

# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Contents

<b>Assembly Business</b> .....	1
<b>Ministerial Statements</b>	
British-Irish Council: Summit Meeting .....	2
North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety .....	5
Community Resuscitation Strategy .....	10
<b>Private Members' Business</b>	
Infrastructure: Effective Delivery of Major Projects .....	16
<b>Oral Answers to Questions</b>	
Justice.....	22
Social Development.....	31
Northern Ireland Assembly Commission .....	40
<b>Assembly Business</b> .....	47
<b>Private Members' Business</b>	
Infrastructure: Effective Delivery of Major Projects ( <i>Continued</i> ) .....	47
Higher Education Sector: Support and Investment .....	52
<b>Assembly Business</b> .....	62
<b>Private Members' Business</b>	
The Disappeared: BBC/RTÉ Documentary.....	62
<b>Assembly Business</b> .....	80
<b>Adjournment</b>	
C S Lewis.....	81
<b>Written Ministerial Statement</b>	
A26: Dualling.....	89

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 November 2013

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. From time to time, I and other Members have raised the issue of excessive delay in the answering of questions for written answer. I tabled a question on 17 June 2011 to the Minister for Social Development. I received an answer two years to the day later, 17 June 2013. My point is this: I have now discovered from a freedom of information enquiry that the Minister was in receipt of the draft reply 11 days after the question was tabled and chose to sit on the answer for two years before issuing it. What facility exists to deal with such bad faith by a Minister in dealing with a question for written answer?

**Mr Speaker:** I have listened to the Member's point of order. I have always encouraged Members to raise such points of order on the Floor so that they are least highlighted and on the record. There is a procedural avenue, and if the Member wants to talk to the Clerks or to the Business Office, he will be guided in such a way that, hopefully, the issue he described will not happen again. I think that that is vital. As the Member will know, I always encourage Ministers, as far as possible, to get answers to questions out to Members. There is an avenue that the Member could pursue, and I encourage him to do that.

Before we start today's business, I was asked by Members to look at Hansard, and especially at the debate that we had yesterday on the ombudsman's office. On an initial look at Hansard, it does not make good reading. We are almost halfway through this term of the Assembly, and I have to say that the debates have fallen very much to a point where Members should question some of the offensive language that they use in the Chamber.

I have continually reminded the House that the standards that I expect are courtesy, good temper and moderation. It amazes me that a number of seasoned politicians in the Assembly, parliamentarians who have been in

the House for some years, feel that the only way in which they can make a contribution is to be offensive to other Members.

Reading yesterday's Hansard tells me that Members deliberately rise in their place to be offensive to other Members. I refer in particular to remarks made by Mr Sheehan, Mr Allister and Mr Elliott in the Chamber yesterday. Some of their contributions fell far short of the good temper and moderation that we should all expect in the Chamber. I will be closely watching the three Members whom I have named, and, if I find that they have crossed a line in future, I will not call them for their contribution. In fact, I will go further: I will ask them to take their place and I will move on.

Members need to realise that my job here is to protect the integrity of the Assembly and the business that goes through and is debated. I just cannot allow Members to make a contribution and to be so offensive that, coming from senior politicians, it is unbelievable. Members can make a robust contribution to the debate, and there can be a very strong exchange of views, but it should not be offensive to any Member of the House. I will not take any points of order on the issue. I ask Members to observe the good standards of moderation and language of the House. Let us move on.

## Ministerial Statements

### British-Irish Council: Summit Meeting

**Mr P Robinson (The First Minister):** In accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the twenty-first summit meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) held on 15 November 2013. The deputy First Minister has agreed that I make this statement to the Assembly on behalf of both of us.

The Government of Jersey hosted the summit and the heads of delegations were welcomed by the Chief Minister, Senator Ian Gorst. The UK Government were led by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Mr Enda Kenny TD, and the Scottish Government were led by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, Mr John Swinney MSP. The Welsh Government were led by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Carwyn Jones AM. The Governments of Guernsey and the Isle of Man were led by Chief Ministers Deputy Peter Harwood and the Hon Allan Bell MHK respectively. A full list of participants is attached to the copy of the statement that has been provided to Members.

The summit again underlined the British-Irish Council's important role in promoting and developing links between its member Administrations and providing a forum for consultation and exchange of information on matters of mutual interest within the competence of each Administration.

Following the decision taken at the twentieth summit meeting in Londonderry to establish a BIC creative industries work sector led by the Government of Jersey, the Council considered and approved a work programme for the next two years at the Jersey summit. We discussed how the work sector might nurture and further support the environments from which a new generation of creative people, creative ideas and creative businesses can emerge and flourish. From a local perspective, we reported on how a determined focus by the Executive on the creative industries has seen significant investment by globally recognised companies and produced sustainable jobs locally for many hundreds of people.

The Council discussed the current economic situation in the member Administrations, with a particular focus on youth employment and

unemployment. Building on previous discussions on youth employment, the Council examined the progress made in each member Administration through their various policy initiatives and programmes aimed at specifically helping young people into employment.

The Council also reported on the latest relevant local employment statistics and reviewed the activities within each BIC working group specific to the employment opportunities for young people. In a wider context, the Council was updated on the work that had taken place across each of the Council's 11 work sectors since the last summit in June 2013.

Finally, the Council received an update from the secretariat on the progress it had made against its business plan during the first six months of this financial year. Members will wish to note that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Government of Guernsey in June 2014.

**Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** I thank the First Minister for the statement. Which member Administrations are making best progress on helping young people into employment? Where does Northern Ireland fit in the league table, and did the First Minister bring back any initiatives that can be applied to Northern Ireland?

**Mr P Robinson:** I suppose that it depends largely on which Administration provide figures that indicate, according to their size, the extent to which there is a problem. For instance, the Government of Guernsey said that 41 young people were out of work. It seems that unemployment in those cases would be a simple matter. I think that the Minister said, "You'd probably think that I should hold a barbecue and make a few phone calls to sort this out". So although we are talking about very small numbers in the Crown dependencies, when it comes to the main jurisdictions of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland, relatively speaking, fares very well. Indeed, a look at the figures up to August showed us to have the lowest level of youth unemployment of all those regions. Back then, the figure for the quarter ending in August was 18.8%, compared to the high 20 per cents in some of the other regions and, indeed, the UK average. The figure in Spain is in excess of 50%. So, youth unemployment is a worldwide problem.

It seems to me that many employers look at young people as people who are inexperienced and who will cost them something in getting

them ready to be employed, whereas the more intelligent employer will see people who have fresh and innovative ideas who can be moulded to become perfect employees. It is very much about the outlook that employers take in times of recession.

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the First Minister for the statement. Will he advise how he reported that the Northern Ireland Executive are specifically seeking to tackle youth unemployment?

**Mr P Robinson:** The only way to tackle unemployment issues is to provide more jobs, and doing that, of course, comes directly from the private sector. We take a number of steps through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to encourage the economy, whether that be through the incentives that we give to local companies or by encouraging foreign direct investment. We have been very successful in doing that.

On the other side, which is getting people prepared for work, the Department for Employment and Learning has a suite of programmes. Obviously, it has the youth employment scheme, First Start, Pathways to Success and a number of different projects that are all aimed at getting people ready for employment.

For instance, in our Department, through the Delivering Social Change programme, the deputy First Minister and I have, under the programme that we brought forward arising from Together: Building a United Community, the proposal for 10,000 placements for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), which, again, would be divided into looking for pathways into work and, at the same time, looking into civic responsibility and cross-community programmes.

**10.45 am**

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will concentrate on the last and fourth-last sentences of the statement.

I am looking ahead to the next meeting of the BIC. I suggest to the First Minister that very many people in the construction industry commute to work weekly because opportunities exist in England, Scotland and Wales. Ahead of the next BIC summit, would it be a good idea for the Executive to work, perhaps with the Construction Employers Federation, to secure an even greater proportion of work in England, Scotland and Wales for local companies so as

to provide opportunities for the hard-pressed construction industry? It is in line with the whole theme of work here.

**Mr P Robinson:** I congratulate the Member for his ingenuity in getting out of the statement something that was not there. I have to say that I agree with him. Considerable numbers of people leave the Province to take up employment, in GB in particular. Indeed, when we were flying back, the deputy First Minister and I met and spoke to a large number of people who were doing just that — leaving on a Monday morning and coming back on a Friday. Our greatest desire is for the construction industry in Northern Ireland to be revitalised to such an extent that people do not have to leave to get employment. Of course, because it is the private sector, it is ultimately the job of those who use employees from Northern Ireland to employ them. It is not everybody's desire to leave their family for the whole week to get employment. However, if there is no local employment, one can understand why they do it. Indeed, I would encourage them, because it shows their desire to carry out a productive, remunerative job, with the dignity that goes along with that.

**Mr Dallat:** I thank the First Minister for his statement, which to me appears to be very positive. In light of the recent news that the president of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, will pay an official visit to Britain next year, is there an opportunity to exploit the maximum jobs and tourism gains that will flow from that visit?

**Mr P Robinson:** The fact that he is going on a state visit indicates that the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland is at an all-time high. It indicates that we recognise the value not only of the friendship but of being trading partners that can flow from that through the structures that we have. We make the best political value that we can, on a North/South and an east-west basis. I very much welcome the fact that President Higgins will take part in a state visit and that it comes off the back of a very successful visit by Her Majesty the Queen to the Irish Republic. It also indicates the kind of progress that we are making as a society, where there is a normalisation of the kinds of relationships that should take place between any two friendly neighbours.

**Ms Lo:** I think that the Minister is quite right to blow our trumpet over the success of the creative industries, which must be the envy of other Administrations. However, Northern Ireland still has the lowest rate of public arts

funding in the UK. I wonder whether the role of arts funding in stimulating economic growth was discussed at the meeting. If so, at what lessons or best practice will the Ministers be looking?

**Mr P Robinson:** Although the meeting did not deal specifically with that subject, the underlying trend from all the Administrations during the discussion was a recognition that the creative industries are a significant part of local economies. They provide employment, and not just, it has to be said, for the artists, whether they be actors, actresses, people in the music industry or painters. The facts are that, when it comes to television and film series, you are dealing with electricians, people in the construction industry, gardeners and so on. About 700 people have been employed in 'Game of Thrones' alone. I am delighted by the fact that the film 'Dracula' is going to be made in Northern Ireland. I am sure that there are people in the Assembly who would be well equipped to land a role in that production, but I will not point the finger anywhere.

So, there are real opportunities that help our economy. As far as arts funding itself is concerned, I recall from my days as Finance Minister that, when I increased arts funding, the sector was very grateful for those increases. I believe that there are real benefits for society beyond the economic benefits of having an increase in arts funding. All those things, however, have to be weighed against other priorities, and I am sure that the Finance Minister will have heard what the Member had to say.

**Mr Spratt:** I thank the First Minister for his statement this morning. Staying on the theme of the creative industries, will he outline some of the successes that there have been in attracting and securing investment in the creative industries and how those compare with other BIC Administrations?

**Mr P Robinson:** When we talk about the creative industries, there is a tendency in Northern Ireland, because of the success of film and television series, to concentrate on those issues. Beyond those, however, there have been many successes, including with mobile phone apps, digital gaming and music. Music for television series, for instance, can be done in my constituency in East Belfast for the west coast of the United States.

A lot of opportunities are available in the creative industries sector. Everybody will be aware that the television series 'The Fall' is made in Northern Ireland. Not only do we have

the Paint Hall, now renamed Titanic Studios, but the additional studios that have been built there indicate that this is a growing and prospering element of our economy. It is one that the deputy First Minister and I were very supportive of and wanted to encourage. I believe that the potential for young people in Northern Ireland to be able to get opportunities here instead of having to leave our shores to get them indicates that we have a very exciting future in the creative industries.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the First Minister for his report. He referred to youth unemployment here in Northern Ireland. Whatever way you look at it, it is highly problematical. It seems that other jurisdictions are suffering similar problems. Was any thought given to a follow-up conference to focus purely on dealing with youth unemployment throughout all the jurisdictions in Britain and in Ireland?

**Mr P Robinson:** We have had several discussions now in the British-Irish Council on youth employment/unemployment, which indicates just how seriously it is being taken. I want to be clear that, when I talk about us hovering around the 18% to 20% level of youth unemployment and how that is less than the rate everywhere around us, it is nothing to crow about. Those are still very high levels of unemployment. I think that the kind of steps that we are taking are bearing down on that level of unemployment. That is an indicator. This goes back to a previous question, in that I think that our programmes for tackling youth unemployment are, perhaps, more successful than those in some of the other jurisdictions. I think that, if we can get our scheme under way, where we will have 10,000 placements of young people who are NEET, that will really eat into the figure. I also think that people who go through that programme will turn out to be more rounded individuals. The very fact that they will have been on the programme will be an incentive to employers, who will know that they have somebody who has skills and training in a wide range of areas that makes them a more suitable employee.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the First Minister for his statement. At this stage, First Minister, Members need to be innovative in the questioning because we have already covered all the ground pretty well.

First Minister, you referred to the business plans and the progress made. Could you perhaps share some of the detail with us on how that progress has made itself known?

**Mr P Robinson:** I am not clear which business plan we are talking about. If the Member wants to clarify that, even from a sedentary position, I will follow it up.

**Mr Cree:** It is in the penultimate paragraph.

**Mr P Robinson:** You are talking about the business plan for BIC itself. The BIC has a series of groups that carry out work and study in individual areas. Following on from the previous question, one of those areas that Jersey is taking responsibility for will deal with youth employment. There is a whole series of work streams. The various jurisdictions and the Ministers involved in those areas will meet and prepare reports, which will eventually come back to BIC when they are completed. It is ongoing work as part of our business plan.

In relation to the overall business plan for BIC, we had the secretariat's report, which indicated that £20,000 was underspent during the period. The new arrangements that we have with our head office in Scotland are working well. I would like to say — I am reluctant to make this too public — that we need to have a greater presence from those with the prime responsibility in jurisdictions, rather than their handing it down to Ministers who might be considered to be, and I do not want to be offensive, lower down the line.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the First Minister for his report. I want to follow up on the matter of youth unemployment. Was there any discussion on the youth guarantee scheme, which is the scheme where under-25s are guaranteed work, an apprenticeship or training within four months of being unemployed?

**Mr P Robinson:** There was no specific discussion. Each jurisdiction outlined the proposals that it has in its own area. As I already indicated, we dealt with the youth employment scheme, the Pathways to Success strategy and the youth employment First Start programme. Those were the offerings that we had. We also mentioned the Delivering Social Change policies. Each jurisdiction set out the schemes that it has. Some of them are similar, but then the problems in the Crown dependencies are at a much lower level than they are in the other jurisdictions.

## **North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety**

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** I wish to make the following statement on the sixteenth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the health and food safety sectoral format, which was held in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Friday 18 October 2013. Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive at the meeting. The Irish Government were represented by Dr James Reilly TD, Minister for Health, who chaired the meeting on this occasion. This statement has been agreed with Minister O'Neill, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

Ministers received a presentation on the work of Safefood from the CEO, Martin Higgins. The presentation highlighted the completion of the infectious intestinal disease (IID) telephone survey and its publication, which allows for a comparison between disease incidence in Northern Ireland and facilitates an all-island estimate of the burden of the disease. The survey revealed that the estimated rate of IID in Ireland is similar to the rate in Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole.

### **11.00 am**

The CEO's report also included findings of research exploring the knowledge, attitude and skills of primary care health professionals on the island of Ireland towards weight management. The success of the all-island obesity action forum workshop and meetings that focused on childhood obesity was referred to in the presentation, as was the commencement of a new communication campaign on childhood obesity. The new campaign, which was launched on 21 October, will focus on helping parents tackle the everyday habits that are associated with excess weight in childhood and on maintaining awareness of the health challenges posed by excess weight. One in four children starting school is overweight or obese, and the campaign is Safefood's contribution to tackling the problem.

We welcomed a presentation from Ms Anne Walsh of the East Belfast Mission on the practical work undertaken by the mission in tackling health inequalities, access to healthy and nutritious diet, and healthy eating education programmes for those in poorer circumstances. The presentation focused on the positive

impacts of the funding provided by Safefood over the period 2011-13.

Ministers reviewed progress on the development of the Safefood business plan and budget 2013 and on the delivery of efficiency savings. We also received an update on the Safefood 2012 annual report and accounts, which have now been signed off by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland and the Irish Comptroller and Auditor General. We were updated on the development of Safefood's draft 2014-16 corporate plan and draft business plan 2014. The key priority for the corporate plan 2014-16 is centred on enhancing the relationship with and relevance of Safefood for the island of Ireland consumer. The strategic intent is to maintain consumer confidence in the food supply chain, supported by relevant robust research and targeted communication and education initiatives, encouraging ultimately safer food and healthier food choices.

A particular priority will be to help communities at disadvantage, and in particular those in, or at risk of, food poverty or deprivation, by continuing the development of the community food initiatives programme, which supports food safety and nutrition programmes in disadvantaged areas. There will also be an emphasis on the environment in which food is sold, in order to influence choices made in the interests of food safety and healthy eating by working with the broader food industry and developing research programmes on the psychology of consumer choice.

The 2014 business plan will identify the specific deliverables required in the first year of the corporate plan 2014-16. In 2014, Safefood will continue the delivery of the three-year childhood obesity campaign in partnership with key agencies on the island of Ireland. A key priority for 2014 will be the development of the website and other digital and social media channels as access points and information channels for all stakeholders. Ministers approved the appointment of Dr Christine Domegan as a new member of Safefood's scientific advisory committee, the reappointment of Mr Robert Huey as vice chair and the reappointment of six existing members of Safefood's scientific advisory committee.

In relation to health promotion matters, Ministers recognised the progress made on strategies to prevent the harm related to alcohol misuse in both jurisdictions, including close cooperation on the North/South alcohol policy advisory group and on awarding a joint contract to conduct research and health impact

assessments on minimum unit pricing. It is anticipated that the research will be available in early 2014.

We commended the progress made on strategies and initiatives to prevent overweight and obesity in both jurisdictions, including the Northern Ireland obesity prevention framework, Caloriewise and front-of-pack labelling, and similar measures in Ireland under the aegis of the special action group on obesity and the agreement at EU level for an action plan on childhood obesity.

Ministers welcomed the launch on 3 October of the report of the Tobacco Policy Review Group titled 'Tobacco Free Ireland' and agreed that an all-island tobacco conference should be held in November 2013. We welcomed the joint launches of the all-island Young Men and Suicide Project report in January 2013. We were also briefed on the new Northern Ireland breastfeeding strategy. The strategy includes actions for partnership working with Ireland, including exploring opportunities for all-island research and campaigns to raise awareness and promote public acceptance of breastfeeding, particularly in public.

Ministers received an update on the business planning process for the establishment of a new radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin. That is progressing, with the construction due to commence in the spring of 2014 and completion scheduled for the summer of 2016. Officials from both jurisdictions have developed an agreed text for a memorandum of understanding on the project and continue to work together to ensure the delivery of a service level agreement for the operation of the unit.

We were informed that the Health Service Executive, the Health and Social Care Board and the Western Trust have intensified discussions on service delivery costs for patients from the Irish healthcare system, as there is an urgency to reach agreement on the service level agreement in order to deliver the project within the required time frame.

Ministers acknowledged the continued progress through the work of the Ireland-Northern Ireland-National Cancer Institute Cancer Consortium.

We also acknowledged the continued success of the US-Ireland R&D partnership and the plans to raise awareness internationally of the value that it adds to excellent research, focusing on improving healthcare, population health and economic development.

On child protection, Ministers welcomed the success of the all-Ireland child protection conference held in May 2013, which was attended by over 250 delegates. It facilitated practitioners, managers, policy-makers and legislators from both jurisdictions to share practice, knowledge, research, experience and learning in relation to safeguarding and child protection practice. We reviewed the continued progress of the agreed work programme on child protection and agreed that further progress on the work of the child protection programme will be reported at future NSMC meetings.

Finally, on EU matters, Ministers acknowledged the North/South engagement during Ireland's presidency of the Council of the European Union and the progress made during the presidency in the area of health, including the agreement of a general approach on a revised draft EU tobacco directive and the first reading agreement with the European Parliament on a decision on serious cross-border threats to health.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. First, I welcome the update on the new radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin, with construction due in spring 2014 and completion by summer 2016. I seek assurances from the Minister that all the issues around the cross-border memorandum of understanding have now been resolved.

Regarding the update on child protection, are there any plans to address the issue of child sexual exploitation on an all-Ireland basis? Will the inquiry that the Minister has announced consider whether there is a cross-border issue in relation to child sexual exploitation?

**Mr Poots:** People need to understand that there is a difference between child sexual exploitation and child abuse. Both are deplorable, but they are different things.

We held an all-Ireland conference on child protection in May. Borders certainly should not provide an opportunity for people who want to exploit or abuse young people and children, and we need to ensure that we can reduce those opportunities. It is important to remember that research indicates that the majority of young people at risk of sexual exploitation live at home, in their own community, and may not be known to professionals or agencies on either side of the border. My Department and its arm's-length bodies — the health trusts and the Health and Social Care Board — have worked

to raise awareness of the phenomenon of child sexual exploitation as one form of child sexual abuse and have worked cooperatively with the PSNI to respond to those concerns.

The British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect and the Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers jointly delivered a conference to over 250 professionals working in the field. So, there has been a lot of development there. Also, the Safeguarding Board has identified child sexual exploitation as one of its key areas of focus. That will assist in ensuring that child sexual exploitation is a key area of concern for all member organisations of the Safeguarding Board and that they work together to address this despicable crime.

Kathleen Marshall is obviously heading up an inquiry, and, if she feels that she needs to speak to people in the Republic of Ireland about any element of it, she is more than welcome to do so in seeking to ascertain the facts and to identify best ways forward for the future.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his statement today. What is being done to tackle cyberbullying and websites that promote suicide?

**Mr Poots:** Cyberbullying can be quite a problem. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety addresses issues around online bullying and promotes safer internet usage. It has developed programmes to increase parental awareness of how to keep safe online and to improve the resources available to schools to teach children about using the internet safely and to build their resilience to potentially inappropriate content that they may encounter online. My Department is represented on the council.

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

Websites that encourage suicide and memorial social networking pages on which young people continue to interact with a deceased person are of serious concern, and parents need to be educated on those issues so that they can monitor their children's activities. I understand that that is a lot harder now. There used to be fixed computers, but youngsters now use laptops, iPads, tablets and mobile phones, so it may not be as easy for parents to monitor to the extent that they should. However, parents need that support and education to ensure proper monitoring, and pressure also needs to be maintained on internet service providers to take down inappropriate sites.

**Mr McKinney:** I refer to the communication campaign on childhood obesity and the Safer Food three-year childhood obesity campaign. Given the pressures that long-term obesity puts on the health service, what measurables and targets are being put in place to ensure that those campaigns are successful?

**Mr Poots:** We have had some discussions because one area of concern is the crossover with organisations such as the Public Health Agency and the Food Standards Agency. We have been very clear that those organisations need to work together because we cannot afford a duplication of services and costs. Consequently, those organisations will hold quarterly meetings on these subjects to identify the progress that they are making, how they can collaborate to get key messages out — there is a potential crossover — and how to ensure that best use is made of resources and we eradicate waste on that front, allowing us to spend more money on tackling what is, as the Member stated, a very important issue.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He welcomed the launch of the tobacco policy review group's report, 'Tobacco Free Ireland', and agreed that an all-island tobacco conference should be held. Will the Minister advise us of the report's key recommendations and outline the particular focus of the conference to be held this month?

**Mr Poots:** The conference was actually held yesterday and was very successful. It was held in Riddell Hall in Stranmillis, which is part of Queen's University.

In a 10-year strategy, we have set a target to reduce tobacco smoking to 15%. The Republic of Ireland wants to go to 5% by 2025, which is very challenging. I believe that 15% is achievable, but we have to be very focused and strong if we want to achieve it. In Australia and in a number of states in the United States of America, for example, smoking is down to 17% and below, so it should be achievable for us to reach 15% in 10 years. We need to confront the issues and be prepared to indicate that what is going on with tobacco smoking is intolerable.

