks ago, when Stream was able to draw down about £3 million of public funding to set up 1,000 jobs in Belfast when, the year before, it had withdrawn 1,000 jobs from Belfast after receiving public money. That sends out all the wrong types of signals to the people of our city, who are doing their best to play their part as active citizens and who, as Mr Robinson said, want to be more economically productive.

This does not all happen in isolation. A recent report on the impact that welfare reform will have shows that the most severe impact across these islands will be on Blackpool, with Derry second and Strabane third. Anybody who is from Derry or Strabane is well used to being at the wrong end of that kind of league table. The economic inactivity rate in Derry is over 40%; I am not sure what it is in Strabane. We are at the highest end with the unemployment rate.

This is not a whinge, as some Ministers would like to portray it; it is us looking to play our part. However, if the Executive do not stand behind the current jobs that are located in the city and make sure that they are guaranteed for the future and if they do not play their part in encouraging more decentralisation and more inward investment, the people of Derry will get very angry indeed.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I welcome the opportunity that the debate presents to correct some inaccuracies surrounding the issue, some of which many contributors to the debate have repeated. I appreciate that the focus of the debate has been on the future of Civil Service pensions jobs in Londonderry, but I want to begin by outlining and recognising those colleagues who talked about the broader picture of public sector employment in the north-west.

Londonderry has the second highest number of Civil Service jobs per thousand of the working-age population — 23.6 — after Belfast.

Coleraine has the equal third highest at 23·1, and Limavady has the fifth highest, also at 23·1. I acknowledge that Strabane has a much lower rate of 3·4, which is one of the lowest in Northern Ireland. However, Omagh has the second highest, so at least half of the West Tyrone constituency is well served with public sector and Civil Service jobs. Some 15,611 people are employed in the public sector in Londonderry, 1,671 of whom are civil servants. This is by far the biggest number outside Belfast. In total, across the whole of the north-west, some 26,486 people work in the public sector.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Eastwood: Does the Minister have the figures for the wages for the jobs that he has just quoted? How many of those are above the average or median Northern Ireland public sector wage?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have the figures to hand. However, given that the Member raised that question, we will come back to him in correspondence as quickly as we can.

By any measure, as I hope the House will recognise, the public sector is a large employer in the north-west and is, as some have alluded to, set to become bigger. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development previously announced her decision that the location for the new DARD headquarters will be the former military base at Shackleton Barracks in Ballykelly. The posts are to be relocated to Ballykelly on a phased approach, with the two major phases in 2016 and 2020. The proposed relocation, which, I encourage Members to recall, could cause significant upheaval for civil servants based in the greater Belfast area, will stimulate the local economy through increased local spending and the provision of high-quality public sector jobs and, potentially, jobs associated with the construction and ongoing servicing of a new building.

Although there are opportunities, there is also a threat. The centralisation of vehicle licensing services in Swansea would result in the loss of 240 jobs in the north-west, 235 of which would be in Coleraine. Taking into account the other six locations with local motor tax offices, over 300 jobs are at stake directly in the public sector. Applying the multiplier effect, centralisation in Swansea would cut over 500 jobs from the wider Northern Ireland economy. I fully support the Minister in his opposition to

that proposed move. The Minister has clearly set out the potential economic impact on Northern Ireland of such centralisation. A special report commissioned from Oxford Economics has demonstrated that the aggregate impact of centralisation of vehicle licensing in Swansea would be to remove over £22 million in gross added value from the local economy. I know that the Minister met his relevant counterpart in the Department for Transport, Robert Goodwill, on 6 November. I understand that at that meeting — the Minister would be better than me at informing the House on this — he pointed out not only the economic impact of the proposed centralisation in Swansea but the exemplary standard of service that staff in the DVA have delivered.

Let me turn to the issue that has been the focus of the debate. I am acutely aware that staff in

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Let me proceed. I am acutely aware that staff in the Civil Service pensions branch in Waterside House in Londonderry are concerned. The issue of staff morale was raised. I have to say that staff morale will not be helped by inaccurately repeating that 80 jobs will be lost. However, I appreciate that they are concerned about job security in light of the plan to replace the pension administration and payment systems, not least because their fears have been whipped up by ill-informed public comment. The bottom line is that 80 civil servants working in pension branch in Derry will not — I repeat: will not — be made redundant. Yet, again this evening, the line that 80 civil servants will be made redundant was repeated by many Members who spoke.