Many people are still exposed to second-hand smoke in homes, cars and other places, and we need to engage in an education process. You cannot tell parents that they should not smoke or ban them from smoking in their own home, but we should tell them that it is not appropriate to do it and that it is not appropriate to do it in cars. We can look at banning smoking in cars,

particularly when children are being carried. We can look at the types of cigarette packaging. We have dinky little packages that look like lipstick, slim packs and so on that become almost a fashion accessory. We need to challenge those who supply tobacco. Our biggest issue is stopping young people smoking. The tobacco industry is clearly targeting young people, and, every year, many more people start to smoke, and we have not reduced the figures much in recent years.

For everybody who dies and for everybody who ceases to smoke, the tobacco industry, in spite of all the marketing restrictions, still succeeds in recruiting new people. We, as an Assembly, really need to challenge that. We need to give a lot of thought to it and be very strong in our deliberations.

**11.15 am**

**Ms Lo:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the new communication campaign on childhood obesity, which is a growing problem — excuse the pun — not only in the UK but in other rich countries, including China. A healthy diet is not the only solution to obesity. Does the communication campaign include a strong message to encourage children to take part in more physical activities, such as sport and more PE lessons in schools?

**Mr Poots:** I have often said that every Department and Minister has a role to play in the delivery of good healthcare. We have constantly encouraged young people to participate in physical activity through the Public Health Agency and other bodies. I look to other Departments, such as the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Education, and organisations such as Sport NI. A series of Departments has a role to play. Local councils and their facilities are also involved. We need to work as closely together as possible to ensure that we work in a joined-up way to get those messages out.

Weight control is 80% diet and 20% physical activity, so there will always be a strong focus on diet. There is not much point in going to a fast-food outlet after you go for a swim, because you probably undo any good that you have done with your swimming, and then some. We need to encourage people to, in the first instance, take control of their diet. Good regular exercise will also help.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I, too, thank the Minister for his statement this morning. He will be aware of quite a lot of recent publicity about legal highs.

Will he tell us what discussions took place at the meeting about that issue?

**Mr Poots:** Legal highs are a relatively recent phenomenon — I said that better than Ivan Little. We have seen the emergence of so-called legal highs such as mephedrone. I am pleased to say that we have been working closely with our colleagues across the UK and Ireland on the issue. Legislation has been passed in Westminster that will allow emerging substances to be placed under a temporary ban while full consideration is given to their harm. That should help us to react more quickly and prevent substances from gaining a foothold in the UK. Our general message is clear: the fact that the products are labelled as legal does not mean that they are safe. In fact, these potentially lethal substances may pose a serious health risk. In addition, many of the substances, when tested, are shown to contain banned substances. Therefore, you are also at risk of being prosecuted and getting a criminal record for drug possession.

The legislation in the Republic of Ireland is considerably better than that in the United Kingdom. I have corresponded with the Home Office on the matter because Northern Ireland has more so-called head shops than the Republic of Ireland. In spite of a larger population, the Republic of Ireland, as a consequence of its legislation, has fewer. The Home Office could be more proactive in challenging this misuse of drugs, which are being passed to young people on our streets.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. Childhood obesity has been addressed on a few occasions. I think that you, Minister, will accept that, if it is not properly addressed, an even larger burden will be placed on the health service, which might restrict the roll-out of Transforming Your Care. The Minister mentioned other Departments' responsibilities. Has any discussion been held with the Department of Education and the school sector about the provision of healthy school meals?

**Mr Poots:** Yes, that is an area that our officials work quite closely together on, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education cover a range of issues. Childhood obesity is a very important one. We have high levels of childhood obesity, and the reality is that, if you are obese when you are a child, the very strong likelihood is that you will be obese as an adult. The consequences of that are higher levels of

morbidity and mortality, lower quality of life and generally poorer prospects. So, we need to ensure that young people have the best opportunities in life. Therefore, tackling the issues when people are children will give them better opportunities as a result.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. What is the specific role of the child protection steering group?

**Mr Poots:** The child protection steering group and all these bodies have important roles to play in that we need to identify how we can ensure that we can best protect children and best meet their needs. A cross-border steering group was established by my Department and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to cooperate on a range of child protection matters, including an all-Ireland child protection awareness campaign, sharing information to enhance and improve safeguarding in child protection practice and strengthening the arrangements for sharing information on a cross-border basis in connection with individuals seeking work with children or vulnerable adults. As I have repeated in the House, a border should not be a barrier to child protection, and it should not be something that perpetrators on the vulnerable can use to their benefit. We must seek to eradicate such opportunities.

**Mr Rogers:** Thanks to the Minister for his statement. In border areas, the whole way from Lough Foyle to Kilkeel, we have issues with different suicide helpline numbers North or South of the border. Also, we have an issue with roaming. Are there any plans to address this with one free phone helpline for all of Ireland?

**Mr Poots:** Obviously, we have a free phone service, and we contribute around £2 million to providing the 24/7 Lifeline service. We are not proposing to change that. It is a service that works well, and we encourage people who have distress and need help to make the call. It is certainly a very important element of our suicide prevention campaign.

I should say that we had people over from the United States recently who were looking at the suicide issue and were very impressed by the work that we were carrying out. You might say that it has not been very successful because we still have close to 300 suicides a year, but I believe that we have saved many lives as a result of the work that has been carried out. We need to continue to put the messages out

there that help is available, that we can support people, that we care for them and that there is a better way. All of us have a role in doing that, and, whether it is Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland or across the board, we all have a role to play in reducing the scourge of suicide in this community.

**Mr Allister:** Was there any discussion about paediatric cardiac services, and is there any update that the Minister can give the House? When does he anticipate making a definitive statement about the protection and provision of such services in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Poots:** On the day and outside of the meeting, Minister Reilly and I held a bilateral meeting on paediatric cardiac services. We are in the endgame on that issue. Hopefully, meetings will take place this week or, if not, next week to continue work to resolve the problem. We need goodwill from the clinicians in the Republic of Ireland, and we need their support and help in identifying a solution to the problem that we have. A lot of us can see what the solution might look like, but we have not got it over the line at this point. Nonetheless, work is ongoing to achieve that. Time is of the essence. Professor Woods leaves our service on 9 December, and we are looking for a replacement for him. The position has been advertised, and there is interest in it, which is gratifying. Therefore, work is going on, and I hope to report to the Assembly on the issue over the next two to three weeks.

## Community Resuscitation Strategy

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** I wish to make a statement to the Assembly advising Members of my intention to begin a public consultation on the draft community resuscitation strategy for Northern Ireland.

In February 2013, by way of a written statement, I informed the House that I had asked the Chief Medical Officer to arrange for a working group to be established to develop a strategy aimed at coordinating the use of available resources to maximise the number of individuals trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) skills. The working group has produced a draft strategy, which is now ready to publish for consultation. The working group was chaired by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) and included representatives from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), Health and Social Care (HSC) bodies and community and voluntary bodies involved in resuscitation training. There was also representation from several other Departments: the Department of Education (DE); the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD); the Department of Social Development (DSD); and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI).

In the past year in Northern Ireland, over 1,400 cardiac arrests occurred in the community outside of a hospital environment. Fewer than 10% of people who suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest survive to be discharged from hospital. Experience from elsewhere has shown that community resuscitation can help save lives. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation and early defibrillation are the two critical interventions that are required for a person to survive an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. CPR is the act of providing the rescue breaths and chest compressions that can keep the person alive until professional help arrives. There is a well-known model called the chain of survival, which is a series of actions that improve a person's chances of surviving a cardiac arrest. Like any chain, it is only as strong as its weakest link. The chain illustrates the vital importance of speed, in particular in the following areas: early recognition that a cardiac arrest is happening; early CPR to buy time; early defibrillation to restart the heart; and post-resuscitation intensive care to restore quality of life. In parts of the world where a higher proportion of the population is trained to perform CPR, the survival rate for those who

suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest is higher than in areas where the proportion of the population trained in CPR is low.

Typically, it takes just two hours for someone to be trained to perform CPR. In Northern Ireland, significant effort and resources are invested in CPR training in schools and other settings. I believe that a Northern Ireland community resuscitation strategy will help to focus a drive to increase the number of people of all ages trained in CPR skills, and it will help us to make the best use of available resources to achieve that. Some people who may not have been trained to do CPR are wary of intervening when someone appears to be suffering a cardiac arrest, even though they can be coached on the spot by the 999 emergency operator. As well as increasing the number of people who can perform CPR, the strategy aims to overcome the anxieties that make some people wary of getting involved.

By definition, a community resuscitation strategy has to be a collaborative effort involving the active participation of many people in all walks of life. I am grateful for the contribution made so far to the development of the strategy by our partners in the voluntary and community sector, in other Departments and in the Health and Social Care family. The whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. Continued partnership working will be an important factor in the long-term success of the strategy. This is not just about interventions by Health and Social Care but about the whole community getting actively involved. The whole spectrum of public bodies, including Departments, can lead by example.

I am confident that, across Northern Ireland, there is a shared commitment to work together and the potential to save many lives. This strategy document is a draft. I am publishing it for consultation, and I encourage everyone to contribute any ideas that could strengthen it in any way.

### 11.30 am

Northern Ireland has been a world leader in this field. The late Professor Frank Pantridge, a constituent of Lagan Valley, and his colleagues at Queen's University and the Royal Victoria Hospital not only invented the portable defibrillator but made an important contribution to the development of CPR. The late Professor John Anderson from the University of Ulster was an outstanding figure in biomedical research. Part of their legacy is their vision and

leadership. So, the purpose of this strategy is to save lives, and we should be ambitious.

The strategy document sets out the case for a community resuscitation strategy. It describes the scope of the proposed strategy, which focuses on the first three links in the chain of survival. Those are: early recognition of a cardiac arrest; early cardiopulmonary resuscitation; and early defibrillation. It describes how the strategy has been developed, including a literature review and an overview of current CPR training provision in Northern Ireland. It proposes a vision and objectives for the strategy. It also lists a series of actions to be undertaken by DHSSPS, Health and Social Care bodies and other Northern Ireland Departments to further the objectives.

The vision for the strategy is to increase, to the highest level that can be achieved across Northern Ireland, survival for those who suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. The strategy partners will seek to realise the vision by pursuing the following objectives: raising public awareness of the importance of early recognition of an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest and the significance of early intervention; encouraging members of the public to intervene in the event of an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest; increasing the availability of, and access to, appropriate and effective CPR training provision across Northern Ireland; achieving higher uptake of CPR training; making the most efficient use of the resources that are available to support community resuscitation training; improving the availability of, and access to, the automated external defibrillators that are in place across Northern Ireland; and enhancing the capacity of information systems to capture and provide key data on out-of-hospital cardiac arrest and patient outcomes.

The public consultation on the draft regional community resuscitation strategy for Northern Ireland will be launched on 20 November. I encourage everyone to contribute any ideas that they feel could strengthen it in any way. The strategy document will be available on my Department's website tomorrow.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. I think that it is right and proper that we look at increased CPR training. I hope that the strategy looks at increasing equipment, particularly in some of our council venues.

I want to ask the Minister specifically about health inequalities. Rates of cardiac disease

are higher in the more economically deprived communities and areas. Therefore, it makes sense for extra attention to be targeted towards those areas. Has that been factored in to the strategy at this stage?

**Mr Poots:** The biggest challenge facing us on that front is public health. I believe that health inequalities are wrong, and I also believe that we have to challenge these issues. For example, the rate of tobacco smoking is twice as high in many areas of deprivation as it is in more affluent areas. It is one of the key causes of heart attacks. We need to recognise that we should avoid heart attacks in the first place, and there is much that can be done to achieve that.

We want to have the strategy, CPR and all these things right across Northern Ireland. We want the ability to do these things and for them to be readily available to you, whether you live in the most affluent or, indeed, the most disadvantaged place in Northern Ireland. We want to ensure that, if you have a heart attack, there will be someone there who will be able to take actions that will give you a chance of surviving, as opposed to people standing on the street scratching their heads wondering what they could do to help but not actually knowing what they could do. I think that this should be viewed very positively, because it will save lives.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he believe that the provision of CPR training in Northern Ireland is adequate?

**Mr Poots:** The Department recognises the importance of people being trained in CPR. It issued a standard in the 'Service Framework for Cardiovascular Health and Wellbeing', which was published in June 2009 and which states:

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

As resources are finite, the challenge is to achieve as much as possible with the available resources.

Since I came into office, we have engaged in a course of work with a number of sporting organisations. The good thing about CPR is that it is quite easy to cascade training. You can easily train trainers and train large numbers of people relatively quickly. I think that that is where we want to go on this issue. We want as

many people trained as possible to ensure that, in most circumstances, somebody will be around who has CPR and resuscitation skills.

In places such as Seattle, where programmes like this have been carried out, the difference in the number of people who survive heart attacks is really dramatic. Some 1,400 people have heart attacks outside of hospitals here each year, and we have a survival rate of less than 10%. If we were to double that survival rate — that would be modest — and move that up to 20%, an extra 140 people would be alive as a result of this strategy. This is a very important piece of work, and we should embrace it.

**Mr McKinney:** The Minister has rightly outlined the early parts of the chain, and, of course, the later parts of the chain are the emergency services and further hospital services. Does he accept that there is a weakest link potential in the area of communication, particularly in remote areas? Is he having any conversations with other relevant Departments in an effort to ensure that mobile communications, in particular, are as robust as they can be in remote areas to ensure the further success of his strategy?

**Mr Poots:** That is an important element for us in all aspects of health. As we move more towards telehealth and telemonitoring, it is absolutely critical to have good communication opportunities.

Northern Ireland has good communications, although I accept that there are black spots in a relatively small number of areas. We need to continue to work with the communication companies. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is obviously the lead Department on that issue, and we will always encourage that Department to continue to ensure that the communications network is as strong as possible because it assists us greatly in a whole range of areas to do with health.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister mentioned that fewer than 10% of those who suffer from a cardiac arrest outside of hospital will survive. Earlier, a Member mentioned more remote areas. Organisations such as Islandmagee First Responders have been established by volunteers to support areas that are an extended distance from hospitals and medical support. Will the Minister advise what support is available for such organisations and what training is available to nourish and develop them and to encourage other communities to self-help where such groups exist?

**Mr Poots:** We have set aside quite a lot of money to support the voluntary sector, and it makes bids to the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the trusts for funding. That is carried out through needs analyses, and there are mechanisms for doing that. A series of organisations provide support, and we all see them at many sporting events and other large events.

This strategy is about moving it beyond the voluntary sector to every possible individual. If we go to a youth organisation or a sporting club, training should not be restricted to half a dozen people in those organisations. It should be available to everybody who wants to do it, because, many times, incidents happen outside of those contexts. It may be in the home or elsewhere where there are only two or three people around. We will continue to support organisations such as first responders. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service provides support and training for them, and that will continue.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, Minister, for your statement. CPR training has been rolled out to a wide range of organisations in Northern Ireland for 50 years, including youth groups, schools and the various ambulance organisations, but the new portable defibrillators are now seen in supermarkets and in all sorts of places across Northern Ireland. There is a need to provide training for those, because that is the next step in CPR. The training has been delivered in many ways to many people, but many people are scared to use those new pieces of equipment. How does the Minister intend to get the community over the fear of using those?

**Mr Poots:** The Member is absolutely right. AEDs, or defibrillators, are very successful in getting the heart shocked and reset. There is a huge asset to us in that. There is no actual record of how many AEDs there are. People and organisations acquire them, and they do not have to be licensed, so we do not know about them all. We believe that there are roughly 1,000 AEDs across Northern Ireland. If somebody has a heart attack and one of those is on the wall, and people do not know where it is or how to use it, the fundraising to acquire one is then not of much benefit. We will train more people to use AEDs. The first element will be the CPD, but it is important that we have defibrillators widely available and that 1,000 is a reasonable number, although we would like to see more, and that people are equipped to use them.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for his statement. What decisions has he taken over the past two to three years to try to reduce cardiac and circulatory disease?

**Mr Poots:** We discussed in the previous statement the primary prevention campaigns aimed at the known factors of cardiovascular diseases, such as smoking and obesity. Those are key areas in reducing the number of heart attacks in the first place.

We also have a quality and outcomes framework in the general medical service. The contract has an emphasis on the minimisation of risk factors for heart and circulatory disease, and on the secondary prevention of heart and circulatory disease. In addition, a three-year directed enhanced service supports the service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being, which was introduced in 2008-09.

The cardiovascular service framework which was introduced in 2009 sets out comprehensive pathways and standards for prevention, early diagnosis, treatment, long-term management and palliative care in relation to cardiovascular disease. The Public Health Agency leads on that.

More recently, we established a 24/7 cath lab in the Royal Victoria Hospital. A 24/7 service will become available at Altnagelvin in early summer next year. Those will bring about an astonishing improvement in recovery from heart attacks, including saving lives but also improving the quality of life. If people have a heart attack, the damage done to the muscle of the heart can be hugely detrimental to having a good quality of life thereafter. The primary and community care investment programme interventions will ensure that considerably less damage is done to the muscle of the heart, so it will not just save lives but extend them and improve the quality of people's lives.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Minister for his statement. In my constituency, the Carnbane league is one of the largest amateur soccer leagues in the North. Because of the incidence of young players in other areas and in our own suffering cardiac arrest while playing football, it is policy to send young players to be tested for possible heart defects. That proved to be very successful. Will the Minister encourage that policy? Will he accept that many sporting clubs, if not all, should have access to CPR and defibrillators?

**11.45 am**

**Mr Poots:** The screening of everybody would be hugely challenging. It is not a route that we have gone down thus far, and I do not think that the analysis would lead us at this point to consider that to be the best use of resources. I believe that encouraging all young people in sporting organisations to get involved in the implementation of a community resuscitation strategy and ensuring that they are capable of carrying out resuscitation is core to a lot of these issues so that we can respond very quickly when someone falls ill. As I indicated, the more young people who can be trained, the better the chance of them assisting someone in the workplace, in the home or at some other event outside the sporting organisation. I do not believe that it should just be a core from each organisation. I want it to filter through and cascade to as many people in the organisation as possible.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for what is a very important statement. Will he join me in placing on public record our appreciation of the work carried out by the late Mr Shaun Esler MBE from Ballymoney, who spearheaded the work of the placement of defibrillators in Ballymoney retail premises? It follows on from the point that was made by Mr Dickson.

Wearing another hat as Chair of the Education Committee, can I ask the Minister whether he believes CPR training should be compulsory in our schools? Programmes such as the North Eastern Education and Library Board's Heartstart are to be commended.

**Mr Poots:** It is not for me to interfere in another Department. As Chair of the Committee, you will challenge that Department on many occasions, and rightly so. That is the role. Education has a major role in assisting other Departments across a range of issues, as other Departments have a role in assisting Education, but if we are to ensure that young people are well rounded, their education needs to be very broad.

I see the introduction of CPR as being very positive regarding having better rounded young people. It would not take a lot of time away from their curriculum, and there would be a great opportunity to participate in high schools, but that is exclusively a decision for the Minister. I hope that the Chair of the Education Committee and his colleagues will be very encouraging to the Education Minister to ensure that that will be the case across our schools.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I thank the Minister for what I see as one of the most important statements

that he has ever made. I come from the south Down area, and we have witnessed three young people lose their lives on the football field: Oisín McGuinness; Patrick Dinsmore; and our own Councillor Mickey Cole. The families of those young men have campaigned tirelessly for such a campaign to take place by raising funds for local sports clubs, schools etc to have training and have defibrillators at hand. I welcome the fact that you are asking all Departments to lead by example and realise the vision of what we are after. What plans does the Minister have to deliver the campaign to everybody in our community through advertising?

**Mr Poots:** We have not got to that point yet. Obviously, this is a consultation document, and I encourage as many people as possible to respond to it. If they have ideas, and if there is anything that they think that we have not covered, we would be very keen to hear about them. Very often, you can get ideas coming from the community that are not always obvious to a civil servant or public health official. So, we will encourage people to participate in the first instance by responding to the consultation.

We will try to turn the strategy around as quickly as possible. The sooner it is implemented, the better. I asked the Chief Medical Officer to work on the draft strategy, he completed that work, and I am bringing it to the House immediately. I want to make progress as soon as possible because the bottom line is that the sooner we can cascade training across Northern Ireland, the more lives we are likely to save.

I particularly appreciate where the Member is coming from in speaking about the very personal incidents that have happened in her community. It has happened to young people who looked the picture of health. We are not talking about people standing on the touchline with a cigarette in hand and carrying a lot of weight. Fit young people can have heart attacks as well. Our response can give them a chance of living, as opposed to people not knowing what to do.

**Mr Gardiner:** I thank the Minister for his statement and warmly welcome today's announcement. As the Minister said, many schoolchildren are already receiving training in emergency life-support skills. However, unfortunately, some schools do not accommodate that. Will the Minister speak to the Minister of Education to ask that such training become a formal part of the teaching programme in our schools?

**Mr Poots:** Given that this is a document for consultation, that certainly may be a suggestion that people will put to us and, indeed, to the Department of Education. It may be a point that we can amend during the consultation process, should the Department of Education wish to state clearly that it wants to engage in such training provision. I cannot speak for the Department of Education. That is purely a matter for it, and it is a matter for Members how they wish to lobby me and the Minister of Education. However, I can see the logic in what Members have said.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. How is he ensuring that sufficient liability cover is in place in Northern Ireland for first-responder schemes?

**Mr Poots:** That is a very important question because people are sometimes fearful of intervening in case they do something wrong and a claim is made against them.

In order to support fully the important role of community first responders in assisting statutory agencies in responding to emergencies, the Department is prepared to underwrite the costs associated with legal claims for damages made against the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) as the organisation that is responsible for dealing with emergency incidents and the governance of first responders who are members of community first responder (CFR) schemes with which the Ambulance Service has an agreed memorandum of understanding (MOU). That applies in any case that arises from performance or non-performance in any medical or associated procedure that is carried out by a CFR in response to an emergency incident and when insurance cover for medical malpractice has been withdrawn by a commercial insurance provider from a relevant scheme.

In addition, the Department is prepared to underwrite the costs associated with any legal claim for damages made against individual CFR schemes, or first responders who are members of CFR schemes with which the NIAS has an agreed MOU, in any case arising from performance or non-performance in a medical or associated procedure that is the response to an emergency incident and when insurance cover for medical malpractice has been withdrawn. That undertaking is predicated on the assumption that a first responder who was tasked to an emergency incident by the NIAS and is the subject of a legal claim for damages in respect of malpractice will have been acting

in good faith when dealing with the incident and within the terms of competence as set out in the MOU in force between the NIAS and the CFR scheme of which the first responder is a member.

I might add that the courts have previously taken the view that people who have acted in emergency situations with best interests at heart should not be liable to prosecution. I am not aware of successful prosecutions in such incidents.

## Private Members' Business

### Infrastructure: Effective Delivery of Major Projects

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

**Mr McGlone:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly calls on the Executive to take all necessary steps to create an effective delivery pipeline of major infrastructure work to alleviate the current economic and social difficulties being faced across the community.*

Go raibh maith agat. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development uses a simple and general definition of infrastructure:

*"the system of public works in a country, state or region, including roads, utility lines and public buildings."*

The effectiveness of any region's infrastructure is a critical factor in its economic growth, competitiveness and social well-being. As the world changes, there is a need for a new economic and social infrastructure to accommodate that change and maximise the potential for economic growth. In addition to the new infrastructure, the existing infrastructure must be maintained, upgraded and, where necessary, replaced. That requires long-term planning, access to consistent levels of capital investment and, importantly, the political will to use that investment wisely and deliver the necessary infrastructure work.

A key part of that long-term planning in Northern Ireland is the Strategic Investment Board (SIB). Established in April 2003, the SIB is, in effect, an expert consultancy group that operates within government, working with Northern Ireland Executive Departments and agencies towards the delivery of major infrastructure projects at a lower cost, with reduced risk and faster than would otherwise be the case. That is the aim. The SIB drafts the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which is the rolling 10-year plan of the Executive's priorities in public infrastructure as determined by Ministers. It covers all areas of government, including education, health and transport.

When the Assembly was restored in 2007, there was a commitment from the British Government of access to £18 billion for capital investment over the next 10 years. That commitment was not kept by the coalition Government in London; instead, the promised capital investment budget was slashed by about 40%. Although some £5 billion was invested in capital projects in the first three years of that commitment, the Executive have not been able to sustain that level of investment. The necessary funds have not been found in the budget available to the Executive, and the alternative finance mechanisms needed to make up the shortfall have not yet been identified or, if they have been identified, have not been used. Alternative finance mechanisms to fund major infrastructure work will be an essential part of the toolkit needed by the current and future Executives, if our economic and social infrastructure is to be fit for the future.

Those alternative mechanisms have been talked about for some time. Whether the political will exists to choose or implement them remains to be seen. The mechanisms are not exclusively partnerships with the private sector, although some parties may be predisposed to promoting what could be seen as the privatisation of sectors in which investment is needed. Other public sources of funding for major infrastructure projects are available and should be accessed. The UK infrastructure guarantee scheme has a target of unlocking up to £40 billion of infrastructure projects. The European Investment Bank has an annual fund for investment in infrastructure of about £43 billion. Extending the existing reinvestment and reform initiative could also be used to benefit infrastructure investment locally.

The Executive need to pursue the devolution of further fiscal powers to ensure that we have greater control over our finances and a greater ability to plan for the longer term. However, it cannot be emphasised enough how important it is that political will and, more importantly, political coordination across Departments are needed to deliver the major infrastructural work required. As we saw recently with the Narrow Water bridge, the slightest political hesitation, wherever that may be, can result in the loss of partners and funding for an infrastructure project. In my constituency, the community safety college at Desertcreat has been delayed because of costly mistakes in the planning of the project. We all know about the A5 scheme and the problems that arose as a result of a legal challenge to that. We have also seen how, on occasions, party political differences have been allowed to take precedence over the

delivery of much-needed investment regeneration projects, such as that at the Maze/Long Kesh site.

The Assembly cannot afford to ignore the warning signs of serious problems in the current mechanisms for bringing forward major infrastructural work. What is needed is a focused and coordinated approach to delivering the first-class infrastructure that is required to assist the building of sustainable economic growth and help create a fairer and more just society.

**12.00 noon**

**Mr McKinney:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGlone:** Yes.

**Mr McKinney:** Does the Member agree that it is important for Departments to look at new, different and imaginative ways to access funding for such projects, not just for major projects but also for smaller projects? I think particularly, for example, of contributions from the Green Investment Bank, which has something in the order of £3-8 billion to spend on projects nationally. If government could access some of that, it would make sense.

**Mr McGlone:** I accept that and, indeed, recently the Green Investment Bank and potentials arising from it were discussed at the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee.

More recently, a report from the Confederation of British industry (CBI) pointed out that we should benchmark our delivery of infrastructure projects against delivery in Scotland and on the rest of this island. The Executive need to learn from the example of those jurisdictions and create an effective delivery pipeline of major infrastructure works. Not only is that essential to the creation of an infrastructure that is fit for purpose, it is essential for the regeneration of our economy. An effective delivery pipeline of major works would build public confidence in the Assembly's ability to get on with the work. It would build confidence in the business community that we are serious about investment in the future and help sustain and create thousands of jobs in the construction industry.

In its report, the CBI advocates a number of changes that are required to develop and deliver infrastructure projects. A new, centralised procurement delivery agency, with a clear mandate from the Executive and, as I have mentioned, benchmarked against the

agencies operating in Scotland and the rest of Ireland, should have responsibility for the procurement and delivery of public sector education and health capital projects, for example, as well as a role in the prioritisation of other capital projects. The CBI recommends the development of an accurate pipeline of infrastructure works with regular updates on the progress of departmental capital plans. There should be at least one strategic project in an advanced state of readiness in Roads Service at all times. An effective delivery pipeline would also assist in efforts to attract foreign direct investment, clearly demonstrating to all the importance that the Assembly places on improving our infrastructure and on delivering on our promise to do so.

Indeed, I heard recently from the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) on Friday — I am sure that other Members, including Mr McElduff, will refer to it — about its concerns over the lack of infrastructure capital projects west of the Bann. That pipeline should contain projects with a three- to five-year period, and there should be regular updates on progress. There must be commitment on the part of the Executive to make sure that timescales and promises with respect to the infrastructure and that pipeline are met.

The CBI report also includes some interesting proposals regarding the creation of a department of the economy and the appointment of the Minister in the Executive with overall responsibility for the delivery of infrastructure and the capital budget. The Finance Minister, along with others in the Executive, may not relish that prospect, but it is a proposal that deserves to be considered seriously.

It is essential for the Executive to create an effective delivery pipeline of major infrastructure works to alleviate the current economic and social difficulties faced across the community. The all-party working group on construction looks forward to its meeting with the Minister of Health, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Justice on 3 December. The Minister of Education is unavailable for that meeting, but I hope that senior officials from his Department will attend. We hope to drill down and see what major capital projects can be got out into the community and prioritised by Departments. I really do not care whether the concept is called "spade-ready" or "procurement-ready". The community wants the projects ready and to see work begin.

I thank my colleagues from other parties for their support and participation in the debate.

**Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development):** The Committee for Regional Development has not discussed the motion in advance of today's debate. I therefore base my comments on previous conversations conducted in our Committee meetings, principally during scrutiny of departmental bids during the monitoring rounds.

The Department for Regional Development and its arm's-length bodies are integral to sustained investment in our infrastructure. The Programme for Government, for example, has a target of £66 million to be invested in water and sewerage infrastructure. The price control determination for Northern Ireland Water up to 2010 called for £564 million for capital investment, while PC13 seeks a further £324 million investment. With regard to our roads infrastructure, we have the deferred A5 project at £330 million and the A2 at a cost of £57 million. There is also the A8 project, costing in excess of £110 million, including €18.3 million through the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) projects. The Committee supports those significant projects, and, to give credit where credit is due, the Department on the whole delivers them.

The Department also has a major role to play during the monitoring rounds as a means of reallocating declared excesses from other Departments. In the October monitoring round, my colleague the Finance Minister allocated £75 million to structural maintenance projects. The Committee has always been supportive of a planned schedule of infrastructural works that could be delivered in a strategic and effective manner.

It costs £116 million a year just to maintain our road network. Although the Department has been very successful in the past couple of years in hitting or getting close to that target as a result of in-year bids, we are nevertheless running a backlog in structural maintenance to the tune of £830 million. The Committee has stated in the past that a sustained effort needs to be made to reduce that backlog, not only so as not to stack up problems for future years but in recognition of the significantly positive impact that addressing the backlog would have on the construction industry and the suppliers of the materials needed to complete the works.

In times of austerity, it is no coincidence that investment in construction and infrastructure is a tool used to help rebuild the economy. The roads and sewerage systems were all built with the stimulus money spent on infrastructure. We cannot overlook the ancillary consequences of

a strategic, effective and well-maintained infrastructure on, for example, tourism, imports and exports.

The Committee has on a number of occasions called on both the Department for Regional Development and Northern Ireland Water to identify and progress any shovel-ready projects to the stage at which, if major investment is identified, they will be in a position to react. Particularly in Northern Ireland Water, those are issues in which accounting practices restrict the ability of the organisation to plan effectively its capital investment programmes. I know that the previous Finance Minister and the current Minister have sought and are seeking to resolve the issues with Treasury, but we as a Committee continue to call for investment in our infrastructure to be a priority, because it makes sense, because it is essential to the development of our economy and because it is the proper thing to do. I support the motion.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will preface my remarks by reiterating a point made by Mr McGlone. The British Government did renege on a commitment of major investment in our infrastructure, and we are working within those parameters.

However, it is a fact that too many crucial public sector infrastructure projects and too many vital public buildings that would benefit our communities are being stalled and delayed. I do not want to overstate it, but that really causes huge despondency. Hardly a day goes past that people do not mention that the A5 — the western transport corridor that is a North/South Ministerial Council and an Executive priority — is stalled; that the Maze/Long Kesh development is stalled; and that the Narrow Water bridge is stalled. I hear those three projects mentioned non-stop in my constituency, and the delay is doing huge economic and social damage to people, communities and morale. At the end of the day, roads, buildings and bridges are about people. They are about improving connectivity and jobs. People need to be assured that every effort is being made to deliver and to fast-track projects into work on the ground, particularly the big projects that promise to make a difference.

I will now highlight a major feeling of deficit and grievance that exists west of the Bann and concentrate on the view of the construction industry there. Last Friday afternoon, along with other MLAs who are present for this debate, I attended the Tyrone and Fermanagh association meeting of the Construction Employers Federation, which was held at

QMAC Construction between Pomeroy and Donaghmore. The overwhelming feeling there was that there is a dearth of construction work on the ground at this time, particularly west of the Bann. They cited difficulties with procurement. People said things such as, "A local company would not get as much as a screw nail in a big job" and "We're good enough to do the work, but we're not good enough to qualify for the list". Another phrase that I remember from that meeting was "We are PQQed to within an inch of our life". There were a lot of references to young people emigrating to Australia, Canada and New Zealand in search of work, as well as to the number of people who commute weekly to England, Scotland and Wales. I raised that point earlier with the First Minister. So, a lot of economic and social damage is being done to our communities, and that affects morale. People find it hard to understand and to stomach delay after delay. I have to say that, among the constituents that I represent, the A5 is the most acute example of that.

It needs to be remembered that the construction industry pump-primed the wider economy, as every £1 that is invested in construction tends to generate £2.84 in wider economic activity. So, to cut to the chase, people want to see a list published of every public construction project that is on the ground and/or in the pipeline at this time.

As an MLA, I appreciate Ministers' efforts to translate a promise into reality on the ground. Earlier, I took the opportunity to discuss the schools programme directly with the Minister of Education, John O'Dowd. Not enough of the schools are on the ground at this time. The Minister expressed his frustration at bureaucracy and red tape, which are often to do with the business case and economic appraisals. However, we need to overcome such hurdles and get work out and on the ground as soon as possible. People want to be absolutely assured that public projects are being monitored and managed properly and fast-tracked into real action as quickly as possible. In my constituency, again, there is the A5 and the Lisanelly shared education campus. I welcome the progress that is under way there. There is not enough progress on the enhanced local hospital that is to be built in Omagh and other local capital investments, such as primary care centres and the A32. All those cause huge concern.

My final point concerns the rural planning policy statement, PPS 21, which needs to be revisited.

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

**Mr McElduff:** I believe that it needs to be revisited so that rural people have greater opportunities to build a single home in the countryside. That will also make a difference, especially for local companies.

**12.15 pm**

**Mrs Overend:** I, too, welcome the debate and the opportunity to participate in it. Indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party recognises that a vibrant and fit-for-purpose infrastructure is a key driver in promoting growth and is, therefore, a principal component of the economy. The value of capital expenditure in economic recovery cannot be overestimated. The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to delivering the benefits from major capital projects.

The current situation is felt ever so acutely by the construction industry. Just last Friday, along with other Members here, I met representatives of the industry in my constituency of Mid Ulster. Mr McElduff gave very precise details of where that meeting was in my constituency, and I appreciate that. Although there is a glimmer of optimism in the construction industry, it has undergone a hugely rapid decline since 2007. Recent figures that were stated at that meeting showed that the industry's output was down by 43% for the quarter ending June 2013 from its peak and was down again by 5% on last year's figures. Although private housing starts are up by only 15%, completions are up by 50%. However, that is only half the level of completions in 2003 and 2004.

Over the downturn, we have heard of many construction employers going out of business, no more so than in my constituency of Mid Ulster. Looking back to when agriculture was in decline, many farmers moved from farming into construction. Now, we see many of those construction firms in decline and going out of business. Of the businesses that remain, the state of trade survey tells us, 63% of construction companies are working at only 75% capacity. Many do not expect that to get much better over the next year, but many are also hopeful that it will rise.

Although the motion concentrates on the delivery of major infrastructure work, it is important, too, that we realise and consider the implication of the downturn for the construction industry. There is a small expectancy of a labour squeeze. With people moving out of the

construction industry over the past few years, we need to ensure that sufficient workers remain in the construction industry and are ready to work when projects get under way. I understand that the average age of a man on site is 50 years old. That is something that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning need to consider when looking at apprenticeships and people moving into training in that sector. It is important that the industry receives the focus that it deserves from those Departments.

It is vital that all Ministers step up to the mark to bring forward work programmes and deliver them ready for procurement. From the point of view of both government and the general public, it is, obviously, essential that infrastructure schemes are delivered on time, on budget and to the highest agreed standards. From speaking regularly to representatives of the construction industry, I am well aware of their concerns. A major one relates to the procurement process, where the need for fairness and transparency is a constant theme. Just last week, the Public Accounts Committee highlighted concerns over aspects of the rebuilding of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Those concerns must be addressed, and they highlight the need for appropriate and robust checks and balances to be built into a procurement process for all contracts, including major infrastructure ones.

I am pleased to say that one major infrastructure project relates to my constituency, Mid Ulster, in the shape of the new state-of-the-art emergency services training college at Desertcreat. The scheme appears to have been subject to undue delay. I very much look forward to real progress on that vital scheme, which will benefit not only Mid Ulster but the whole of Northern Ireland for decades to come.

My party's Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy, has been instrumental in progressing various road infrastructure schemes, such as the Magherafelt bypass in my constituency and the recently announced A26 project in North Antrim. However, responsibility lies not only in roads but, as the motion implies, in all Departments round the Executive table. As the Member for West Tyrone mentioned, there are major concerns that the school building programme under the Department of Education for Northern Ireland is not progressing quickly enough. Last year, the Education Minister announced new school builds, but I understand that they are not going to tender, never mind being built.

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

**Mrs Overend:** Goodness me.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** In fact, it is up.

**Mrs Overend:** I support the motion.

**Mr Girvan:** I, too, support the motion. I want to make some points about some of the positive things that have happened recently. Seventy per cent of all ongoing capital spend on projects in Northern Ireland comes from the public sector. That is happening, but unfortunately, probably not all locals benefit from it. There are some areas where some investment could be made, and I appreciate that it is vital to take a strategic look at this.

We have invested £51 million in our telecommunications network. That sector has necessarily supported some jobs, but we have to look at what is going on in other jurisdictions and ensure that we remain competitive in that area. In doing so, it is important that we put capital in to ensure that we stay as a world leader. Eighty-nine per cent of all businesses have access to fibre-optic broadband, and we want to make sure that we have a world-standard telecommunications network.

Another area that would benefit the wider economy is the interconnector between Northern Ireland and the Republic, which would provide some access to cheap energy, and that would benefit businesses, as well as the wider economy.

I will move on to some of the major projects that we have undertaken. I appreciate that the Department for Regional Development is one area where we have major spend on our roads infrastructure. The A8 project is going through in my area at present, causing major disruption to a large area in a rural economy and to the land. As a consequence of that, local businesses feel that they have benefited very little from the project. They have not tendered, because of their interpretation of red tape. They believe that it is not necessarily worthwhile to put in a tender, even for simple projects such as the fencing project. Local people involved in that industry said that it was not worthwhile doing it.

People may be unaware of some measures that have been put in place by the Executive through the Finance Department and the Finance Minister, including the prompt payment process, which ensures that businesses get

cash flow and are not hamstrung. That has been of great benefit in addressing some of the cash flow issues associated with some of our minor projects. The introduction of project bank accounts has been another good initiative, and that needs to be brought out. The industry needs to be aware that it can have access to projects. We need to ensure that red tape does not prohibit local businesses from tendering for them and to actually help them to access funding.

I am a Euro-sceptic, and as such I believe that some of the tender processes that have been put in place do not necessarily help local businesses but have created difficulties in some areas. We need to ensure that we get something back. Even if you class it as a social economy clause in the project, that is a way of overcoming some of those difficulties. Those are things that need to be done.

In 2012-13 we invested £1.3 billion in road and rail, upgrading park-and-ride facilities. All of those are areas which are being brought forward. The CBI identified some of those as key areas. We invested £77 million in a capital project in the Titanic Quarter that has created 250 full-time jobs in that area. In doing so, it has spread out to a big tourist draw for that area. Those sorts of projects are very good, but it is about identifying key projects and ensuring that local people have that access to them.

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

**Mr Girvan:** Thank you very much indeed.

**Mr Rogers:** I support the motion. Just a few days after the announcement by the SEUPB of the withdrawal of funding for the Narrow Water bridge project, these are bad days for South Down. Our chambers of commerce right around the coast were depending so much on that not just as a major infrastructure project to boost our construction industry but to boost our tourism industry.

I want to keep my thoughts on education. I have spent many years in education, and I fully understand the importance of providing a good physical environment for our young people. I am the former principal of St Louis, Kilkeel; I retired in 2007. The principal before me thought that he would turn the first sod of the new school, but we are still waiting. The condition of the school building impacts on the type and quality of education that teaching staff can deliver. I welcome the announcement of

school enhancement projects, but, like anything else, they need timely delivery.

We are gravely concerned about information in the October 2013 update on major capital works. What makes it more frustrating is that the Education Committee recently visited Scotland and saw how their capital investment programme is working, progressing and benefiting the construction industry, education and everyone. Indeed, as other people mentioned, many of our workers get on flights on Monday morning to go over to work there. The capital investment programme of the Department of Education here in Northern Ireland makes grim reading. The delays in major works affect schools across the North, from Belfast to Derry to Newry. They affect primary schools, secondary schools, Irish-medium schools and the special needs sector. The slippage in the special needs sector seems to be worse than in others. Those who need it most seem to be suffering most. The inability of the Department of Education to build what it promises covers all of the education system.

Construction companies are holding on for when they hear that projects will be shovel-ready on a certain date. When that does not happen, many of them unfortunately go under. The reasons for these significant delays include revised economic appraisals, lack of planning approval and waiting for the appointment of specialised teams. Each of these projects is valued at millions; indeed, one project is valued at up to £20 million. This is a large amount of money in Northern Ireland terms, and it is needed to stimulate our construction industry and provide the physical environment for the education of our young people.

The case for the new school buildings has been made. It is outrageous that schools, pupils and teachers endure substandard environments because of the inability of the Department to deliver the projects in a timely manner. The Minister has questions to answer in this regard. He needs to explain to the House why the Department is unable to work effectively and efficiently, but, more importantly, he needs to explain the delays to the young people who continue to be educated in substandard conditions.

This is not just about our education sector; it is about our construction industry and everybody. We need to get this right.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting

until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.28 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Justice**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** We will begin with 30 minutes of oral answers to questions, followed by 15 minutes of topical questions.

#### **The Disappeared: Justice**

**1. Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice what measures he will take to ensure the appropriate departmental resources are available to the relevant criminal justice agencies to bring to justice those responsible for the murders of the disappeared. (AQO 5029/11-15)

**Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice):** It is very important for me as Minister and for my Department as a whole that the PSNI and other criminal justice agencies are adequately resourced to bring those responsible for the murders of the disappeared to justice. I will continue to work with colleagues at the Executive to ensure that sufficient funding is made available to them. Anyone with any information, no matter how small, should pass that on to the relevant authorities. It is important that every effort is made to help to ease the terrible ongoing suffering of those unfortunate families.

**Miss M McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for his answer. With the finger of blame being pointed very firmly in the direction of Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, from beyond the grave by Brendan Hughes and from among the living by Billy McKee, will the Minister join me in calling for the Sinn Féin president to provide the authorities with the information that they need to give the families of the disappeared the peace that they need and to allow the bodies of the disappeared to be buried with dignity?

**Mr Ford:** I cannot point the finger at any individual, whether that be the president of Sinn Féin or anyone else. I do, however, repeat the Taoiseach's words in the Dáil on 5 November:

*"somebody ordered that Jean McConville be murdered, someone instructed that people take her away, someone instructed Dolours Price to drive the vehicle used across the*

*Border and ... someone gave the instruction in respect of what took place."*

Whoever has any information, regardless of what that may be or what office they may now hold, has an absolute duty to do all that they can to assist in the recovery of those who were disappeared.

**Mr Elliott:** I appreciate the Minister's remark about the provision of additional funding. However, can any other investigative process be progressed by the Department of Justice or the Police Service of Northern Ireland, even on a cross-border basis with the Garda Síochána?

**Mr Ford:** I appreciate Mr Elliott's question. Certainly, it is up to the PSNI and an Garda Síochána to pursue criminal investigations with whatever evidence they have. We also have the role of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains, which has specific duties to follow up in the recovery of bodies. What is essential is that anybody who has any information whatsoever that might help in the recovery of victims or in the prosecution of perpetrators should provide it.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Minister agree that it is quite clear that the murder of Jean McConville was the product of a very elaborate and extensive conspiracy and that there are, therefore, many aspects of that case to be investigated, including not just those who perfected the murder but those who conspired to that end and those who have since withheld information about it? What confidence can the House have, through the Minister, that all those various persons involved are being rigorously pursued, or is it a situation —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Let us address the question.

**Mr Allister:** — where no one wants to disrupt the process?

**Mr Ford:** If Mr Allister is suggesting that the PSNI, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and, indeed, their colleagues on the other side of the border are not doing all that they can to deal with serious crime, I think that he is making a mistaken assumption. I have no evidence to believe that everything that can be done is not being done at this stage. We have to reflect on the fact that we are talking about very difficult circumstances from many years ago. I repeat the point that somebody knows who carried out those actions, and anybody who has information that would help to recover the victims should provide it.

## Judges: Complaints

2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is aware of any complaints made to his Department of unfair treatment or personal bias by judges in court cases. (AQO 5030/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** I am informed of any complaints that my office receives from individuals or their elected representatives in respect of the conduct of members of the judiciary. To safeguard the principle of judicial independence and the effective operation of the justice system, I have no authority to address complaints about judicial office holders. Any complaints of that nature are referred to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice, as he has sole statutory responsibility for determining complaints about the conduct of judicial office holders.

**Mr McCallister:** The Minister will be aware, having presumably agreed to the Pledge of Office, that 1.4 (cd) states that a Minister is:

*"to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts".*

Does the Minister believe that the Health Minister was in breach of the Pledge of Office when he questioned whether he would get a fair hearing in the Court of Appeal?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That is an absolutely different question, but I will leave it to the Minister's discretion.

**Mr Ford:** I can say only that the operation of the ministerial code is not for me to police on behalf of the Assembly or the Executive. It is certainly the case that Ministers collectively, and in the issue that he highlights, the Health Minister specifically, may wish to reflect on his recent comments about the independence of the judiciary, but it is not for me to determine on behalf of any other body what his actions should be.

**Mr Givan:** The Minister will be aware of the evidence provided to the Justice Committee by His Honour Judge Marrinan, who said that the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) acted irrationally, unfairly and illegally in the appointment of a High Court judge. Is the Minister concerned, on the basis of the evidence provided to the Committee,

about the way in which NIJAC operates, given that its chairman is the Lord Chief Justice?

**Mr Ford:** I am certainly aware of the Justice Committee meeting, at which it appeared to take a significant length of time to take evidence from Judge Marrinan. However, the issue is not one for the Department of Justice, because NIJAC is a non-departmental public body (NDPB) sponsored by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I am concerned that there appears to be a breakdown in the relationship between Judge Marrinan and other members of the judiciary, but it is not for me to go into the detail of that. I will certainly be interested to see what the Justice Committee determines after its consideration of the issues relating to the appointment process.

**Mr Gardiner:** Has the Minister any plans to review the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission?

**Mr Ford:** No. As I have just said, NIJAC is an arm's-length NDPB of OFMDFM, so it is not for me to consider a review of it.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr Fra McCann is not in his place.

### **Dissident Unionists: Definition**

4. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice to clarify what he means when he uses the term dissident unionists. (AQO 5032/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** There are a small number of disaffected people on both sides of the community who are seeking to take Northern Ireland back to the past. We have seen their recklessness and willingness to endanger life, whether that is through acts of terrorism, organised criminality or public disorder. The term "dissident republicans" is well understood. During the previous oral questions to me, I used the term "dissident unionists" in a reply to Alban Maginness to refer to unionists who also engage in criminal behaviour and do not accept the current political arrangements. Neither group of dissidents can be allowed to thwart the progress that Northern Ireland has made. They need to see the futility of their violent actions and pursue exclusively peaceful means. Nobody engaged in democratic politics should do or say anything that would encourage the dissidents.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 5 has been withdrawn.

**Mr Anderson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. The term "dissident unionist" is offensive to law-abiding unionists, and I wish you to put it beyond all doubt and confirm that you do not regard those engaged in legitimate peaceful protests, such as those about the flags issue and the ongoing protests at Twaddell Avenue, as dissident unionists and that we must all be very careful in our choice of words.

**Mr Ford:** I regard those who break the law, whether or not they claim to be peaceful, as dissident.

**Mr Dallat:** My question has almost become superfluous because the Minister has made his view absolutely clear. Does he agree with me that those involved in loyalism who are causing disorder and mayhem are, in fact, dissidents?