Let me provide you with some important background information about the project looking at the future service delivery model for the Civil Service pensions branch. By doing so, I hope to clear up some confusion, which, I think, has been deliberately created by some. The principal Civil Service pension scheme in Northern Ireland is the main pension scheme for all Northern Ireland civil servants and a number of other bodies. Staff working in Civil Service pensions branch administer and pay pensions. They also perform several other functions, including policy, legislation and financial accounting, to name but a few, which are not being considered as part of the project. There are currently 93 staff employed in the division, not all of whom are employed on member administration and payroll functions. As of March 2013, there were 34,000 active members, 27,000 pensioner members and

8,500 deferred members of the scheme. The Civil Service pensions branch requires IT support in order to perform the administration and pensioner payroll for those members. The pensions branch currently uses two computer systems to perform member administration and pensioner payroll functions, contracts in respect of which are coming to an end. Therefore, a replacement must be procured.

Public service pension reform has had an impact on the need for a new solution to be found, although it is not the main driver for change. However, in order to implement the new pension scheme for civil servants from 1 April 2015, the new solution must be in place by that date. Treasury has made it clear that we need to press ahead with the reform of public service pensions. Failure to do so for the main schemes is estimated to cost over £300 million for each year's delay.

The future service delivery project has been established to procure a replacement. The project team must follow the Northern Ireland Guide to Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation, which all Departments must follow when considering spending public money on new or replacement services. The Northern Ireland Guide to Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation requires that all options are considered in a business case, including outsourcing.

In June 2013, a strategic outline business case confirmed that there was a need to procure a replacement solution. My predecessor approved the next stage in the process: an early market engagement exercise. This exercise allowed officials to approach the market to determine whether there was an appetite to meet the requirement and capture indicative costs for doing so. The early market engagement exercise was completed in July. The response confirmed that there is an appetite within a specialised market. It also provided indicative costs on which to base the outline business case. The main options to be considered include a system solution to be operated by civil servants or a managed service, ie an outsourced solution. My officials are currently developing the outline business case to consider the options for replacing the current systems in line with standard guidance. The outline business case considers overall value for money, ability to meet requirements and the risks and benefits — monetary and non-monetary — of each option. No decision on the preferred option has yet been made. The outline business case is still being developed and has a number of departmental approval stages to complete. I want to repeat that: the OBC has not been completed. I ask

Members how, therefore, I would share that with anybody if it has not actually been completed. When the internal approvals are given, I will consider and decide what option or options should proceed to the next stage in the procurement process.

My officials have consulted and will continue to consult the trade unions and will keep staff up to date with developments as the project progresses. Whichever option is approved, there will be a reduction in the staff required in Civil Service pensions branch. Those who have said this evening that they support a new IT system acknowledge that job losses will be an inevitability. A new system will be end-to-end, with member self-service facilities, and will require fewer staff to operate it. A managed service would result in a higher reduction in staff. Civil Service pensions branch will continue to exist and be staffed by civil servants, as there are other key functions to deliver, such as scheme management, policy and legislation, and finance. So, whatever option is agreed, it will not be 80 staff who are affected. Any surplus staff will be managed in line with documented Civil Service procedures, including natural wastage and redeployment. Let me reiterate that no one will be made redundant, contrary to the public statements to that effect issued by some.

I should add that I very much regret the premature action being taken by the trade union NIPSA to ballot staff working in Civil Service pensions branch on possible industrial action, given that no decision has been made and, as I have already made clear, no one will be made redundant. I ask what purpose a strike would serve in the circumstances.

Let me make myself clear, if I have not already: I view my first responsibility as providing services to achieve the outcomes that our society needs — in this case, administering and paying the pensions of civil servants. I also, like all Ministers, have an overriding duty to ensure value for money for the public purse. I have no ideological inclination one way or the other whether the service should be provided in-house or outsourced. If it is the best value for money way of providing the service that achieves the outcome we need, I will support it. If I were to slavishly procure a new system without considering all available options, I would be negligent in my duties. I am open-minded about what the final decision should be and will base my ultimate decision on evidence.

In closing, I want to recognise the work that the staff in Civil Service pensions branch do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Quickly, please.

Mr Hamilton: I regret that some have sought to prey on the fears of staff for their own ends. Screaming publicly that 80 jobs will be lost, when in fact nothing of the sort is the case, does those staff no service whatsoever.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think it was important to hear those last few words.

Adjourned at 6.43 pm.



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