**Mr Ford:** Mr Dallat has correctly identified the way in which I used the phrase last time and the way in which I have used it again today. I believe that Members sitting here with a democratic mandate need to be very careful that they do nothing to encourage such dissidents.

### **The Disappeared: Columba McVeigh**

6. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Justice what steps he will take to encourage those with information relating to the abduction and murder of Columba McVeigh to pass this information on to the relevant authorities in order to help find his remains. (AQO 5034/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** The family of Columba McVeigh has suffered greatly throughout the past 38 years. It is a matter of great sadness that both his parents passed away without being accorded the dignity of giving their son a Christian burial. His family and the families of the other disappeared are to be commended for their continued efforts to establish the truth behind the events that led to the death of their loved ones. The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims Remains is the body established to help in those cases. I encourage anyone who has any information that would help in any way to bring an end to the suffering of those families to make that information known to the relevant authorities.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Those who carried out any such form of nefarious abduction, murder and subsequent burial were responsible for one of the worst abuses of our civil rights that has ever existed.

Would the Minister be prepared, following on from his answer, to meet the McVeigh family or its representatives?

**Mr Ford:** In my time as Minister, I have met a number of families, including those who were bereaved or suffered in other ways because of various aspects of criminal activity and terrorism over the years. I am quite happy to extend that to the McVeigh family and its representatives.

**Lord Morrow:** I welcome the Minister's answer and the assurance that he has given to the House today. I wonder whether he will go a little bit further by further reassuring the House that he, in particular, and his Department are doing everything they possibly can to have a resolution to the nightmare that the McVeigh family has gone through for numerous years. As one who has met them, I am acutely aware of the sorrow and grief they are experiencing. If the Minister were to go the second mile on this — and I am not saying that he is not — it would bring some degree of reassurance to that family.

**Mr Ford:** I certainly take Lord Morrow's point. I am not sure that much can be done by my Department as opposed to agencies such as the PSNI and an Garda Síochána to deal with the specific concerns that family members have, but I am certainly prepared to meet them and see whether there is anything that they would wish that can be done by my Department.

**Mr Cree:** When the Minister meets his colleagues from the Republic of Ireland, does the issue of the disappeared appear on the agenda regularly?

**Mr Ford:** The issue of the disappeared does not appear regularly on the agenda for Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) meetings with my colleague the Minister for Justice and Equality. However, the ongoing issues of terrorism feature; we look at a joined-up approach across the island. Each of us ensuring that we fight criminality in all its various forms is part of the issue. The specific responsibilities for the recovery of remains are not for my Department specifically, but ongoing issues about how we address those problems are very much part of our concern.

## **Maghaberry: Death in Custody**

7. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the implementation of the

recommendations made by the Prison Ombudsman following the death in custody of Colin Bell in HMP Maghaberry. (AQO 5035/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** The Prisoner Ombudsman's report into the death of Colin Bell was published in January 2009 and made 44 recommendations. The Northern Ireland Prison Service accepted 43 of the recommendations, and they have all been addressed. The Prison Service takes its responsibility for the safe custody of all those in its care extremely seriously. The safety and care of vulnerable prisoners continues to be a priority.

Every death in custody represents a personal tragedy for someone, and lessons can be learned in every case. I am satisfied that the Prison Service has made significant progress in that respect. It has implemented a number of measures to deal with the serious failings identified in the ombudsman's report.

**Mr Spratt:** The Minister will be aware that, in some of the recommendations on procedures, a number of prison warders were charged by the PSNI. In fact, they were used as scapegoats by the PSNI and the Prison Service. Will the Minister look at that, given the fact that at least one of those men was suffering from cancer at the time? It caused undue and added stress to a person already seriously ill.

**Mr Ford:** I cannot accept that an appropriate disciplinary response can be regarded as scapegoating. I am also very aware that there is a criminal case before the courts today on this issue, so it would be unwise to say anything more.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. I reassure him that the Justice Committee likes to think that it gives significant time to all the witnesses who appear in front of it. We do not select particular ones and give them more attention than others.

Does the Minister agree that the death of Colin Bell in Maghaberry could and should have been avoided?

**2.15 pm**

**Mr Ford:** On Mr McCartney's opening remarks, I will say briefly that any session with any individual witness that lasts longer than an entire Executive meeting seems to me to be a fairly significant contribution.

On the serious point that he raises about the death of Colin Bell, the recommendations made by the ombudsman and the implementation of all but one of those recommendations by the Prison Service are clearly an indication that the death should not have happened — that Colin Bell should not have died — and that there were serious issues to address concerning how vulnerable prisoners are cared for. I believe that those lessons are being learned, but we are also well aware that prisons in every part of the world will see deaths in custody. We need to do all that we can to eliminate them.

**Mr Rogers:** What further steps are being taken to assist prisoners who have mental health issues to ensure that they get effective treatment for their illness?

**Mr Ford:** I can assure Mr Rogers that the issue of mental health is one that is being taken very seriously. A number of the recommendations from the prison review team, led by Dame Anne Owers, are on specific aspects of healthcare, including mental healthcare. At the most recent meeting of the oversight group, we had a detailed response from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust on the work that is being done there, and the permanent secretary of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) sits on the oversight group to ensure that those lessons are being learned. Only earlier today, I was discussing ongoing healthcare issues with the director general of the Prison Service. Therefore, it is fully acknowledged that there is a lot of work to be done, but that work is under way.

**Mr Nesbitt:** To follow on from Mr Rogers's question and the Minister's answer, on foot of his discussions, which he has just outlined, how much is being spent on healthcare in the prison system, and what proportion is being spent on mental health issues?

**Mr Ford:** I am afraid that Mr Nesbitt will have to ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that question.

## **PCSP: Paramilitary Members**

8. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Justice what action he can take to remove any members of an illegal paramilitary organisation from continuing to serve on any policing and community safety partnership. (AQO 5036/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** The Northern Ireland Policing Board has responsibility for appointing independent members to policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) and the four Belfast district PCSPs, in line with the requirements of a statutory code of practice issued by my Department under the Justice Act 2011. Following appointment, independent members can be removed if, for example, they fail to disclose a conviction or have demonstrably acted in breach of the terms of a declaration against terrorism; and/or they are convicted of a criminal offence. In line with the requirements of the 2011 Act, responsibility for removing independent members rests with the Policing Board, or the relevant council with the approval of the board.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for his reply. What he is actually saying is that he has no power of removal and that the Policing Board has some power. Is it not a scandal that a well-known member of an illegal organisation now sits on the Belfast policing board? Is that not something that ordinary members of the public would rightly object to?

**Mr Ford:** I need to be cautious about referring to whether someone is or is not a member of an illegal organisation and about which individual Mr Maginness may be referring to, but the arrangements for removal are quite clear if someone has demonstrably failed to uphold the declaration against terrorism made on appointment to the PCSP or the district PCSP. That is the way in which the law as was put through the House is currently formulated. If there were changes to be made regarding vetting prior to appointment, they would have to be considered by the House at a later stage. I certainly understand the concerns that are being expressed by Mr Maginness if that is the feeling of sections of the community about some individual members. The key issue is to ensure that we see all members of PCSPs acting to uphold their responsibilities, acting lawfully and upholding the rule of law and the democratic institutions of the state.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. In the light of recent events in Coleraine and east Belfast, what discussions has the Minister had with the Chief Constable about illegal loyalist activity and the status of the UVF ceasefire?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That is a totally separate question, and answering it is at the Minister's discretion.

**Mr Ford:** I think that we need to be careful how we actually handle those particular issues. The specific matter of a UVF ceasefire or lack of UVF ceasefire and issues of specification in the organisation are not for the Department of Justice but remain with the Secretary of State. However, the Member and others will appreciate that, naturally, when I meet the Chief Constable, I discuss a range of issues, including criminal and terrorist activity.

## Human Trafficking

9. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the 63% decrease in the number of referrals for human trafficking between 2011 and 2012, as stated in the second report of the interdepartmental ministerial group on human trafficking. (AQO 5037/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** The figures for referrals of potential victims of human trafficking to the national referral mechanism (NRM) can fluctuate. In Northern Ireland, where the number of referrals is relatively low, any fluctuation, such as where there are multiple referrals from a single case, can have a disproportionate effect on the figures. In addition, the clandestine nature of human trafficking makes it very difficult to assess with any degree of certainty the real level of the crime. The level in 2012 was lower than in 2011, but there is already an increase in 2013.

One factor in recognising victims is the need to raise awareness of the issue and how to recognise its signs with both front line professionals and the wider public. The cross-border forum on human trafficking, which my Department co-hosted with the Irish Department of Justice and Equality last month, looked at the challenges of identifying victims of human trafficking. Key messages emerging from that forum reinforced the need for training and awareness; the importance of a multi-agency approach; the role of education; and the need to build victims' trust and confidence in the criminal justice system and the statutory bodies that can help them. My Department is working with partners to address those issues.

Progress includes the launch of an education resource and support for a number of awareness-raising campaigns and events. Training of front line professionals has been prioritised by the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF), and my Department has produced a leaflet to inform victims of how and where help can be accessed. The OCTF has commissioned research on referrals from

Northern Ireland since the NRM was established so that we are better able to understand and respond to emerging threats and victims' needs.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. How can the public assist in the campaign against human trafficking?

**Mr Ford:** I think that the key way in which the public can assist is by being informed of the issue and aware of the kinds of signs that apply to trafficking, whether it is the trafficking that we see in forced labour, particularly in agriculture and horticulture, or people living in a house where there are too many people coming and going and unusual activity that may or may not relate to the sex trade. As well as becoming informed, people need to not be frightened to make their concerns known to the relevant agencies, normally the PSNI, to ensure that, if there are concerns about people being trafficked, they are followed up at an early enough stage and not left until people have perhaps moved on or other changes have happened. There is no doubt that the numbers that we are talking about in Northern Ireland are relatively low. However, the scale of the problem is not the real issue. The issue is the horrendous crime that trafficking is, whatever form it takes. It is therefore important that the public are aware, vigilant and respond.

**Lord Morrow:** There are many issues about which the Minister and I disagree on how to take the matter forward. However, there is, of late, clear evidence that the PSNI is taking measures — perhaps he initiated those — to create awareness of human trafficking, which, unfortunately, goes further than across Northern Ireland. Is this but a first step? Is it the Minister's intention to take further action to create awareness of the awful scourge of human trafficking?

**Mr Ford:** I certainly appreciate the work that Lord Morrow is doing. While he highlights areas in which we disagree, we can also highlight significant areas in which we agree on the matter.

My intention is that we continue to highlight the issue through, for example, the Department's engagement group working with a number of NGOs. I think that he will have read, if other Members have not, the report of the interdepartmental ministerial group (IDMG), which was published at the time of the last

meeting that I attended in London and on which I reported on at my last Question Time. It shows that a significant amount of work is being done in every region of the UK. I have already highlighted, in my primary answer to Mr Lynch, the work that we do on a North/South basis to cooperate. It is clear that good work is being done, but we require a partnership of the statutory agencies alongside the concerned voluntary groups and individuals to ensure that we get the message out.

**Ms Lo:** First, I want to commend the Minister for working so closely with his colleagues in other jurisdictions to ensure a joined-up approach. Is he looking at the Home Office modern slavery Bill, which is going through Westminster at the moment, to see if there are elements of that Bill that could be extended to or replicated in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Ford:** I thank my colleague for that question. She is slightly premature in that the modern slavery Bill has not yet been introduced in Westminster. However, the Home Office is engaging in a number of areas around it. There are provisions in it that, if they apply across the UK, will have relevance for us.

One of the key issues on which there is a slight disagreement — only a slight technical disagreement — between Lord Morrow and me is the rapporteur mechanism and whether there should be a rapporteur for Northern Ireland or we should fit into a UK arrangement. If the Home Office carries through on the promises that it is making in respect of an independent rapporteur for the UK as a whole, the rapporteur may well be able to fulfil a significant function for Northern Ireland in looking at devolved and non-devolved matters, and that would be beneficial to us. However, we really need to see the detail of what the Home Office plans. I will look at that, and my officials will engage with the Home Office, Lord Morrow and others on how we carry it through.

## **Court Cases: Statutory Time Limits**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Stewart Dickson.

**Mr McCarthy:** Question 10.

10. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his plans to introduce statutory time limits in youth cases. (AQO 5038/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** I am happy to answer Kieran McCarthy as well as Stewart Dickson.

*[Laughter.]* I am pleased to report that plans for introducing statutory time limits (STLs) are well advanced and that I intend to launch a public consultation on our proposals shortly. As developed by the Criminal Justice Board, the proposals are to introduce a single time limit for both charge and summons starting at the commencement of formal proceedings, which is the date on which a young person is formally charged or, for summons cases, the date on which the complaint charging the suspect is made to the court. Once a time limit has been activated, justice agencies will have 120 days to reach the start of trial. That time limit would apply to around 70% of the processes that we measure in the justice system.

When I announced in February 2012 that I planned to introduce STLs, I assured Members that any proposals would include specific safeguards to protect victims and the interests of justice. I, therefore, propose to exclude certain serious offences from the scope of STLs, with a particular focus on offences involving children or vulnerable adults. In addition, I propose to provide the court with powers to extend a time limit in the interests of justice.

In developing the consultation, my officials have undertaken an extensive programme of pre-consultation with a range of stakeholders representing a broad spectrum of public groups and organisations with a particular interest in young people. That has been extremely useful in giving us a clear understanding of the issues for young people and their families and of how STLs, along with the wider reforms that I am bringing forward, could make a positive difference in their lives.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Dickson for a short supplementary.

**Mr Dickson:** Minister, you referred to youth engagement clinics in your original announcement: how are those progressing?

**Mr Ford:** Youth engagement clinics were part of the key work to improve performance prior to the formal introduction of statutory time limits and were piloted in the Belfast area earlier this year. They were seen to have significant benefits in diverting cases away from formal proceedings and speeding up the justice system. We now seek to see how they can roll out across Northern Ireland generally.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That ends the period for oral questions. We move on to topical questions.

2.30 pm

## **Victims: Parole Commissioner Consultation**

1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is satisfied with the current arrangements used by the Parole Commissioners to consult with the families of murder victims about the release on licence of perpetrators. (AQT 381/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** A complex set of arrangements is managed through the victim information scheme. I believe that those arrangements normally work extremely well in ensuring that families are made aware as individuals progress through the system, particularly with issues such as temporary release. However, there are always circumstances in which the information is perhaps not supplied in a way that is most helpful. That issue is being addressed within the Department.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I am afraid that the Minister's words are probably of little comfort to people like Linda Brown, whose daughter Nichola Dickson was murdered in Ballycarry in 2003. Linda only discovered that the perpetrator was out on licence after being told that he had been spotted out and about in the centre of Belfast. Can the Minister expand on what he is doing and, particularly, whether he will catch up with England and Wales as far as the EU directive on the rights of victims is concerned and allow victims to participate in parole hearings?

**Mr Ford:** The issue of the direct participation of victims in parole hearings is at a different stage. Certainly Mr Nesbitt has highlighted a particular issue where there was a problem in that the way in which information was supplied about somebody in the third phase of the pre-release scheme was, perhaps, not entirely easy to understand. That is the point that I referred to in my principal answer about ensuring that matters are dealt with differently. Clearly, that kind of issue needs to be kept under review as part of the ongoing work with victims and witnesses to ensure that, for example, the joined-up issues around bringing together the three victim information schemes is done in the best way to assist victims, whether they are direct victims or have been bereaved through murder or manslaughter.

## **PSNI: Agency Staff**

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Justice which options he or his Department explored with the PSNI as alternatives to another directly awarded contract to Grafton Recruitment for agency staff at the end of this year. (AQT 382/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** Unless there is an issue about the Department having a formal role in approving a business case because of the figures involved, the issue of direct award contracts is one for the PSNI. It is not an issue for the Department to directly supervise.

**Mr Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that answer. Before I ask my supplementary question, I want to note that it is very interesting that the Minister routinely takes that approach to every organisation, with the exception of the so-called National Crime Agency. Notwithstanding that point, given the ongoing controversy about this lucrative yet non-competitive contract, will the Minister assure the House that his permanent secretary will not endorse this contract?

**Mr Ford:** I assure Mr Maskey and the House that the correct procedures will be followed by the Department, the Minister and the permanent secretary. If there is a role for the Minister, it will be carried out properly; if there is a role for the permanent secretary, it will be carried out properly.

## **National Crime Agency**

3. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Justice what progress is being made to ensure that Northern Ireland plays its full part in the National Crime Agency, and rather than continual platitudes in the House about trying to go after people who break the law, when we have the opportunity to deal with lawbreakers and to bring them to a system whereby they are accountable for their deeds and their ill-gotten gains, we make it reality rather than just words. (AQT 383/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** I have certainly told the House on a number of occasions about the engagement that I have had around the National Crime Agency. I continue to believe that it is vital that we get the full benefits of having the NCA operational in Northern Ireland in the devolved sphere as well as, of course, its current position of being active in the non-devolved sphere without any oversight from our policing architecture.

On 25 October, I wrote to Sinn Féin Members setting out some responses to questions that had been raised. On 22 October, I was given an undertaking by members of the SDLP that they would provide me with a paper setting out some of their concerns. I remain active and keen to engage on those issues, but, at the moment, the ball is in the court of those two parties and not the Department. I assure the House that the Department will respond speedily to any representations made by any party in the House.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for clarifying that. It will be interesting to see the response of those two parties, who talk much about lawbreakers, and whether they are prepared to come up with suggestions on how this vital element of our structures against criminality and criminals should be implemented. Will the Minister assure the House that it will not just be about addressing issues of accountability but about real and meaningful progress to ensure that Northern Ireland plays a central role in ensuring that criminals and their assets are pursued and criminals put out of business?

**Mr Ford:** It is my intention to ensure that we have the National Crime Agency operating in every respect in Northern Ireland in support of the PSNI and other agencies and playing its part in the Organised Crime Task Force alongside other agencies, whether they be local and devolved or UK-wide agencies operating in Northern Ireland. That should be the ambition for us all. That has to be done in recognition of the specific policing architecture in Northern Ireland. I have said on many occasions in the House and in negotiations with Whitehall Ministers that I remain committed to seeing that happen. I welcome the fact that I have had positive comments on that from all parties in the House. I just hope that we can carry that through and get the details sorted out from those who are asking questions but have not responded to the last points that I put to them. I trust that we can do that as speedily as possible.

### **Sick Leave: DOJ**

4. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the high levels of sick leave in his Department and in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. (AQT 384/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** Mr Anderson correctly highlights why sick leave is seen as being at a high level in the DOJ: it is because prison officers are classed as departmental employees in the production of the statistics. We can all accept that there are

circumstances in which somebody who has a relatively straightforward desk-bound policy job may be able to go to work but, with a similar sickness, would be unable to work as a prison officer. That is almost the total part of the reason why DOJ absentee figures are higher than the Civil Service average. The issue is being addressed in the core Department, as in other Departments, and in the Prison Service. However, we have to recognise the circumstances in which prison officers work and accept that their rate of sickness will always be higher than that of other staff.

**Mr Anderson:** I thank the Minister for his response. I understand that the Northern Ireland Prison Service predicts a further increase in sick leave in 2013-14. Do you agree that sick leave levels are being made worse by the low staff morale caused by the speed and nature of the prison reform programme?

**Mr Ford:** I have seen no sign that there is low staff morale because of the prison reform programme. Indeed, what I see is that, with a significant input of over 300 new staff and 200 staff regraded into the new custody officer post, there is significant impetus to see change happen in the Prison Service. Undoubtedly, some members were more accustomed to the difficult duties that they had to perform some years ago, and for them that is a challenge. However, I see significant improvements being made and a solid management leadership driving forward the change that this society needs to see.

### **Solicitors: Fees**

5. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is aware of the concern that the review of solicitors' fees in the family law remit and their possible reduction might lead to the closure of some law practices and, subsequently, difficulties around access to justice for some people. (AQT 385/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** I am aware that concerns have been expressed by some people about the potential closure of solicitors' firms. The reality is that I have a duty to ensure that the budget of the Department of Justice is used to provide the justice services that this society needs as a whole. In round figures, on devolution, the justice budget was £75 million and expenditure just over £100 million. Despite the reforms to criminal justice fees, the budget of £75 million is still being exceeded, with expenditure in the region of £100 million. Every penny that is spent in that respect is money that is not being

directed to other services by the Department. When we compare fees in this jurisdiction with those in England and Wales, which is the most comparable figure, we see that we spend significantly more. There is no doubt that that position is unsustainable.

**Mr Eastwood:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the difficulty that law graduates have in finding employment or placements in solicitors' offices, which some people would say is because of some of these cuts, would the Minister advise young people to go into the legal profession?

**Mr Ford:** It is not for me to advise young people on their career choice, except possibly the four young adults who are my children.

Individuals have to decide for themselves, and there is no doubt that some law graduates have found career opportunities with some of the international legal firms that are establishing back office services in Northern Ireland. Other aspects of life have changed in recent years, and I am not sure that it is my role, as Justice Minister, to guarantee that small solicitors' firms will continue to operate as they have been doing. I see lawyers — solicitors and barristers — looking at different ways to operate, such as developing alternative dispute resolution services. The important thing is that we get the best services for the people of Northern Ireland in an affordable way that meets the needs of this society for the next few years.

## Desertcreat Development

6. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Justice whether, given the concerns highlighted by the Public Accounts Committee about the contract for the rebuild of the Lyric Theatre, he has any concerns about the Desertcreat proposals, in that the bidder-designate for that contract might be the same company. (AQT 386/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** As I understand it, there is not, at this stage, a preferred bidder or a preferred bidder-designate. From the work being done by the programme board, my information is that robust checks are being carried out on the bidders who might be involved in the final contract. Indeed, the COPE in DHSSPS has been carrying out a lot of that work on behalf of the programme board. The key issue is to ensure that we get Desertcreat college built as fast as possible and meeting the needs of the three services.

**Mr Copeland:** My source of information was the Justice Committee, to which, I believe,

some of your departmental officials used the term last week. However, given the significant budget overspends that have dogged Desertcreat thus far, does this have the potential to provide further delay? If so, what steps will you take to prevent that?

**Mr Ford:** I believe that we have got matters back on track. There certainly was a problem in that the consultants appointed made a significant error in the estimated costs and those who were supervising failed to pick up on that error. A lot of work has been done by the programme team, the two Departments and the three responsible bodies to look at how costs can be taken out without cutting back on the functionality of the college. I believe that we have reached the position where we have a scheme that will represent value for money and can go ahead.

## Dissident Republican Threat

7. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the threat posed by dissident republican terrorists, particularly in light of recent events. (AQT 387/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** The position remains as it has been for some time: the threat from republican terrorists remains severe, which means that attacks are believed to be likely. We have seen a number of significant attacks in recent weeks. The use of parcel bombs put at risk the lives of a number of people. Whomever they were addressed to, they were never going to reach those people, but the lives of postal workers and administrative staff in a variety of government and police offices were put at risk. That shows how desperate some people are. The deliberate attempt to murder police officers in Strabane this weekend was clearly a sign that that threat is being carried through. We should also recognise the extremely good work being done by the PSNI, whether it is in some of the specialist branches or at community level, to counter that threat.

2.45 pm

## Social Development

### Social Development: Pilot Schemes

1. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the pilot schemes his Department has introduced since May 2011. (AQO 5044/11-15)

**Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):** I understand that the Member has clarified that his question relates to housing and regeneration pilot schemes. In that respect, my Department has introduced the following pilot schemes since May 2011: the boiler replacement scheme, which is finished; phases 1 and 2 of the affordable warmth scheme, of which phase 1 is finished, and phase 2 is ongoing; the pay-as-you-go pilot, which is finished; the empty homes pilot, which is finished; the FirstBuyNI scheme, which is finished; the affordable home loans fund, which is ongoing; six Building Successful Communities pilots, which are ongoing; the Resurgam social enterprise pilot project, which is ongoing; the Tyrone/Donegal partnership virtual incubation and software training academy (VISTA), which is ongoing; the Development Trusts Northern Ireland community asset transfer, which is ongoing; and two signature projects through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) Delivering Social Change programme, namely nurture units and social enterprise incubation units, which are both ongoing.

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline how many of those schemes have been introduced in his North Belfast constituency? Indeed, in the wider list of total schemes, will he get back to me on the location of each scheme and where they were introduced?

**Mr McCausland:** If the Member had listened to the fulsome list that I read out, he would be aware that the boiler replacement scheme operated right across the Province; phases 1 and 2 of the affordable warmth scheme are being taken forward in a number of areas; the pay-as-you-go pilot was most certainly not in North Belfast; the empty homes pilot was spread across several constituencies; the FirstBuyNI scheme was Province-wide; and the affordable home loans fund was widespread. None of the pilots was restricted to one constituency, and, in fact, most of them were Province-wide.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. How much funding was allocated to the affordable home loans scheme, and how many homes will it provide for?

**Mr McCausland:** My Department received £19 million of loan funding from the Treasury over 2012-13 and 2013-14 under the Get Britain Building banner. That money has been

allocated to three housing associations. It will provide interest-free loans to the housing associations to develop new affordable housing throughout Northern Ireland between now and 2019-2020. Outline proposals from the associations indicate that funding at that level could provide up to 620 new homes, including bringing up to 150 empty homes back into use as affordable homes.

Those homes will be targeted at first-time buyers and those returning to the market, giving them an all-important step onto the housing ladder and helping to promote economic growth and assisting the construction industry to create and maintain jobs during a period when that sector is under pressure. My Department is working with housing associations to ensure that plans are in place that would allow them to commence 100 new homes in the financial year 2013-14.

**Mr Eastwood:** How many of those schemes have been subject to a full equality impact assessment (EQIA) or have been screened for an EQIA?

**Mr McCausland:** The schemes are pilots. We are dealing with issues such as energy efficiency and so on to bring homes back into use, which affect every part of Northern Ireland. Rather than getting bogged down in the technicalities of EQIAs, I am more interested in addressing the real needs of people. The tragedy is that, during the years when the Member's party had charge of this Department, those issues were ignored.

## Housing Executive: Maintenance Contracts

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the reasons for the significant delays in issuing new maintenance contracts. (AQO 5045/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for his question. In May 2013, the chairman of the Housing Executive advised me that an internal investigation had indicated that an estimated £18 million had been overpaid to planned maintenance contractors. In June 2013, following evidence of substantial overcharging, the board of the Housing Executive commissioned an external independent review of how the organisation had been dealing with planned maintenance contracts over the past five years. It advised that until the issue was satisfactorily resolved, the four planned maintenance contractors would not receive any new contracts from the Housing Executive.

The Housing Executive's board has asked for three things to be in place before moving forward to make appointments: an agreement to repay any overpayments found to have been made; an agreement on what additional sample inspections are to be done; and an agreement on how the sample inspection results will be applied to allow a robust estimate of the financial position to be reached.

The first agreement is in place, and the Housing Executive is waiting for a response from the contractors on the proposals made on points 2 and 3. If agreement is reached over the next two weeks, the Housing Executive's board will be in a position to appoint contractors to the framework at its November meeting.

**Mr Elliott:** Can the Minister inform the House how much the overpayments that have been paid back amount to?

**Mr McCausland:** I ask the Member to show a little patience because there is a figure in the report produced by the firm of consultants Campbell Tickell. As I said, that report was commissioned by the Housing Executive. Therefore, the figures will be known to the chair of the Housing Executive and the board. The information will then be given to the Social Development Committee on Thursday, when it will receive copies of the report. It would be premature for me to quote the figure today because that information will be disclosed. There is an embargo on the report until Thursday, and I prefer not to breach that.

It is true to say that it is not a good report — there can be no doubt about that. It is a good report in itself, but its subject is dire. It does not make good reading and mentions a very substantial overpayment figure.

**Mr I McCrea:** Can the Minister explain how any contractors alleged by the Housing Executive to have received overpayments were successful in securing new contracts with the Housing Executive?

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for the question. There is a balancing exercise to be carried out by the executive: it must ensure that it does all that it can to protect the public purse while ensuring a good service to tenants. There is a difficulty there. In June, the Housing Executive board determined that the planned maintenance contractors would not be awarded any new contracts until the overpayment issue had been resolved. Since that time, the Housing Executive has held meetings with the contractors. One outcome of the meetings, and

this is important, is that the contractors have agreed to repay any overpayments.

The next step is to quantify the agreed amount. As a result of the progress made, the Housing Executive has made progress with the contractors. It has been able to let the new double-glazing contracts. However, the Housing Executive board must receive further assurances from officers and contractors before new planned maintenance contracts are awarded. As I said, it is hoped that that will be dealt with — it will certainly be discussed — at the Housing Executive board's meeting later this month.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Does the Minister continue to stand over his claim of overpayment to the tune of £18 million? If so, does he acknowledge the widespread concern and hardship caused to small firms facing cash flow problems with the bank on the basis of his allegation?

**Mr McCausland:** The figure quoted was the figure provided by the chair of the Housing Executive. I am sure that the Member is aware of that fact. The Member is also a member of the Social Development Committee, and I assume that she has already received her copy of the Campbell Tickell report ahead of the meeting on Thursday.

If she has not, she will receive it in the next day or so, because although the report will be embargoed until Thursday, there will be an opportunity, I am sure, for members to look at it before the meeting.

On Thursday, the figure as estimated by Campbell Tickell will be disclosed. I have already said, in answer to a previous question, that the report does not make good reading. It identifies, as I indicated, very serious shortcomings in the Housing Executive over a sustained period reaching back more than a decade. It shows that there was a serious shortcoming in how the Egan contracts, introduced back in 2001, were managed. That led to the sort of situation that we saw.

The figure, as estimated by Campbell Tickell, will be disclosed on Thursday, and as I already said, the report does not make good reading because it shows, quite clearly, that a substantial overpayment was made. As far as I am concerned, it would not matter whether it was £5 million, £10 million, £15 million or £20 million. Whatever it was, it was far too much.

## Housing: Shared Developments

3. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister for Social Development how the proposals for shared neighbourhood developments, announced as part of the Together: Building a United Community, differ from existing Northern Ireland Housing Executive policies. (AQO 5046/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** My Department provides funding to the Housing Executive to deliver a shared community programme. The objectives of the programme are to reduce housing segregation, to develop, support and sustain current shared communities and to increase community cohesion, bridging and participation. Thirty existing Housing Executive estates, with 60,000 residents, are supported through that programme and a further 20 shared communities are being developed and supported.

For new social housing developments, the Housing Executive identifies developments that are deemed suitable for shared designation and works with the relevant housing association to promote and develop the scheme, subject to residents' agreement, as shared housing. To date, that approach has delivered 11 shared newbuild schemes. My Department has also been tasked with taking forward proposals to create 10 new shared neighbourhood developments, as set out by OFMDFM in the 'Together: Building a United Community' document.

In taking that work forward, I have asked my officials, when examining the current shared communities programme, to identify what lessons can be learnt from the good work done to date to develop greater levels of sharing within social housing, and we are considering the feasibility of up to 17 potential shared sites. We will also examine whether there is scope, and indeed a need, to encourage similar activity within private housing development.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Minister. The 'Together: Building a United Community' document has raised more questions than it answers. Will the Minister explain whether a budget has now been decided upon, whether locations have been picked or even suggested for pilots and whether dates have been chosen for when the work will commence?

**Mr McCausland:** I tried to make it clear but perhaps I was not clear enough. This is still very much a work in progress. We are looking at 17 possible sites, but it will take some time to

work through the exact details of those. This is not a question about money. Whether you build houses for what, in effect, turns out to be a segregated community or you build the same number of houses and try to push that as a shared community, the cost of house building is not going to be very much different. So, it is not a cost issue; it is attitude issue and an issue of how you approach it. Essentially, at the core of this, it is about getting the consent, agreement and commitment of the people who want to live in that shared community.

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Is preferential status given to applicants who specifically want to live in a shared housing area?

**Mr McCausland:** All social housing in Northern Ireland is allocated on the basis of need. That is the legal position, and that is how it is. It ensures that the allocation of housing is compliant with Northern Ireland's equality legislation. We cannot socially engineer mixed housing. It is simply impossible to do that. That is why I have tasked the Housing Executive, when working with the housing associations and local communities, to support and encourage them to see the benefits of shared housing.

### 3.00 pm

**Mr A Maginness:** In implementing what I think is a very bold and good approach to integrated housing, how will the Minister guarantee that he gets that mix of integrated residents in a particular area? How is that going to be achieved, particularly given the criteria of need that the Minister has just outlined?

**Mr McCausland:** The Member will be aware that, as I said earlier, there are already, to date, 11 new shared schemes. It is purely dependent on how you advertise the location. The case in Antrim is an example. There was a widespread call across the Province asking people whether they wanted to come and live in what would be a shared community, and people came from different areas to that. That was their choice. That is really as far as you can go. You can encourage but you cannot coerce. That is the line that needs to be drawn and recognised. We cannot give extra points or do anything in that regard. I am sure that the Member would be opposed to altering how houses are allocated. The key thing is to encourage people and to spread the net widely. It has worked better in some cases than in others. It is an area in which there are no guarantees.

## **Bloomfield Estate: Historical Debt**

4. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has for the historical debt relating to the Bloomfield estate transfer and the upcoming transfer of 2,000 homes. (AQO 5047/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** On the Bloomfield bungalows scheme specifically, I am pleased to report that the stock transfer of the properties to Oaklee Housing Association is progressing as planned following the recent tenant ballot, which resulted in an overwhelming majority — 96.7% of respondents who voted — in favour of the transfer proposal. Therefore, it was a pretty overwhelming vote in favour in the case of Bloomfield.

It is not possible to determine separately what portion of the current loan debt balance relates specifically to the properties included in the Bloomfield transfer and other potential transfers. In the past, the Housing Executive raised loans on an annual basis. Loans were not raised for specific newbuild and improvement schemes. Given those circumstances, there is no plan as referred to in your question. The debt, if any, will remain with the Housing Executive. The arrangement for rent arrears for any property in the stock transfer programme is that all arrears due to the Housing Executive from the tenants at the date of transfer will remain with the Housing Executive.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Regarding the wider proposal for potential stock transfer when the Housing Executive potentially stops being the landlord of those properties, how will the historical debt be managed? Is that being considered as a factor in any business case for such a proposal?

**Mr McCausland:** We are very much in the early stages of the process of reconfiguring social housing in Northern Ireland and the role of the Housing Executive. There is a series of work programmes being taken forward looking at different aspects and areas of work. In spring next year, I hope to have some idea of the thinking that is emerging, but at this stage, it would be premature of me to comment. A lot of the issues are complex and will need to be looked at, and I have nothing really to add at this time. It will be a matter that will come forward in due course.

**Mr Dunne:** What are the benefits of transferring those Housing Executive properties to housing associations? I would also like to put on record

our appreciation to the Minister for the time that he has put into the project. It is long awaited and long overdue, and the senior citizens deserve it.

**Mr McCausland:** The transfer programme will bring forward much-needed improvements to raise the standards of some of our poorest quality housing stock. Overall, the standard of social housing in Northern Ireland is better than it is anywhere else in the United Kingdom, but we do have a significant number of properties that are still of a poor standard and that require work. Those tend to be older, as opposed to newer, properties.

The nature of the works to be carried out on any particular scheme will be dependent on the outcome of a stock condition survey that will be carried out on each scheme and on other maintenance works that might have already been completed on the property. For example, improvements for tenants could include replacement of windows, refurbishment of windows and bathrooms and the upgrading of heating systems and insulation measures. In the end, it will provide tenants with high-quality, decent, modern homes that are fit for purpose. That should, indeed, be our desire. The sad thing is that, for many years, some such issues were overlooked. However, we are really getting to grips with them now.

**Mr Cree:** Will the Minister advise how the estimated value of the houses that are to be transferred compares with the estimated cost of the refurbishment work that it is proposed that the housing association will undertake?

**Mr McCausland:** There is no simple answer to that question, because it will depend very much on the amount of work that is to be done to each of the properties. It will vary from case to case, and the work will be more substantial in some cases than in others. That is why, when I listed some of the work, I quoted the range of work that might be considered. However, it will very much depend on each case.

At the end of the day, the real advantage here is that the housing association will have access to private finance and will be able to bring in additional money, and, therefore, work will be done on far more properties than would otherwise be possible. Therefore, tenants will receive a benefit that might not otherwise have been achieved.

## Housing: Garden Maintenance

5. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the level of garden maintenance assistance available to tenants of social housing who are older, as well as those with a disability. (AQO 5048/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** I think that we all recognise the enjoyment that we can have in our gardens, and the recent good summer made those of us lucky enough to have one realise just that. However, the task of looking after them is not an easy one, as it takes time, energy and money, something that is perhaps not always taken into account when a home with a garden is allocated to a tenant.

The Housing Executive has advised me that it does not routinely provide assistance with garden maintenance for its tenants. That is in line with the tenancy agreement, which advises that the tenant is responsible for the:

*“Care and upkeep of gardens and hedges”.*

Housing associations have advised me that their tenancy agreement states that it is tenants' responsibility to maintain their own gardens. Therefore, for family dwellings, housing associations do not generally provide any assistance with gardens, nor do they plan to do so.

**Mr Anderson:** I thank the Minister for that response. The Minister mentioned housing associations. Would there be a role for them in providing further assistance for residents in this matter?

**Mr McCausland:** The Member beside me chided me for being somewhat misleading, in that I am not the person in our house who does the gardening. However, setting that point aside, most housing associations' older tenants live in sheltered accommodation, where there are communal gardens and grassed areas rather than individual gardens. In sheltered accommodation, housing associations maintain the grass and planted areas, the hedges, kerbs, footpaths and car parks. That is funded through the service charge. In addition, many tenants help to maintain the gardens, and many schemes have tenants groups that fundraise, attract funding grants and provide more plants etc for the grounds. It is true that, in some cases, voluntary organisations are involved. I have met some and actually visited others in the North Down constituency, where a community organisation works to assist older

people who might not have access to resources to pay for the gardening.

The opportunity is there for housing associations, and as I have said already in recent days, we want housing associations to be more creative and innovative. It is about building communities rather than just houses, and showing a particular regard for the elderly and vulnerable is part of building a community.

**Mrs Dobson:** Given their impact on the overall appearance of an area, untidy gardens can cause problems for residents. So, will the Minister explain what powers the Housing Executive has to compel tenants to maintain their gardens to a minimum standard?

**Mr McCausland:** The problem of unkempt gardens occurs in many different places. I am sure that the Member will be aware that it happens even at privately owned homes, for example, where a vulnerable homeowner is unable to maintain a garden. The tenancy agreement makes it very clear that it is the responsibility of the tenant. As regards exerting some influence on tenants other than speaking to or encouraging them, I would be interested to hear the Member's suggestions if she has any thoughts on how that might be increased. Other than to give encouragement, I do not think that it is particularly possible to exert influence unless a health issue arises. I am not sure. If the issue is simply long grass, it might not fall quite into that category.

## Housing: Regeneration Schemes

6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Social Development why the six housing regeneration pilot areas announced on 28 October 2013 have no proposals for shared housing. (AQO 5049/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** I want to start by saying that those are not housing regeneration areas, as the question assumes. They are, in fact, Building Successful Communities pilots. The concept for the six Building Successful Communities pilots is that a regeneration forum is to be established in each area, drawing membership from elected representatives, local communities and statutory and voluntary agencies, such as the Housing Executive, housing associations, local councils, the Police Service and the health and education sectors. Those six forums, in consultation with local communities, will develop an action plan for each pilot.

My Department is still in the process of identifying and appointing forum members. However, since the action plans will be specific and individual to each pilot area, there is nothing to prevent proposals for shared housing coming forward as a result of that process.

The main aim of the pilot programme is to drive regeneration through concerted social, economic and physical interventions by a range of Departments, agencies and community interests. The communities themselves will be right there at the heart of the approach.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that central to economic regeneration is the promotion of integration? How will those forums ensure that integration will be promoted rather than segregation maintained?

**Mr McCausland:** Of course. As I have already pointed out in my answer to a previous question, we are taking forward a number of initiatives in that regard through the Together: Building a United Community strategy. I suggest that the areas where they are more likely to succeed are probably not some of our most difficult inner city communities where there are significant levels of deprivation and so on. Six pilot areas have been selected. We are taking that work forward. There are real challenges. We should not, in any way, seek to be prescriptive or coercive towards those local forums. They should be given the freedom and flexibility to see what can be done to address all the physical, social and environmental issues that I mentioned. They are challenging communities in areas that, having benefited over a number of years from being areas at risk or neighbourhood-renewal areas, as nearly all of them were, still have serious problems that have not been resolved. The challenge and focus has to be primarily and initially on addressing those issues.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Peter Weir for a very quick supplementary question.

**Mr Weir:** I will be very quick, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. What support is there for a housing-led approach to regeneration?

**Mr McCausland:** To answer that question, I will make two points. The first is that driving regeneration using housing is a key theme in the new housing strategy. When it was brought forward for consultation, there was widespread support for that approach. Subsequently, having announced pilot areas for Building Successful Communities, I received much

positive feedback from those communities. It is a key theme in the housing strategy and has received widespread support and endorsement.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That brings to an end the period for questions for oral answer. We now move on to topical questions.

3.15 pm

## Housing: Repossessions

1. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the delay in setting up a task force to address the issue of home repossessions, which, according to a survey by the Housing Rights Service, have increased by 20% this year. (AQT 391/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** Supporting people whose homes are in danger of being repossessed has been very much on our minds and has been raised in this Chamber on a number of occasions. I believe that the support that we are giving at the moment through the Housing Rights Service and the additional financial support that was given to the service to enable it to support people in those situations has been particularly important.

There is a clear difference between folk who, effectively, bury their heads in the sand and hope that a terrible situation will go away and those who face up to it, take legal advice and get practical support from the Housing Rights Service. There is a clear difference there between people who arrive at court and who are about to lose their house and there being an intervention at the last minute. The key thing is to get in touch with the Housing Rights Service at a very early stage.

We keep the situation constantly under review as to what additional measures might need to be taken. That is something that we have not forgotten about or neglected in any way, but I would encourage people primarily to approach the situation by using the Housing Rights Service.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. What alternatives from other jurisdictions has he examined in order to seek a remedy to this issue?

**Mr McCausland:** A number of options were mentioned in the past, and financial interventions were talked about. However,

when you look at the scope of the problem and the extent of the financial difficulty of the individual and scale that up, it would be possible, in practical terms, to help only a very small number of people. The problem, as the Member well knows, affects hundreds of people each year and, therefore, although we have looked at other options elsewhere, the primary response has to be the one that we are adopting at the moment. As I said, however, it is something that we keep under review.

## Social Development Inquiry

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Social Development whether, given the letter dated 24 May 2012 to the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, which was submitted last Thursday as evidence to the Committee's inquiry, he believes that he misled the Committee. (AQT 392/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** The Committee is taking forward a process at the moment. A number of submissions were made last Thursday, and further submissions will be made this Thursday. I am due to come before the Committee later on in December — I think it is 12 December. At that point, I will give a submission to the Committee. It would be wrong and premature to address the matter until I had the courtesy of giving that to the Committee.

**Mr Dickson:** Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, it was a very simple question to the Minister: did he mislead the Committee? I think that we should note that he has not answered the question. Why, Minister, did you give an instruction to a civil servant to change the content of that letter?

**Mr McCausland:** I do not know whether the Member has a difficulty in understanding plain English. In response to the first point, I simply said that I would make the information available to the Committee on 12 December when I go to the Committee. In response to the second question, I intend to give the answer to that in due course as well. There is a very simple answer, and it will be given on 12 December. I ask the Member to have a little bit of patience.

## Energy Costs

3. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister for Social Development whether, in light of comments by the newly appointed Utility Regulator that high energy costs are here to stay, he can assure the House that he is doing all within his power

to assist those who are most in need to heat their homes. (AQT 393/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for his question. The fact is that, according to the house condition survey, fuel poverty affects 42% of households — about 295,000 — in Northern Ireland. As the Member is aware, fuel poverty arises from income level, fuel cost and energy efficiency.

Today, we heard the statement from the regulator about the cost of energy in Northern Ireland and the fact that it is set to remain high in the foreseeable future.

We can do something about income, to a limited extent. My Department runs a very extensive benefit uptake programme, which will, this year, as in previous years, make a substantial difference to quite a number of vulnerable people on low incomes. The other main area of work is around energy efficiency in homes. We have the warm homes scheme and the boiler replacement scheme, which really do make a difference. The affordable warmth pilot is being taken forward, and it is important to remember that those aged 60 and over are entitled to a winter fuel payment. The two principal areas that we can work on are delivering some financial support through the benefit uptake programme and winter fuel payments, and the energy efficiency measures. I hope that we will see a reduction in fuel poverty as we see homes in Northern Ireland made more energy efficient.

**Mr Anderson:** I thank the Minister for that response. He will know that I recently raised the issue of energy efficiency of homes with him, especially single-walled dwellings. Can he provide me with an assurance that those types of dwellings will be made a priority in any forward work programme?

**Mr McCausland:** I have looked at that issue for some time, since I became aware that around 5,000 Housing Executive properties across Northern Ireland were of no-fines construction, most of which are constructed of a single skin of concrete with no cavity. Some work on that is being taken forward at the moment. The Housing Executive has set up a working group to progress a strategic approach to look at the thermal performance of all Housing Executive no-fines stock.

I recently visited Springfarm in Antrim where I met the consortium of the Technology Strategy Board to view the no-fines houses in that estate. We discussed the methods that could

be used to provide external insulation to the seven properties in the pilot scheme there. The lessons that will be learned from that pilot over the coming year will not just benefit people in Northern Ireland but people throughout the United Kingdom, because the Technology Strategy Board and the experts that have been brought across from GB to look at this are really operating a pilot for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Early next month, I propose to visit the Leonardo project in Germany to see for myself a successful retrofit scheme that was carried out there. I had the opportunity some months ago to see a retrofit scheme that was carried out in Liverpool. The German scheme is somewhat different. There are lessons to be learned, and I have made this a priority. I, like the Member, am aware of many homes in my constituency that suffer from that particular problem.

## Welfare Reform Bill

4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has any concerns that delays to the Welfare Reform Bill will put at risk his Department's ability to administer and provide benefits to the most vulnerable. (AQT 394/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** The Member makes a very important point, one that has been largely overlooked in general comment, and particularly in the media. When we talk about welfare reform and delays, we tend to think about the recent visit by Mike Penning and the point that he made about financial penalties that would impact on the Northern Ireland block grant. However, there is more to it than that. Potentially, it could also have an impact on the viability of a number of jobs in Northern Ireland that provide services to the rest of the United Kingdom in the delivery of welfare.

I am really concerned that delays to the Welfare Reform Bill are already resulting in operational difficulties due to the need to put in place clerical workarounds as the two benefits systems begin to diverge. There are practical difficulties, and that is putting at risk the Social Security Agency's ability to administer and provide benefits. The agency is already incurring additional costs. At the moment, they are modest, but they will quickly rack up.

I have written to ministerial colleagues to advise them of the operational impact of the introduction in GB of the new mandatory reconsideration process, which went live on 28

October. This meant that certain benefit decision notifications issued to claimants in Northern Ireland contained incorrect information on how to dispute the decision. In order to ensure that people get the correct information, an insert has had to be included with the notifications issued to Northern Ireland claimants. The agency has incurred additional costs of some £90,000 at this juncture due to that single issue. So, it is important to keep in mind not just the penalty issue — as the Work and Pensions Minister pointed out, that is a hugely important one — but the practical difficulties, which are detrimental to claimants in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Going back to the issue of divergence, are we reliant on GB IT systems to deliver benefits here in Northern Ireland?

**Mr McCausland:** I must apologise to the Member; I got slightly distracted there in one sense. The point I should have made is that we in Northern Ireland are totally dependent on the IT system used throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. There is no possibility of Northern Ireland going it alone and devising its own IT system for welfare payments; it would be totally impossible. The cost would be astronomical and totally destructive to the Northern Ireland block grant. I just cannot imagine how we would do it, and anybody who thinks that we can is very much mistaken. The system is spread right across the UK, and we are part of it.

## Housing: Repossessions

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he will set up a task force to mitigate against home repossessions, given that the terms eviction and repossession are very emotive and reminiscent of Ireland a couple of hundred years ago, the worst aspects of which I thought we had left behind, but, unfortunately, between June and September, the number of people who have had their homes repossessed increased by 20% over the same period last year. (AQT 395/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** I am not sure what the procedure is in the Assembly when you are asked a question that you have already dealt with. I would have thought that, if someone asked a question, the next person who was thinking of asking it would ask a different question. Ms McCorley asked that question earlier, and I refer the Member to the answer that I gave to her.

**Mr Dallat:** I make no apology whatsoever to the Minister for asking a question that is very close to another one. I am not sure whether the Minister has ever been at an eviction; it is not nice.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Your supplementary question.

**Mr Dallat:** Here is my supplementary question: the housing strategy action plan for 2012-17 commits you, Minister, to the creation of a working group to mitigate the effects of repossession on individuals and families. Will you now implement that, please?

**Mr McCausland:** As I indicated previously, or at least I hope I did, we are constantly reviewing and working on that issue. I said earlier that I welcome ideas at any time from any individuals on how we might do things differently or better. If the Member has any proposals that he wants to bring forward, I would be more than happy to receive and listen to them.

## **Newtownards: Public Realm Funding**

6. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development to advise whether the bid for public realm funding for Newtownards has been successful. (AQT 396/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** I am pleased to inform the Member that there will be an announcement very shortly. The public realm scheme in Newtownards, which was delayed in the past for various reasons, has now been brought forward. It is an extensive scheme worth £5.5 million that will bring considerable benefit to Newtownards. So, I am happy to confirm to her that we will be making an announcement very shortly.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Miss McIlveen for a very quick supplementary question.

**Miss M McIlveen:** I obviously welcome the Minister's announcement and the recent news that Comber has also received £2.4 million worth of funding for public realm works. Does the Minister agree that improvements such as public realm works can be an economic catalyst for small towns?

**Mr McCausland:** There is very clear evidence that public realm works, as part of a wider package of measures in a town centre, can make a real difference to the town centre.

Revitalisation schemes for shops nearby can often add to that. Generally, a public realm scheme emerges out of a master plan for a town centre. That is a great opportunity for all those involved — the local authority, local traders, businesspeople and my officials — to work together to see what is the best way forward for that town centre.

It is a very challenging time for town centres. Recent figures for empty properties were quoted. We need to boost town centres by making them more attractive and by encouraging greater footfall and more people to shop there and, thereby, provide greater viability for traders.

**3.30 pm**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That brings us to the end of topical questions.

**Mr Dickson:** On a point of order, Principal Deputy Speaker —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** There are no points of order during Question Time, I am afraid. We will move to questions to the Assembly Commission.

## **Northern Ireland Assembly Commission**

### **Parliament Buildings: Car Parking**

1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Assembly Commission when additional visitor and staff car parking facilities will be provided to address the current problem of people having to park on Prince of Wales Avenue. (AQO 5059/11-15)

**Mr Cree:** Assembly security staff currently oversee the management of the upper car parks adjacent to Parliament Buildings in addition to the lower east and overspill car parks. All other car parks throughout the estate come under the direct control and management of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). The Assembly Commission recognises the difficulties experienced in parking in the car parks, particularly on sitting days, and the Commission appreciates that it may still be necessary for some people to park on Prince of Wales Avenue on sitting days.

The Facilities Directorate will continue to consult with colleagues in DFP to explore other potential options for improvement. However, it is unlikely that that will result in additional car

parking spaces for the foreseeable future. During business hours, access to the lower car park is restricted to staff, other persons with official business in Parliament Buildings and visitors. Assembly security staff will continue to oversee and manage the spaces in that car park and ensure that they are used as efficiently and effectively as possible and that all vehicles are properly parked and obstructions are not caused. To that end, the cooperation and assistance of all car park users is very much appreciated.

**Mrs Dobson:** Has the Commission made any representations to the Department of Finance and Personnel to extend the provision on the estate, particularly as parking has been removed on the south side of the link road to Massey Avenue?

**Mr Cree:** Thank you for that. It certainly is an issue. The placing of traffic cones along Massey Avenue by DFP has meant that parking outside the designated car parks — the usual ones — can now occur only on Prince of Wales Avenue. The Facilities Directorate will, however, continue to monitor that and will liaise with DFP, as appropriate, should any difficulties arise. Early indications are that difficulties are arising.

**Mr Allister:** It may be within DFP's control, but can the Member shed any light on why it was thought necessary to introduce cones on the access from Massey Avenue? It seems to me a totally unnecessary requirement, and, indeed, I note that we now have a second member of staff doing some inexplicable role further up the avenue. Is it just change for change's sake?

**Mr Cree:** It is a very good question, and I share the Member's view. I have watched that, because that is how I access the estate. DFP thinks that it is a more effective security system and, in fact, has asked the Commission to bear with it while it tries it as an experiment. The early indications are that it slows things down, and it certainly takes extra car parking spaces away that were utilised to the full, particularly on sitting days. However, as I said, it will be monitored and kept under review by the Facilities Directorate.

## Committees: Paperless Packs

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the progress made on its paperless/e-Committee pack project. (AQO 5060/11-15)

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thosaigh an tionscadal leis an Ríomh-phacáiste Coiste a chur ar fáil do Chomhaltaí ar an 9 Meán Fómhair 2013 nuair a tugadh ríomh-phacáistí i gcéimeanna do gach Coiste Reachtúil agus gach Buanchoiste de chuid an Tionóil. Tá gach Coiste ag baint úsáide as an chóras nua, agus is féidir le gach Comhalta a bpacáiste Coiste a fháil go leictreonach. Go dtí seo, ghlac 105 Comhaltaí an traenáil riachtanach agus tugadh ríomhaire táibléid nua dóibh.

The introduction of the electronic Committee pack project for MLAs began on 9 September 2013 with the phased roll-out of electronic packs to all Assembly Statutory and Standing Committees. All such Committees have now moved over to the new system, and all Members can now receive their packs electronically. To date, 105 MLAs have undertaken the required training and have been allocated a new tablet computer. Our Information Systems Office is working with Members and party support offices to arrange suitable appointments for those remaining MLAs, and it is hoped that all Members will have received their devices before the end of this month.

To date, three Committees have gone fully electronic: the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure; the Committee for Regional Development; and the Committee for Employment and Learning. That means that members of those Committees no longer receive any paper meeting packs. Of the remaining Committees, four produce three printed copies or fewer per meeting, and five Committees produce between four and six printed packs per meeting.

Although that has resulted in savings in staff time and office resources, the main benefit of the project is that it provides a more streamlined and efficient process for creating and distributing Committee documents. Members continue to avail themselves of the technical support provided by staff from the Information Systems Office. I encourage any other Member to contact that office should they feel that further one-to-one training is required.

Tá glacadh maith ar na Ríomh-phacáistí Coiste, agus tá aiseolas deimhneach ó bhunús na gComhaltaí agus ó bhunús na foirne Coiste. The level of uptake of the electronic Committee packs has been encouraging and feedback from the majority of MLAs and Committee staff very positive.

**Mr Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for giving that quite extensive response. Before I ask how secure the Commission feels that the system is, I commend all officials in the Information Systems Office for providing excellent support to Members as the programme is being rolled out.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat as an gceist sin. I appreciate your comments. No doubt the staff will be very pleased to hear that. I had a meeting with them yesterday and they are genuinely very pleased with the uptake and how Members have embraced it.

The tablet devices connect to the Assembly network, so Members must input their usual network username and password to access the device and their electronic Committee packs. I know that, initially, some were critical of the logon process, but it is necessary to provide the required security. It might appear to be slower than access to non-Assembly devices such as iPads, but it is a required process to ensure overall IT security. Only the nominated tablet owner can access the device. The device hard drives are also encrypted using industry standard software tools, which would help to prevent unauthorised access in the event of the tablet being lost or stolen. The devices are set to automatically update the antivirus and operating system files at regular intervals.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta, Cairtriona Ruane, as an fhreagra sin a thabhairt dúinn. My thanks to Ms Ruane for responding. Unfortunately, I, along with, I think, six or seven other individuals in the Building, got lumped with a bad device. After returning it three times, I decided to return it permanently because it was not working. Had the device gone belly up while I was trying to chair a Committee, I would have found that an awful position to be in. It was very useful indeed that the helpline was not an 00353 number in some overseas country or other region of the EU, given that I recently discovered that a bar has been placed on Members dialling any other number, so it would be interesting to find out —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** We need a question, Mr McGlone.

**Mr McGlone:** — what the Commission has done about that as well.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat as an gceist sin. Thank you for your question and

comments. The Member may consider 00353 to be the code for an overseas country, but, for me, it is all part of the one island called Ireland. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McGlone:** There is a bar on the device — this is a partitionist Assembly.

**Ms Ruane:** Anyway, we will get back to the serious question about the devices freezing and the difficulties at the start. I raised that issue at the meeting yesterday. The Information Systems Office recognises that there were a number of faults and configuration issues with some devices at the outset of the project. That caused some frustration for some Members, and I absolutely accept that the Member was very frustrated. Of the 170 tablets purchased, a total of seven devices experienced hardware faults and have since been replaced by the manufacturer. Four other tablets displayed persistent software problems, and those issues have largely been resolved. The Information Systems Office will continue to monitor the situation. MLAs are encouraged to contact IT staff should any further problems arise or they wish to receive further one-to-one training.

In all seriousness, I strongly recommend to the Chair of the Committee that he liaises with the office again and give it another go. I think that, once we get over the teething problems, this will make a big difference and not just for Committee packs. There are lots of other plans to roll this out. If there is anything that I can do to help the Member, I will be happy to do so.

**Mr Kinahan:** Unfortunately, my tablet machine got a bad Assembly Member, someone who is not very good at working it. You cannot correct that fault too easily. Have we got all the problems ironed out, particularly over larger documents? Will we always be able to have a written document so that those of us who wish to write on the side of it can carry on that way?

**Ms Ruane:** I thank the Member for the question. Of course, documents will be provided to Members who ask for them. The Assembly staff do understand the difficulties. The younger generation love electronics. My daughters know how to do stuff that I would not have a clue how to do. Some people like to have documents in their hands and they like to physically write on a document. I have watched Members use the annotation. Hands up, I have not yet got the hang of using it, but, once you do so, it makes life much easier. You are not carrying around as many documents. Of course, Members will be provided with physical documents.

## Outreach/Education: Update

3. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the outreach and education programmes across constituencies. (AQO 5061/11-15)

**Ms Ruane:** I am getting all of the questions today. Ar na cláir for-rochtana agus oideachais, tá clár for-rochtana don ghnó tríd an Iontaobhas Tionóil agus Gnó, do ghrúpaí pobail tríd an Tionól ag Nascadh leis an bPobal, do dhaoine óga tríd an gClár Oideachais, agus don phobal i gcoitinne tríd ócáidí agus imeachtaí i bhFoirgnimh na Parlaiminte. The outreach and education programmes include outreach to business via the Assembly and Business Trust, community groups via Assembly Community Connect, young people via the Assembly education programme and the general public through functions and events held at Parliament Buildings.

I think that we will all agree that the Assembly's community outreach service is doing a very good job. It has engaged with more than 35,000 people since the start of the mandate. That is a significant number of people. To increase focus on the community and voluntary sector, Assembly Community Connect was launched in May 2013, providing free training, information and support for community and voluntary organisations. Since its launch, the number of people engaged with each month has increased by 73%, from an average of 108 to 187. More than 1,030 organisations are now registered with Assembly Community Connect. Community and voluntary groups from every constituency are represented. It has visited 11 constituencies through the Get Involved initiative. The Get Involved conference brings the Assembly and its work to local communities. It will visit all constituencies by the end of this mandate.

From the start of the mandate, Assembly Education Service has delivered the education programme to more than 43,000 students across 18 constituencies, including 5,300 students in their own schools. We have organised eight Let's Talk events, involving more than 700 students from seven constituencies. We have done lots more, but my time has just run out.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** What feedback is being collected from those who take part in the outreach and education programmes to help to complement the service?

**Ms Ruane:** Sin ceist an-suimiúil ar fad. That is a very interesting question. I know that every single MLA has been involved in the Education Service, and they will all know the wonderful work that it is doing. There is ongoing feedback on the Education Service. All comments are noted. Members of the team are constantly updating and reviewing and making changes. In one instance, where I invited an Irish-medium school in, there was very positive feedback, and that positive feedback was fed back to me as an individual MLA. I pay tribute to the Assembly staff, who are doing a very good job in relation to that.

3.45 pm

**Mr Beggs:** There has been a concerning trend of reduced participation in elections over the past decade. Will the Member assure me that the Commission will continue to support and expand, rather than potentially reduce, the education outreach programmes? Can she update me on when the team plans next to engage with my East Antrim constituency?

**Ms Ruane:** The Member can be absolutely assured that I have fought, and will continue to fight, very hard to ensure that there are no reductions and, instead, that we increase the work that the Assembly education staff and their programmes do.

In relation to East Antrim, the Assembly team works with every constituency. If you have ideas or events or plans, we would be happy to hear them. Please feel free to contact me or any member of the Commission.

## Parliament Buildings: Roof Project

4. **Mr McMullan** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the roof project. (AQO 5062/11-15)

**Mr Cree:** The Commission granted approval to proceed with the design of the roof project based on the stage D report and presentation in June this year and following subsequent consideration of options to minimise the disruption to Assembly business. The project was progressed on the basis that construction work will not disrupt Assembly plenary or Committee business from Monday lunchtime through to Thursday lunchtime. In addition to a full replacement roof covering, the project will include the replacement and upgrading of all existing roof-mounted plant installations and the introduction of a mezzanine floor in Room 401. Sustainable design initiatives, including

rainwater harvesting and photovoltaic panels, have been incorporated into the project.

The scheme design has now been completed, and invitations to tender were issued on 7 November. It is anticipated that the successful contractor will be appointed in approximately mid-February and that work will commence on site at the end of February, if possible. Work will continue for a period of 12 months.

During the past summer recess, work was carried out to create a contractor's service yard to the rear of Parliament Buildings, with a view to minimising the disruption to access and car parking during the works. To facilitate the construction works, the contractor will be given possession of the fourth floor of the Building throughout the complete works. Around 120 Building users will need to be relocated to facilitate that, and temporary decant accommodation has been secured on the estate for that purpose.

This will be a major construction project but one that is necessary to eradicate ongoing problems of water ingress and to protect the fabric of this listed building. I respectfully ask Members to show a degree of tolerance to any minor issues that might arise during the works.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before I call Mr McMullan, I remind Members of the Speaker's very specific guidance on the use of telephones in the Chamber.

**Mr McMullan:** From the initial cost of the project, have we gone over budget on any of the work so far?

**Mr Cree:** Thank you for that. The very simple answer is no.

**Mrs Overend:** There has been some talk of offices being evacuated and staff being moved elsewhere. Will the Member detail some of the development plan for that?

**Mr Cree:** Thank you for that supplementary question. Annexe C will be used for some staff. It can cope with something like 120 people, so it is envisaged that there will not be a major problem in that respect.

**Lord Morrow:** I listened intently to information about the new roof project for the Building. Has the Commission given any consideration to a stocktaking exercise of the lifts in the Building? One of them has, I think, been out of commission for at least a year. I see that

another one is out of commission at the moment. Are our lifts fit for purpose?

**Mr Cree:** I thank Lord Morrow for his supplementary question. Indeed, I was in the lift this morning where I pushed the button and the doors closed. Before I could turn around, they opened again and I was told that I had arrived, and then they closed again. It was quite humorous, like something you would see in a sketch: me standing there waiting to go and the doors opening and closing, opening and closing. I reported that as another fault.

The lifts are obviously quite old, but the technology is not rocket science. I am advised that major work is being done to the lifts. I see Mr Logue sitting over there in the box, so blame him for that. There has been a problem with one of the lifts for a long time. I think that we have got to the stage where we have to take a bit more positive action.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Commissioner for his very detailed answers. There has been speculation — I will put it no higher than that — that Committees will have to meet outside this Building, either on the estate or elsewhere. Indeed, there has been talk about the Stormont Hotel etc. Will the Commissioner reassure the House that that will not happen and that, in fact, Committees will be accommodated in this Building?

**Mr Cree:** I thank Mr Maginness for his question. Organising a suitable venue outside was one of the concerns that was considered at length. The current situation is that that is no longer anticipated. The work plans mean that, between Monday and Thursday, Committees and, indeed, full plenary sittings, should be able to operate as normal without any need to relocate or decamp to any other place.

## Outreach/Education: Update

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Assembly Commission to outline its plans to increase the Assembly outreach programme to the education and community sectors. (AQO 5063/11-15)

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat as an gceist sin. Tá clár for-rochtana oideachais an Tionóil ar fáil do gach bunscoil agus gach iarbunscoil in Éirinn. Faigheann gach scoil eolas faoin gclár for-rochtana ag tús na bliana acadúla, agus tá an tSeirbhís Oideachais ag cur a cuid clár chun cinn ar láithreán gréasáin na Seirbhíse Oideachais.

The Assembly education outreach programme is available to all primary and post-primary schools throughout Ireland. All schools throughout the North receive information about the outreach programme at the start of the academic year. The Education Service is now promoting its programmes on its website.

Since the start of this mandate, education outreach programmes have been delivered in 17 constituencies. The South Antrim constituency has not taken up the Education Service's programmes to date, but schools in that area will be targeted directly. I encourage MLAs from South Antrim to contact their schools to encourage them to take up the opportunities.

The Education Service continues to develop close working relationships with other organisations that work in the education sector, such as the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment; C2k, which is responsible for IT in schools; and the Children's Commissioner.

To increase the focus on the community and voluntary sector, Assembly Community Connect was launched in May 2013 to provide free training, information and support for the community and voluntary sector. As I said, the number of people who are engaging with it has increased significantly. The number of organisations that are accessing it is also increasing: 1,030 organisations are now registered with Assembly Community Connect. It has visited 11 constituencies, and it plans to work in all the local communities.

Beidh na comhdhálacha Bí Rannpháirteach ar siúl i dTuaisceart Aontroma, i nGleann Lagáin, i bhFear Manach agus Tír Eoghain Theas, agus i dTuaisceart an Dúin i 2014. The Get Involved conferences will take place in North Antrim, Lagan Valley, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and North Down in 2014. Assembly Community Connect will visit all constituencies by the end of this mandate.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an fhreagra sin. An bhfuil toghlaigh ann a bhfuil níos mó ionadaíocht acu ná toghlaigh eile ar lontaobhas Gnó an Tionóil? Do some constituencies have greater representation than others on the Assembly and Business Trust?

**Ms Ruane:** I thank the Member for that incisive question. Actually, there is actually a disproportionate difference in representation. It is up to us, as individual MLAs, as well as the

Assembly Commission, to make sure that some are not represented disproportionately. For example, East Belfast has 30 representatives, South Belfast has 54, East Antrim has one, Fermanagh and South Tyrone has one, Foyle has one, Newry and Armagh has two and South Down has four. You can see the differences and disparity, and that needs to be looked at. I have raised that issue with officials to see how we can make sure that there is better proportionality across all constituencies.

**Mr Storey:** There can sometimes be a cost impediment to schools coming to the Assembly. What use has the outreach service made of C2k and modern technology to ensure that, if something happens here, it can be relayed to one school or a group of schools, given the challenges that some schools have with transport? Will it give a commitment to continue to use those resources?

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat as an gceist sin. I thank you for that question. Obviously, the Commission will listen to any ideas that the Member has. At all times, the Commission is trying to digitalise and make sure that we have the best technology and use technology in the best way. One of the first questions that I answered was about the use of technology and the importance of us all challenging ourselves and using it. I know that there are plans to use technology in an interactive and creative way.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Questions 6 and 12 are grouped.

## Ormiston House

6. **Ms McGahan** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the disposal of Ormiston House. (AQO 5064/11-15)

12. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the disposal of Ormiston House. (AQO 5070/11-15)

**Mr Weir:** The Get Involved campaign was mentioned earlier, and I was beginning to wonder whether I would be getting involved in this Question Time. With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will give two for the price of one and answer questions 6 and 12 together.

This has obviously been a long-standing issue. The Commission placed Ormiston House for sale on the open market in January 2011. Alongside that was an attempt to get planning permission for a limited amount of development

on the site. Planning permission was received in 2012, and the site was relaunched in July 2012. Although there has been a considerable level of interest in the property for a variety of development opportunities, few substantive bids have been made, and the Commission has not yet been in a position to agree a sale. The Commission has received one bid for the property, but it was for less than the asking price.

**Ms McGahan:** I thank the Member for his response. If it is not sold, what alternatives does the Commission have in place for Ormiston House?

**Mr Weir:** The Commission does not have any alternatives as such. The point is that we believe that it is important that Ormiston House is sold and made use of. We want that to happen. To that end, we are very conscious that we need to obtain value for money for the public purse and the amount that it was bought for will clearly not be realised. We want to maximise its value, although, at the same time, we realise that we are not necessarily in a fire sale and it is not a question of trying to offload Ormiston House at the cheapest possible value. It has to have some degree of commercial worth. From that point of view, I do not think that the Commission has a particular purpose for Ormiston House other than ultimately to sell it with the planning permission that has been granted.

**Mr Gardiner:** Will the Commission defer any decisions on the sale of Ormiston House until its potential as an international mental health faculty, as suggested by Mike Nesbitt MLA, has been fully explored?

**Mr Weir:** The Commission is certainly keen to explore any options and to take any offer. However, at the moment, neither the Commission nor its agent has received an approach about an international mental health centre on the Ormiston site. So, any discussion about that as a possibility is purely hypothetical.

As I have indicated, the Commission's aim is to obtain the maximum public value for the site. That is the duty on us. From that point of view, I think that the Commission would be open to any concrete suggestions or offers and would certainly look at those.

**Mr Humphrey:** What is the annual cost to the Northern Ireland Executive for maintenance, heating, lighting, security and so on for Ormiston House?

**4.00 pm**

**Mr Weir:** The running costs have so far been in the region of £130,000 a year. The principal sum within that is for security. However, some recent decisions on security mean that that cost can be reduced. Although the final figure has not been determined, the expectation is that it will be brought down to under £100,000 per year.

## Assembly Business

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I come back to Mr Stewart Dickson for his point of order.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. When the Minister for Social Development was responding to my question, clearly he knew the answer but refused to give it to me in the House. Does he not have a duty to answer questions in this House when he has the appropriate knowledge? Is it not that his first responsibility is to this House rather than to the Committee that he indicated that he would be giving the answer to?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** It is not up to the Speaker or Deputy Speaker to judge whether a Minister has answered a question, but the Minister offered an explanation to do with an upcoming occasion. However, I will reflect on the matter when I read Hansard.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Infrastructure: Effective Delivery of Major Projects

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly calls on the Executive to take all necessary steps to create an effective delivery pipeline of major infrastructure work to alleviate the current economic and social difficulties being faced across the community.*  
— [Mr McGlone.]

**Mr Flanagan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion. I am glad that there is unity across the Chamber on the merit of it and support for it being agreed.

The construction industry is vital to our local economy. I am sure that somebody has said that it is the backbone of our economy but if they have not, it is the backbone of our economy, along with about 15 other sectors that get plugged every time they are up. The construction industry is vital, particularly when you get into rural places such as Fermanagh and Tyrone, where there really is not a pile else going on apart from people being able to build stuff, which they are very good at. So, we are heavily reliant on it in rural areas such as Fermanagh and Tyrone, and I am sure you will forgive me for plugging that at the start.

However, places such as Fermanagh and Tyrone have been exceptionally hard hit by the downturn in the construction industry, because we see people skilled and well-qualified in many different aspects of the construction sector having to leave their home place because there is no opportunity for work. They have not only had to travel to more urban parts of Ireland that are doing a lot better than rural communities but have had to leave this island altogether and head to places such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand in search of work.

It is unfortunate that that is the case, and we need to do everything that we can to create jobs for people here, to keep people here and to offer people who have left the opportunity to come back. I am hopeful that some of the people who left will want the opportunity to come back to build their lives here, so we need to do all that we can to ensure that that happens.

In what the Assembly can encourage the Executive to do, an awful lot of public schemes have been talked about for years, decades and generations and not brought forward. We need to see that those are brought forward and developed properly. A long list of schools are on the waiting list. We have seen significant progress in recent years on the school waiting list, but an awful lot more could be done if more capital investment was available to put into the schools estate. We have seen that the Department of Education under John O'Dowd can get money spent if it is given to him.

We have seen the same with the construction of hospitals and universities. Unfortunately, we have not seen the same delivery when it comes to roads, which is a sore point for very many people in places like Fermanagh, Tyrone and Derry.

In my constituency, there has been a proposal for a newbuild at Devenish College for years. Unfortunately, due to the absence of agreement in the controlled sector, it has never moved forward. Hopefully, we can reach that agreement and proposals can be put to the Department for that site to be developed.

**Mr Elliott:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Flanagan:** Happily, Tom.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he recognise that it is not just because of a failure to reach agreement within the controlled sector that Devenish has not been built? It is because of delays in the process between the education and library board and the Department of Education. It has been on the cards for some time, and it has not been held up just because of a lack of agreement.

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

**Mr Flanagan:** The lack of agreement is one problem. There is another problem with the process, and questions have been asked by people in the industry about why it takes so long for schemes that have widespread support in the local community, political agreement and agreement in the business community to be completed. People cannot understand why it takes three years from the initial scoping of an idea for something to happen. That is a source of serious frustration.

As an Assembly, we need to ensure that, where there are barriers to people who have private finance and are willing to invest, we seek to

remove those in a sensible way. If people have money to spend and want to spend it on infrastructure and the project is sensible, we need to do all we can to help them. That does not mean that we need to give them more money; it means that the process needs to reflect that.

The construction industry has welcomed the fact that planning applications for schemes that have money ready to be spent will receive priority in the Planning Service over schemes that will not happen for the next 10 or 15 years. It is only right that schemes that will be developed quickly go to the top of the list. As part of the wider reform of the Planning Service, that is something that we are all agreed on. Planning applications need to be sped up. It takes far too long to get a decision, whether positive or negative. There has been some progress on that, but the sceptic in me says that that is because there is nearly the same number of staff in the Planning Service and far fewer applications. Maybe that is not true and it is over-cynical, but I doubt it. It would be useful for Assembly Members to see a list of projects that each Department and arm's-length body has that are shovel-ready and can be developed. That is an area where there is serious scope for us to put political pressure on Departments to deliver.

As a rural MLA, I know that it is frustrating for rural dwellers who are not involved in farming that they have no opportunity to build a family home. It is not about putting a bungalow in every corner and on every hill in the country — or every valley, which is what the Planning Service would try to get you to do. It is about building in a sustainable manner so that people can live in the countryside and contribute to the local community, even those who are not involved directly in farming.

My final point is about the promised peace dividend that has never really materialised.

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

**Mr Flanagan:** We have seen some issues coming through the economic pact, but there is still no sign of the money that was promised by the British Government years ago. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr B McCrea:** Colleagues, at first sight, this appears to be a rather strange motion to bring before the Assembly. Obviously, people have sympathy with the idea that we should spend more capital, if it were available. My problem is

that Mr McGlone proposed the motion, yet his colleague in the SDLP is the Minister of the Environment, with responsibility for planning. Mr Frew's name is on the list, yet the DUP is responsible for DETI and DFP, including overall energy infrastructure and telecommunications. I heard Mr McElduff speak most eloquently, but he talked about education, as did his colleague Mr Flanagan, and their Minister is the Minister of Education. Finally, Mr Kinahan, whose name is on the list for the UUP, was once, I think, PPS to the Minister for Regional Development. When you put all those things together, you have a group of MLAs imploring their Ministers to work better together and to provide the infrastructure that the community needs. I am surprised that we have had to do it in this way. Surely these matters would be best resolved around the Executive table.

**Mr McElduff:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B McCrea:** I will indeed.

**Mr McElduff:** Does the Member accept that, when he was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, he often gave critical advice in the Chamber to then party colleagues?

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

**Mr B McCrea:** That is, of course, true. I find myself, now that I am not in the UUP, being less critical and trying to deal with issues. I notice that it is not always reciprocated, right enough, but it is a perfectly valid point that Mr McElduff raises.

For the record, I agree with the general sense of what people are trying to say here, which is that there seems to be a lot of red tape, bureaucratic obstacles or things that get in the way of trying to do the things that we want to do. I have sympathy with that position, but surely the real argument here is that it is for the Executive to engage in cross-cutting, non-silo-based decision-making, working together to try to release the funds that are necessary to make certain things happen. There is no doubt that the public are looking at us and saying, "What are you actually doing? Is there anything happening up there?".

It also probably brings us to a position where one has to ask whether there is capital available. What I hear quite often from the Finance Minister is that there has been a significant reduction during the comprehensive spending review period in the capital spend that is available. Perhaps that suggests that we

need to look at different ways of raising capital, whether that is through PFIs, PPPs or some other local enterprise areas. The simple fact is that cash availability is what really kick-starts most projects. When you get something like the A5, which is not available, or some other major project, suddenly there is a scramble to try to get that money deployed somewhere useful. So there is something that needs to be done to create the pipeline that we want to see for the construction industry.

I am drawn to the CBI report, which mentions it quite clearly. Other Members quoted from it. The statement that drew my attention was:

*"There must therefore be a drive, led by Ministers, to ensure that relevant capital works, and their indicative timescales, are made public as soon as is feasible."*

I think that the report compared us with Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, where there are published time frames. Perhaps that is something that we could do to see whether we are ready.

There is one final thing that I want to mention that we have to find a way of dealing with, and that is that Northern Ireland has developed a reputation as the most litigious region when it comes to procurement. We will have to find a way of making quick decisions. By all means, we need to have the proper levels of consultation and appeal, but we need to do it quickly without being challenged. In my constituency, the John Lewis thing has been on the blocks ever since I have been in politics, and it shows no real sign of moving forward. We really cannot afford to turn down investment if it is available, and I am sure that other Members will agree that we want to get a streamlined process.

I will conclude by saying —

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Member for giving way. I will give a bit of background. The motion emanated from the all-party working group on construction. There is a meeting that is open to all Members of the Assembly on 3 December, where exactly the type of process that the Member is engaging in and talking about here will happen with at least three Ministers. You are very welcome to attend that meeting, as are other Members.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I cannot see how long I have got left because I do not have my glasses on, but —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Ten seconds and counting.

**Mr B McCrea:** I gratefully accept the invitation. It is the right thing, but it should be ministerially led.

**4.15 pm**

**Mr Frew:** This has been a very good, measured debate. There has been no real contention, apart from one intervention from, I think, Mr Elliott to Mr Flanagan. That shows that we have full agreement and sympathy with the motion. Mr McCrea raised a point about why the individual Members who signed the motion had tabled it: it is simply because of the all-party working group. I am not a big fan of all-party working groups, but I like being on this one. I believe that it is very productive and a good use of my time because it has made a difference to Ministers' rationale and the way in which they think. It has also made a difference in applying pressure on Departments through not only Ministers but private secretaries and people in positions of power to make decisions more quickly and to keep them focused on what they need to do in order to spend money on infrastructure, which is what we all aspire to.

There is no doubt that some good news stories have come out of late, not least the statement from the Minister of Finance a number of weeks ago regarding the £250 million in public expenditure allocations. That has helped to make great benefits and strides in my constituency of North Antrim along the A26. It has also helped the children's hospital and other worthwhile projects. We should push and strive for that because we need more large projects in our areas.

It is clear that the Executive have an investment strategy, which is assisted by the Strategic Investment Board and its work, and that the Executive's number one priority is the economy. With that, there must be spend on infrastructure. If you speak to any economist today, they talk about periods of austerity and recession, and you will hear them say that there is resistance to spend. People will not spend; businessmen, businesswomen and companies will not spend. There is self-protection: they keep the head down, try to roll with the punches and get through to the other side. There will always be a tendency for government not to spend, especially when you get commitments

from the Government about the peace dividend, as was mentioned today, and the Tories and their partners in government, the Lib Dems, reneging on that promise by nearly 40%. It has had and will have an impact on government, infrastructure and the economy. There is absolutely no doubt about that.

What do we do? We need to do things quicker, slicker and better; there is absolutely no doubt about that. We have to focus our minds on doing that because, undoubtedly, while we live in a period of recession and austerity, government must spend because sometimes it is the only organisation or body that is spending. We do not have to take chances, but we have to be able to spend as much as possible to have the greatest effect on our population. That is not to say that we throw money at something for the sake of it or just to create wealth or jobs. There is a bigger and wider remit than that. It will, in fact, make a difference to people's lives, which is why we have to pick and choose our projects carefully and make sure that they have the greatest possible effect.

Patsy McGlone, the chairman of the all-party working group, spends a lot of time on the issue, which is also dear to my heart. He talked about roads, utility links and public buildings and said that long-term planning was needed for the maintenance of the existing infrastructure. Let that not be underestimated. We push all the time for new roads, buildings and infrastructure, but we have to remember that it takes millions of pounds to maintain the current infrastructure. There is absolutely no doubt about that, but it has been neglected of late. In our constituencies, we see it all the time. We go to Roads Service and ask for resurfacing work to be done, and it tells us that it does not have the budget for that but will cater for potholes here and there. That cannot be cost-effective, so something in the maintenance of infrastructure and roads must change.

Mr McGlone also mentioned the slashing by the Tories and Lib Dems of nearly 40% of the peace dividend, despite the earlier commitment. That must, as he rightly said, have an effect. He mentioned the European Investment Bank. He also mentioned the need for greater fiscal powers, and I know that Mr McCrea spoke about that just this weekend at his conference. Would the Member like to take the opportunity to tell us by how much he would raise taxes to pay for more infrastructure? I make that offer, if he wishes to avail himself of it.

**Mr B McCrea:** I will take the intervention if you like. The real point was not to raise or lower taxes at this stage; the really important point came from Brian Hayes, the junior Finance Minister in the Republic of Ireland. He said that you can do an awful lot of good with a relatively small amount of money, if you target certain areas.

There might be things that we can do on the fringes of the construction industry. That is not meant to be a provocative statement. It is just that the Member is interested in how we can move forward, and I would be more than happy to share that with him. I want to make clear that it is about how we spend relatively modest sums to encourage the activity that we seek to promote, particularly in the construction industry.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you for that intervention. I hear what you say, and you say it in a very rational way. However, do we not have the power to tweak, change and target? We have to be careful. We talk about having fiscal powers and the potential to raise taxes — income tax and every other tax — but that can have a destabilising effect on the economy and business, so we have to be mindful of that. We have the power to direct —

**Mr Ross:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Frew:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Ross:** Does the Member recognise that the more fiscal powers we have, the more uncertainty there will be about future budgets? We want certainty to plan for the next four or five years, and our budgetary certainty helps the Executive plan their spending on infrastructure.

**Mr Frew:** Certainly, I agree with my colleague and fellow Member that that is indeed the case.

I will move on because I want to include as many contributions as possible in my winding-up speech on what has been a very good debate.

Jimmy Spratt, speaking as Chairman of the Regional Development Committee, referred to the deferred A5 road project and to the A2 and A8 road systems. He welcomed the work of the Department for Regional Development and the structural works that are going ahead. However, he made a very valid point, which I have raised already, about the detrimental effect of the £830 million backlog in road maintenance. Roads that are not fit for purpose

have a detrimental effect on haulage and deliveries. Roads are the very veins that flow throughout our country and carry business and trade. It is vital that we get to grips with the funding backlog — £830 million, I think Mr Spratt said. He spoke of the importance of that infrastructure.

Barry McElduff talked about projects being stalled and postponed. I know that we all work for parties, but a lot of Sinn Féin Members mentioned education, which is very healthy and very good. I sensed their frustration about some of the projects in their constituencies. One in my constituency is Castle Tower School: we have waited for ever and a day for that project to take place.

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

**Mr Frew:** I hope that we are getting to the end of it, but it has been years in the making.

**Mr McElduff:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Frew:** Yes, I will.

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

**Mr Frew:** I regret that I cannot let the Member in and that I cannot get through everybody's remarks. It was a very good debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly calls on the Executive to take all necessary steps to create an effective delivery pipeline of major infrastructure work to alleviate the current economic and social difficulties being faced across the community.*

## Higher Education Sector: Support and Investment

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Swann:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly acknowledges the key role of higher education in growing the local economy and helping to realise the Programme for Government's cross-cutting priorities in health, social development, agrifood, education and skills, and research and innovation; and calls on the Executive to affirm their commitment to supporting and investing in the local higher education sector.*

From the outset, I want to make it clear that the debate is not about universities as buildings; like the previous debate, it is about the investment in our whole community. It is about creating a framework for prosperity. It is about securing growth for all, socially and economically. It is about opportunity. All those things are made possible through the work of higher education. That was demonstrated earlier with the Employment and Learning Committee's showcase entitled 'Advancing Knowledge, Changing Lives', which took place earlier today.

Two years ago, a crucial debate took place in the Chamber in difficult circumstances. Higher education was facing a crisis, with a funding gap of crippling proportions that seriously threatened the scope and ambition of the work of our universities. In September 2011, the Executive agreed to meet the funding gap. Through our commitment and with the active involvement of our universities, the tide was turned. That was a crisis in which our whole community, in all its diversity, became engaged. It was a time when we clearly saw the vital role that higher education plays, how much it is valued and how important it is for us to safeguard it now and for generations to come.

Every day, our universities succeed in turning aspiration into reality. They have ambition and purpose. They provide education that is innovative and world-leading, expands the horizons of our young people and equips them to take their place in the wider community. Our universities engage in research of global significance, and they are the stimulus for

growth for Northern Ireland. Let me give you some figures just to show what that means. Each year, the higher education sector in Northern Ireland generates more than £1 billion worth of economic activity. For every £1 million of university output, a further £1.38 million is generated in other sectors of the economy. It employs 7,000 people across Northern Ireland and directly generates thousands of additional jobs. It educates 54,000 students each year and, in doing so, refreshes and enriches a range of skills that are vital to the development of our community.

This debate takes place on a day when we have been able to see at first hand the quality of the work carried out by our universities. We saw it in the unique showcase held in the Long Gallery, which the Employment and Learning Committee was delighted to host. I say "unique" because it was the first time that all three of our universities — Queen's, the University of Ulster and the Open University — have collaborated in an event of that kind. It was truly inspirational. Not only did we see examples of some extraordinary achievement, but it was a delight to meet members of staff and some of the students, all of them deeply committed to the theme of the showcase — advancing knowledge and changing lives.

We depend on our universities for their productivity, their innovation and their creativity. For that we owe them a debt of gratitude. It is up to us to ensure that they receive adequate funding to allow them to continue to play an important role at home and across the world. We must continue to give the support that allows them to aim higher and, in doing so, helps to safeguard the economic future of Northern Ireland.

Our three universities compete at many levels, but in today's showcase we saw evidence of collaborative commitment and delivering public benefit, which may result, even today, in greater collaboration. Earlier today, the Minister of Health, Mr Poots, referred to Professor Frank Pantridge and how his genius contributed to saving lives across the world through his remarkable invention, the mobile heart defibrillator. That life-saving spirit can be seen in the work of his outstanding successors.

### 4.30 pm

The clinical research facility is focusing on cancer, nutrition and metabolism, vision science and respiratory disease. There is also the Centre of Excellence for Public Health, which is a collaboration involving Queen's, the University of Ulster and the Belfast Health and Social Care

Trust. That is where talented medical academics are tackling more of the challenges that face our society, many of which are caused by the way in which we live.

It seems to be almost every day that we hear about new discoveries and developments at our universities, and that is thanks to the work of some remarkable people who are helping to build Northern Ireland's global reputation for innovation. Such people include Professor Stuart Elborn, who has developed a groundbreaking drug for people suffering from cystic fibrosis; Professor Tracy Robson, who discovered a new drug that will help to combat cancer; and Professor Usha Chakravarthy, who is carrying out clinical trials into eye disease that could result in saving the NHS £84 million a year.

However, it is not just new professors. Professor Gordon Blair, who, unfortunately, passed away on 21 October 2010 after battling cancer, was my wife's great-uncle. By the end of the 1960s, his research work on engines had produced validated computer simulation programmes that helped to design more powerful engines and provided theoretical and design insights that gave the Queen's University team advantages over even the biggest factory motorcycle teams across the world.

I now turn to the University of Ulster, which has 16,000 full-time and almost 8,000 part-time students. Through their spending power, the full-time students alone contribute £160 million a year to the local economy. That is in addition to the £200 million-plus spend of the university itself on salaries, wages, goods and services. Its Belfast city campus is under construction. The campus development will transform the north side of Belfast's central business district and open a new chapter in the life of the city and the university. In the past three months, the University of Ulster has opened new scientific research centres in stratified medicine, in functional brain mapping and in connected health. Years in the planning, those centres build on essential skills and research and will boost Northern Ireland's growing healthcare technology sector.

In 2012, the university received over 34,000 applications to study, its highest ever number. The Confucius Institute at the university has created a centre of Confucius classroom learning hubs to bring Chinese culture and language to young people across Northern Ireland. The hubs will partner with a network of 111 other schools across the Province to enable every pupil in Northern Ireland to access

support for learning about Chinese language and culture.

The third of our universities is the most recent addition — in June this year, when it officially became Northern Ireland's third university — and it is the Open University (OU). Harold Wilson was the first to set out a vision for the "University of the Air" in 1963. His idea was realised in 1969 with the establishment of the Open University. Since Wilson's speech, the university has continued to grow and to innovate. It is now one of the world's foremost distance learning institutes and has significant expertise in harnessing new technologies and teaching techniques to enhance its students' experience of learning at a distance.

As well as its first-class teaching and learning, the Open University carries out world-renowned research that ranks in the top third of UK universities, with 87% of it deemed internationally excellent. To mark and celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Harold Wilson's speech, the Open University commissioned four pieces of public art across the four nations of the UK. In Northern Ireland, Carrie Neely was commissioned after a competitive call to curate a series of artwork called "Luminous, Curious, Journey", and those displays can currently be seen in Belfast.

Part of the Open University's role is to widen participation in part-time study. It offers a route into higher education for anyone with a desire to learn, thus creating a more highly skilled society and workforce, regardless of social background. Part-time study is vital in supporting our economic recovery. The university offers opportunities to upskill and reskill the current workforce in Northern Ireland by offering work-based learning programmes in health, management, education, IT, science and other economically relevant subjects. The university's flexible learning opportunities allow individuals from every constituency in Northern Ireland to study around various commitments such as work, family life and caring responsibilities.

However, the Open University's commitment to research and innovation is also evident. In the last research assessment exercise, the university was ranked in the top third of the UK, as I said. Again as I said, over 80% of all OU research has been assessed as internationally excellent or world leading. In Northern Ireland, Bombardier Aerospace successfully applied for an Open University knowledge exchange voucher, worth £10,000, which was implemented between January and June 2013. Using that seed funding, the materials group in

the Open University's faculty of mathematics, computing and technology was able to investigate the residual stresses in mechanically versus chemically milled parts.

Our universities have attracted £684 million in funding for research projects over the past five years. They have more than 5,000 business connections in each constituency in Northern Ireland. As a result of research innovation, they have created no fewer than 100 spin-out companies with a combined turnover of £260 million and almost 3,000 high-value jobs.

Through the work of the higher education sector, Northern Ireland has become a national and international trailblazer. At Queen's, the Institute for Global Food Security is a hub of research into food safety. It is taking our reputation far beyond these shores, helped by its director, Professor Chris Elliott, who is heading the Westminster Government's independent inquiry into UK food supply. With the agrifood sector —

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

**Mr Swann:** Here in Northern Ireland, the value and impact of what our universities do has never been more important. They are crucial to the success of every aspect of the priorities that are identified in the Programme for Government. In conclusion, without commitment to support for the higher education sector and everything that it stands for, Northern Ireland would be a much poorer place.

**Mr Ross:** In his remarks, the Chairman talked about the collaboration between the three universities that operate in Northern Ireland. I think that "collaboration" is the correct word. What we want to see in our economy is further collaboration not only between the universities but with government and businesses. It is certainly where things are going.

Those of us who took the time to go upstairs to the Long Gallery over lunchtime would have been impressed by the range of things that the universities and institutions are getting up to and the sort of impact that they will have not only for businesses here in Northern Ireland but globally, with some of the 3D design and healthcare elements that the Chairman mentioned. I think that it is very encouraging.

There is no doubt that people in the Assembly will recognise the important role of universities. As mentioned a number of times in a previous debate today, the economy is a central pillar to

our Programme for Government. The role and importance of the universities in the economy is mentioned in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, as well as in the innovation strategy that will come. Of course, the other tool that the Executive are looking for to help to grow our economy is the power to lower corporation tax. If they get that power, it is their view that they will lower it to somewhere between 10% and 12.5%. Independent analysis indicates that that would create up to 4,000 or 5,000 jobs every year. Of course, we need to have the type of graduates who will fill those jobs, and we are very reliant on the universities to produce those graduates.

A large piece of work has already been done to try to identify where those jobs would be. I think that that is where the Executive and universities in particular have a role to play to try to ensure that we create the right type of graduates to fill those places. The role of the Minister and the Executive in encouraging more STEM places is very important. We know that there could be a shortfall in ICT skills unless that is addressed. Last week, I was in Brussels at the European Employment Forum. The Minister was also there and spoke at the event. Delegates talked about the massive shortage that there will be in ICT skills right across Europe. So, I think that we need to pay attention to that as well.

Back in January, Stewart Watt from Almac, which is one of our companies here in Northern Ireland, talked about the need for good interaction between employers and universities to ensure that the courses that are offered relate directly to career opportunities. That will help to ensure that new graduates hit the employment ground running with the skill sets that are required in an increasingly competitive market. That highlights universities' role in producing graduates who will benefit Northern Ireland.

Upstairs, I listened to the video that was presented to us. In that video, Mark Nodder from the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and, of course, Wrightbus, talked about the many positive reasons that there are for companies to come to Northern Ireland to do business. Of course, we know that those reasons include the government support that is offered from Invest Northern Ireland and the lower cost base for businesses that come here. However, the significant reason is our people and the standard of the graduates and workforce that we have in Northern Ireland. That hugely important point is made whenever our Ministers travel overseas, whether it is the Enterprise Minister on trade missions or the

Employment Minister doing similar work overseas. It is a major selling point for Northern Ireland.

Again, I commend the Executive for taking the decision to freeze student fees so that young people in Northern Ireland do not face additional barriers to getting to university. We know that, some time ago, there was a particular focus on the role of universities in the economy when we thought that the Department for Employment and Learning was going to be scrapped and we were looking at where those functions would go. That focused minds, and, at that time, the Committee for Employment and Learning took evidence from industry, the HE and FE sectors and a range of different people. The general consensus, although there was some concern on the opposite Benches, was that we wanted to move towards having a Department for the economy that would encourage the universities to work closer with industry. Hopefully, that is something that we can still move towards in the future.

On a positive note, a lot of the collaboration that I talked about at the beginning is already happening in Northern Ireland. I mentioned the employment forum that met in Brussels last week. One of the interesting things, particularly on the second day of that conference, was listening to people from other European countries talking about the lack of collaboration in their EU jurisdictions. I do not think that the same can be said of Northern Ireland. We are ahead of the game somewhat when it comes to collaboration.

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

**Mr Ross:** The Confucius Institute is an example of business and education coming together, as are the cancer centre, the Northern Ireland Science Park and the work that is done in the connected health centre at Jordanstown. We have a positive story to tell, and everybody recognises the important role that universities have.

**Mr Rogers:** The higher education sector provides almost immeasurable social and economic benefits to this region and its people, with opportunities for young people to continue their studies and broaden their minds at the University of Ulster, Queen's University and our teaching colleges. I welcome the flexibility of further study that is created by the Open University. Although the motion specifically addresses higher education, I must commend the work of our schools and further education

colleges, without which higher education simply would not have the supply of talent. The future of our economy depends on the ready supply of workers who are qualified with the right skills that are demanded by industry. It is more important than ever that there is a strong connection between our employers and our education providers.

We see the benefits in specific sectors, such as health where the C-TRIC hub links up with the university sector to produce a range of innovative answers to questions in our health technology market. I have a particular interest in the early diagnosis and treatment of cancer. Earlier this year, the University of Ulster was awarded £214,000 to fund further research into prostate cancer. The university is researching a new drug combination therapy that aims to control the growth of aggressive tumours. Across the city, at Queen's University, there have been excellent advances in the treatment of ovarian cancer through the collaborative work between Almac Discovery and the university's school of pharmacy. Magee College and our other colleges have had a creative impact on the City of Culture and on the ongoing developments in the creative and expressive arts, including in 'Game of Thrones' or the upcoming filming of the latest 'Dracula' movie.

Throughout this region, 50% of the research that is carried out in our universities is classified as world-leading. We all had the pleasure of seeing a snapshot of this leading-edge research and development in the Long Gallery earlier today, ranging from the work on aircraft design, which is being carried out by Queen's, the University of Ulster and Bombardier, to the Open University's OpenScience Laboratory.

The role of the higher education sector in helping to realise the Programme for Government's cross-cutting priorities, as the motion states, is something that is continually under the microscope. I ask this question: how can we possibly meet our targets for the growth of our agrifood industry if there is no corresponding investment in research and development?

If we are to put our pupils first and address the deficits in our education system, we must invest in ongoing staff development. Everyone knows that to rebuild our economy, we need to invest heavily in the renewable energies because fossil fuels are simply not the answer.

Are we up to speed in availing ourselves of the grants that will become available as part of the European Union's Horizon 2020 project, which

has up to €70 billion in the pot for research and innovation? We want that sector to grow, yet the Executive have cut funding to third-level institutions. That is the sad reality that the sector is faced with, but funding is invaluable when it comes to making our services and our institutions more efficient and in providing solutions and products that put us firmly on the map. In my opinion, the skills base that the sector provides across the North is the main reason why so many high-tech companies come here to invest. We have a responsibility to invest and to secure investment in the sector.

That being said, we must look to the institutions to provide leadership and stability from within. I must commend the University of Ulster's business school, which followed up on a comment that I made about the brain drain. It is looking at measures to ensure that more of our students do not have to go abroad for high-quality degree courses. Although I am aware that the provision of veterinary science courses is being considered by our universities, we are still in a position where the nearest course is in Dublin. You do not have to go too far in the English countryside to find a vet from Northern Ireland.

#### 4.45 pm

We have seen the privatisation of jobs, pay freezes and the closure of facilities across the sector in the past two years, which damages confidence across the community in the priorities of the third-level sector. The people locally who sustain and have sustained the universities over many years need to have confidence in the sector. They will seek at all costs to protect jobs and to make progressive decisions on the facilities and services that the sector provides.

I want to turn to the specific cross-cutting theme in the Programme for Government of addressing regional imbalance. We are not addressing regional imbalance, even within the third-level sector, when the relevant Ministers will not commit to implementing a specific pledge in the One Plan for Derry on student numbers at Magee campus of the University of Ulster. The university has work to do in preparing the best business case for the growth in student numbers, and it is imperative that the Executive and the Minister react progressively in the way that they are able to do for other projects.

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

**Mr Rogers:** Similarly, we must be more proactive at developing better links with our colleges across the border. Our commitment to widening participation and engaging further with business and community groups through the sector is delivering dividends. Those avenues must be developed. The SDLP wholeheartedly backs this motion.

**Mr Lyttle:** I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the motion and recognise the crucial role that the higher education sector plays in Northern Ireland.

Education is an engine room for personal development and it plays a vital role in the economic development of our society. It provides the high-level skills, invaluable research and commercial knowledge transfer that we need to develop our economy. I am delighted that the Alliance Party commitment to higher education has seen tangible expression in the Alliance Minister for higher education's work across recent years; that our manifesto commitments have been taken forward in that regard; and that government remains the primary funder for higher education. However, it is also essential that we continue our support and that we ensure that that is used wisely.

I welcome, as other Members have, the opposition to any unfair rise in tuition fees and the designation of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects as priority skills areas, as well as the work that has been done to develop strong links between employers and our higher education institutions. I also welcome the expansion of places for STEM-related courses that we have seen each year, which will hopefully exceed Programme for Government targets by the end of this period. I welcome, too, the additional funding for extra STEM places on masters courses at the University of Ulster and Queen's University. I think that this is absolutely vital to ensure that we are delivering the right skills to support our key aim of rebalancing and growing our economy in Northern Ireland.

I also welcome the increased cooperation that we have seen among our higher education institutes and indeed with our commercial companies, the public sector and community organisations, which is hugely important in helping knowledge exchange throughout our community in order to generate wealth. The higher education business and community interaction survey released earlier this year has shown that this has helped to generate significant money in our economy, and is showing great work in that regard. I also welcome the Connected initiative that has

enabled higher education institutes to increase the range and depth of their interaction with the local community and provided employer engagement plans to engage with employers about improving our skills economy.

As has been mentioned today, we have been delighted to have our university and higher education institutes in the Assembly for the Long Gallery event. I have been delighted to see the work of our institutes across Northern Ireland. Most recently, Queen's University was awarded a Northern Ireland Science Park 25k award for a spin-out company that is doing some excellent work in bioscience and health research. I note the University of Ulster's success in widening participation with its Step Ahead scheme, and of course the amazing work of the Open University with the leadership of John D'Arcy in relation to distance learning. It is also important to note the provision of our further education colleges and the efforts that they make to ensure the widening of participation in and access to our higher education institutions.

In closing, I certainly recognise the vital role of the higher education sector in Northern Ireland. I, too, hope that the Executive will, as the motion requests, affirm their commitment to supporting and investing in higher education in order to, as we heard today, advance knowledge, change the lives of people in Northern Ireland and ensure that we remain a hub for world-class higher education.

**Mr Buchanan:** I, too, support the motion. I commend the universities on their excellent work in Northern Ireland and, indeed, on their excellent showcase in the Long Gallery today, where they presented all the work that they do. For the past 150 years, the higher education sector in Northern Ireland has grown and developed in such a way that, today, it plays a pivotal role in the creation of a sustainable, knowledge-based economy. Today's higher education sector is central to the future development of our economy. It plays a critical role in addressing the skills needs of tomorrow's workforce and in developing our knowledge economy through engagement in research and development. The cultural and economic life of Northern Ireland has greatly benefited from the positive contribution of the higher education sector through its diverse provision, alongside its reputation for excellence in teaching, learning and research.

In the current economic blight, our higher education sector must be recognised for the crucial role that it has to play in the Executive's plan for economic growth, investment and

social inclusion. The Programme for Government's cross-cutting priorities for health, social development, agrifood, education and skills, and research and innovation can only be realised by proper investment in the higher education sector to enable it to respond to rapidly changing skills requirements in order to drive our economy forward. Northern Ireland's economy is demanding a higher level of relevant skills, and economic success is increasingly dependent on knowledge transfer and innovation. With the population becoming more mobile, the higher education sector is more competitive, resulting in the funding environment being distinctly more difficult.

Our higher education sector not only provides a high-quality learning experience but plays a key role in meeting skills needs in the local economy by providing highly qualified graduates and reskilling and upskilling the existing workforce. However, to fully maximise intellectual potential, there must be continued cooperation between the sector, Departments and industry. Flexibility in delivering funding and lifelong learning will also be essential to increase part-time and postgraduate capacity in the sector.

Rebalancing the profile of higher education provision so that the qualifications offered more closely reflect the need of the economy and so that graduates develop the skills required to exploit future employment opportunities is also a key driver. The skills and research base needed for the 21st century economy is highly reliant on our higher education providers. We can see growth opportunities that exist in areas such as financial and business services, technology, telecoms and ICT, advanced materials and engineering, life and health sciences and agrifood. Local companies are increasingly global in their focus. From an inward investment perspective, there is a worldwide shortage of software engineers, so international employers are seeking out the regions where they can recruit the staff that they require now and in the future. It is, therefore, vital that we maximise such opportunities and help local firms to access the skills that they need to remain competitive, while ensuring that inward investors are encouraged to locate here because of the availability of the right people with the right skills at the right time.

Although the Executive will face many challenges in delivering on their priorities, it is imperative that economic growth and wealth creation are achieved. A strong, modern economy can only be built upon a healthy, well-educated population, backed by high-quality

public services in a stable society that has the necessary skills to attract investment and promote growth.

The proposer of the motion mentioned the inward investment that is being brought into Northern Ireland by our universities, and we have to be very thankful for that. I therefore call on the Executive to affirm their commitment to supporting and investing in the higher education sector in Northern Ireland for the future of our economy.

**Mr Hilditch:** As a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I generally support the motion. I congratulate the Members who secured the debate and acknowledge the overall efforts of the higher education sector today in bringing its message to Stormont as it showcased its work and lobbied for further support and investment. The Long Gallery was the place to be over the lunch period today, and anybody who did not make it up there missed something special.

There is no doubt that higher education is a key driver for the Northern Ireland economy. Even during this difficult period, it is a sector that has continued to grow and, as we heard earlier today, through partnership working with local businesses, it contributes significantly to the local economy. For that economy to continue to grow through high-value jobs and investment, priority must be given to innovation, creativity and research and development.

We have established the target that, by 2025, we want Northern Ireland to be recognised as an innovation hub and to be one of the United Kingdom's leading knowledge-based regions that embraces growth at all levels of society through creativity and innovation.

I acknowledge the Minister's announcement in August this year of additional funding for masters courses at Queen's and the University of Ulster. That is a step in the right direction and has the potential to provide opportunities towards helping to achieve those types of targets.

Today's motion is also timely as the private sector is expressing renewed concern, and with good reason, that there is not sufficient skills in the STEM-related subjects to provide the next generation of scientists, engineers and technicians. We must work towards closing the gap between the available skills and the volume of required skills, not only in the subjects mentioned, but we must address the shortages in health and social development-type subjects. It is not only a challenge to close the gap and

work on the hard-to-fill vacancies, there are requirements to replace the people who will retire in the next six years, and that number is estimated to be around 1,350. It is estimated that hard-to-fill vacancies alone could cost our economy £21 million annually in gross value added.

Although the motion calls on the Executive to reaffirm their commitment to supporting and investing in the higher education sector, there are challenges down the line for the Minister, the Department and Members. We regularly hear of the concerns, priorities and issues of many in the employment and learning sector, and we cannot be all things to all people. However, there is a great opportunity for government to approach the issues in a joined-up and cross-departmental way.

From my experience, I am aware of the Employment and Learning Committee's careers inquiry, and we look forward to the forthcoming launch of that report and the potential outworkings of it. Another great piece of work was the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee's inquiry into the creative industries and the recommendations that flowed from that one. There is a good opportunity to pull together a number of good pieces of work that will benefit the sector, build the skills base and encourage the Executive and all other partners to reaffirm their commitment to supporting the local higher education sector. I support the motion.

**Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion, and I thank all the sponsors for raising the important issue and all the Members who contributed to the debate. I also want to recognise the role that the three universities have played, not just in organising today's showcase in the Long Gallery but through the huge contribution that they make to the local economy. It is important, as the Chair of the Committee stressed, that we now talk of three local universities, as the Open University has this year completed its devolution to Northern Ireland. We must remind ourselves that we have a wider higher education family, including two teacher training colleges and our further education colleges, providing approaching 20% of the overall offer.

#### 5.00 pm

Our universities support the economy in three different ways. First, they make a very tangible contribution to the regional economy as large employers as well as generating a significant impact through their expenditure and, indeed,

that of their staff and students. That amounts to almost £1 billion annually. Secondly, the universities are investing in the higher-level skills that we require for the future economy. Evidence underpinning the Northern Ireland skills strategy shows that the jobs of the future will increasingly demand higher-level qualifications. Around 50% of the jobs in Northern Ireland will require skills at that level compared with around one third at present. The provision of high-quality teaching and learning leads to the development of highly employable graduates and postgraduates. In recent years, my Department has established a number of employer-led groups that aim to drive up the skill levels of the workforce across particular target sectors. Key to the success of those groups is collaboration among industry, education and government in the areas of ICT, hospitality and tourism, manufacturing, engineering and agrifood. All of them are reaping the benefits of that approach. Thirdly, the universities provide high-quality, internationally excellent research, which translates into successful innovation and knowledge transfer and the creation of spin-out companies.

Northern Ireland universities are punching above their weight compared with their counterparts in Great Britain, with income from business and community interaction.

Contributory factors to that strong overall performance include income from collaborative research, which is 3.6% of the UK total and about 50% more than you would expect for a region of our size; income from intellectual property, which is 6.9% of the UK total and two and a half times more than you would expect for a region of our size; and the number of spin-off companies still active after three years, which now stands at 48. That is 4.8% of the UK total and double what you would expect. It is also worth highlighting the opportunities that we have through the US-Ireland R&D Partnership. I had the privilege of hosting Dr Kerri-Ann Jones, the Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, in Belfast last week.

The higher education landscape in Northern Ireland has changed radically over this mandate. For the first time, we have a higher education strategy in place: Graduating to Success. The strategy sets out a long-term vision for the sector, with implementation targets spanning 2013 to 2020. Furthermore, to support my aim that any qualified individual should be able to gain access to the higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background, Access to

Success, which is a regional strategy for widening participation, was published in September 2012. Together, those strategies cover a broad spectrum of higher education activity. Responsiveness to the needs of the economy is the key overarching theme.

We have also delivered the largest increase in undergraduate places in a decade, with 1,350 additional places committed to over the next couple of years, including through the Executive's job and economy initiative. All those additional places are in STEM subjects. I will look to identify opportunities to add further places to our higher education institutions over the coming months. In parallel with that, the universities have submitted proposals outlining their plans for enhancing their focus on the needs of the economy and ensuring that the qualifications offered reflect that.

The Department has also committed to a substantial increase in the number of directly funded PhD places. Under Graduating to Success, we have set a target of doubling the number of postgraduate awards to 1,000 by 2020. We are on target to achieve that, with 71% of it set to be delivered by 2016, relative to last year's baseline. It is worth stressing that, rather than being in retreat, our higher education sector is growing in Northern Ireland.

The Executive have set a challenging target for European Union funding. The universities are central to meeting that target and are on track to increase their drawdown of funds by 2020. The target to draw down €50 million under FP7 by the end of December 2013 has already been surpassed, with €63.5 million having been secured by June this year. My Department has also introduced a new quality research funding model that not only promotes world-leading and internationally excellent research but takes into account the current and future needs of the local economy.

Recurrent funding for knowledge transfer, through the higher education innovation fund (HEIF), has increased by £2.68 million to £11.6 million, which is an increase of 30%. However, we cannot afford to stand still. I believe that the further development of a vibrant, world-class research base is crucial to the continued development of Northern Ireland's economy, with the higher education sector generating commercial opportunities and scientific breakthroughs, and propagating high-value jobs and investment. To meet these needs, continued access to additional funds is essential, and, again, the role of universities is critical in drawing these down. FP7 will be succeeded by Horizon 2020, which will run from

2014 to 2020. The budget is just under €71 billion.

Together with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, my Department has developed a £1.8m higher education EU support fund to support the employment of seven Northern Ireland Horizon 2020 contacts. Those appointed are providing specialist advice and assistance to academics and businesses across areas that are of economic relevance to Northern Ireland and priorities for the European Commission. The areas include energy, advanced materials and transport technologies, ICT and connected health.

As we look to the next comprehensive spending review, Members must understand that, if our higher education institutions are to maintain and, indeed, increase their positive impact on our economy and the wider community, they must be properly resourced. When tuition fees were introduced throughout the UK in 2012-13, the Executive agreed that fees for Northern Ireland-domiciled students enrolled at local institutions would be capped at £3,465, with only inflationary increases. This, however, created a funding gap of £38 million, and it was agreed at the time that my Department would contribute £17 million, with others providing £21 million. The current level of fees in Northern Ireland offers an attractive package of study for local students who remain in Northern Ireland for their higher education. We must be careful not to unpick that tuition fee settlement.

Fees of £9,000, which were expected to be charged only in exceptional circumstances, are now commonplace in the rest of the UK. It is logical to assume that, if the cap on fees in Northern Ireland were to be lifted, our local universities would align themselves with other UK universities, and fees would increase dramatically. If the financial incentive to remain in Northern Ireland were to be removed, there is the potential that more local students would choose to study in other areas of the UK. We would still be liable for providing such students with financial support, but many might not return to Northern Ireland, and their skills would be lost to the economy. There are also indications in England of a very negative impact on the uptake of part-time study. A similar reaction in Northern Ireland would have a severe impact on our attempts to widen access and upskill the existing workforce.

A long-term commitment to freezing fees cannot be advanced at the expense of passing on the costs to universities. That would simply undermine the quality of their offering. In contrast, we must also recognise that, with

access to additional sources of income, other universities have greater flexibility in how they expand. Therefore, if we are to maintain a local economy that is in large part based on the quality of our local universities, government and the higher education institutions themselves will need to work twice as hard to not only maintain but improve the quality of the local product and to remain competitive.

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to conclude the debate. I thank the Minister for responding, Committee members for tabling the motion and all Members who participated. It has been a healthy debate and a very informative discussion on an issue that I take a particular interest in. As a product of the higher education route, I understand the benefits for people. I also believe that education can play a key role in the building of self-confidence as well as enhancing employability skills.

Earlier, I attended a showcase event, the theme of which was "advancing knowledge, changing lives", and it was excellent. I am a great advocate of women, particularly mothers and single women availing themselves of educational facilities in their local areas. We have good centres of excellence that provide key skills that will enhance employability. Recently, I visited South West College with MEP Martina Anderson. The college is becoming a key educational centre within local communities. In fact, it announced an increase in full-time higher education courses, and I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the director, Malachy McAleer.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in creating a vibrant economy and is important to economic growth, investment and an inclusive society. To ensure that the local economy is provided with a skilled workforce, it is important that the Executive invest in higher education on a continuous basis. In any changing society, there are challenges, but there are also opportunities. The economy is demanding a higher level of relevant skills, and economic success is increasingly dependent on knowledge transfer and innovation.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

Pat O'Neill, the founder of Powerscreen, wrote a letter to 'The Irish News' last year saying that local engineering firms in mid-Ulster and east Tyrone needed approximately 25 graduate engineers but that very few pupils from local schools were applying to do engineering courses. The connection between employers

and our education system needs to be on a continuous basis.

A recent report by Copius highlighted that there is a huge skills gap in practical skills. In fact, there is nowhere in the North that qualifies welders, for example, to the highest levels needed for specialist work. Other organisations that gave evidence to the Employment and Learning Committee pointed to opportunities in the future, given the right investment and the right emphasis on skills. For example, Momentum indicated that it could create 20,000 jobs in the next five years. The Confederation of British Industry's research points to a range of future opportunities as follows: 10,000 jobs in the ICT sector; 7,500 jobs in the agrifood sector; about 6,000 jobs in health technologies; 1,700 jobs in advanced manufacturing; 21,000 jobs in tradable services; 10,000 jobs in tours; 11,700 jobs in the creative industries; 1,600 jobs in green tech; 7,000 jobs in renewables, powers and energy; and circa 49,000 induced direct jobs as a result of consumer spend. That is about 125,000 jobs. As we can see, growth opportunities do exist.

It is important that we develop education and training facilities that bridge the gap, whether it be through more apprenticeships or changes to the way in which our educational colleges react to the skills gaps when they are identified. Regardless of the economic situation, figures from UCAS show that the demand for higher education remains strong. Obviously I encourage that.

Going to what Members said, Robin Swann, the Chair of the Committee, said that education is about more than just buildings. He said that it is about investment in the community and creating opportunities. It is important that we safeguard that. He talked about how the Open University offers a route into higher education for anyone with a desire to learn. I encourage anyone living in an isolated rural area to consider enrolling in an OU course.

Alastair Ross placed emphasis on collaboration between the universities, employers, industry and government. He talked about how the economy is a central pillar in growing the economy. Lower corporation tax is obviously another important issue, which he flagged up. Like Alastair, I was also in Brussels last week, where they talked about an ICT shortfall across Europe. There are clearly growth opportunities there that we need to focus on. Members of the employment forum in Brussels talked about the lack of collaboration. I agree with the Member that we in the North are actually far ahead, although more work still needs to be done.

Sean Rogers referred to the very important issue of innovation in cancer research. He also talked about the agrifood industry, which I believe is important, especially for rural areas. It is an area where more work needs to be done in promoting skills, especially within the food and drinks industry. Chris Lyttle referred to higher education as an engine room for personal development. He welcomed the Connected initiative, which is important for engaging with the business community. Tom Buchanan said that higher education is important in the development of a knowledge-based economy. Tom also referred to the challenges in funding, especially with the economic climate that we are in.

### 5.15 pm

David Hilditch congratulated the universities for showcasing their work here today. He referred to the event as "something special", and I agree. He talked about how the higher education sector continues to grow and acknowledged the additional funding for masters courses. He also referred to the growth opportunities in STEM subjects. As I said, there are still a lot of opportunities out there.

The Minister recognised the huge contribution that the three universities make to supporting the economy. He referred to the investment in higher-level skills and emphasised the importance of collaboration among industry, education and government. That needs to continue to grow. The Minister also referred to the additional places in STEM subjects, and I welcome the good work that he has done on that. We need to put a focus on gender, which is also a big issue. He talked about doubling postgraduate awards by 2020, and, again, I congratulate the Minister on the good work that he has done to put a focus on all of that. He also referred to how the higher education institutions need to be resourced if they are to meet the needs of the economy. On that note, I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly acknowledges the key role of higher education in growing the local economy and helping to realise the Programme for Government's cross-cutting priorities in health, social development, agrifood, education and skills, and research and innovation; and calls on the Executive to affirm their commitment to supporting and investing in the local higher education sector.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Before we move to the next item of business, I want to remind the whole House of what I said at the start of business this morning about offensive remarks against Members and the standards of courtesy, good temper and moderation that are expected in the Chamber. If Members cross that line, they will be told to resume their seat, and they will not be called to make a contribution in the House for some time.

## Private Members' Business

### The Disappeared: BBC/RTÉ Documentary

**Mr Speaker:** I remind Members that they have a general duty to behave responsibly and ensure that nothing is said that may prejudice any future inquiry or legal case. If that is as clear as possible to all Members, we may be able to move on.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. However, as two amendments have been selected, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Before we go to the debate, I remind the House that both amendments can be made.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the recent BBC/RTÉ documentary on the disappeared, which outlined the harrowing practice of republican terrorists in abducting, killing and secretly burying people; further notes with extreme concern allegations of the involvement of the president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams TD, in the murder of one of these people, namely Jean McConville; stands firmly with the families of the disappeared who have suffered greatly as a result of the actions of republican terrorists; recognises the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR) in providing a mechanism whereby information can be obtained; and calls on all those with information to cooperate fully with the latest appeal from the ICLVR in the aftermath of this programme in order to bring some level of comfort to the families.*

Mr Speaker, I welcome your advice as to the conduct and tone of the debate. Clearly, this is not the first time that the issue of the disappeared has been debated by the House. The Ulster Unionist Party brings it forward today specifically because of the television programme called 'The Disappeared' that was jointly broadcast by BBC Northern Ireland and RTÉ and the subsequent, renewed call from the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR).

I have to say that, in my view, the television programme was probably the finest piece of television journalism concerning the Troubles that I have ever seen. Darragh MacIntyre's scripting and interview techniques and Alison Millar's production values made for something quite extraordinary. However, it was not the technical brilliance of the programme that made it so compelling. It was compelling, in the first instance, because it gave a voice to victims and survivors to describe to us the human cost of our Troubles. If we ever lose our appetite for listening to victims and survivors detail the human cost of the Troubles, we will lose contact with our own humanity.

Frankly, if we in the Chamber did not debate the programme, I think that we would become even less relevant in the eyes of the public than we are today.

The programme did more than give a voice to victims and survivors. It gave that voice to a particular group of victims and survivors who suffered and endured a particular form of torture, which was quite vicious and deliberate in its nature.

In a debate on the disappeared in April last year, Mr McLaughlin, the Sinn Féin Member for South Antrim, made it clear that the disappeared were the result of a "policy". It was a long-standing policy that Mr McLaughlin told us went back to the start of the 20th century and that saw republicans abduct members of their community, torture them, kill them, brutally dump their bodies and, most cruelly, deny their families the comfort of a Christian burial. That was a policy from republicans that was not condemned by Sinn Féin, which tells us that it is the party of human rights.

It was also terrorism. I think that it is fitting for Ulster Unionists and, indeed, unionists generally, to remind themselves from time to time that the IRA did not just kill and maim policemen and soldiers and attack pro-union communities; it also terrorised its own community. That community came to realise that, if you crossed the Provisional IRA, at best, you could be tarred and feathered — tied to a lamp post, your hair cut off and hot tar poured over your head, followed by feathers — and, at worst, you would be disappeared — abducted, tortured, killed, your body dumped and your family denied the right to a funeral service. Frankly, republicans consistently colluded to terrorise their community.

Now, of course, they condemn the policy. For example, Martin McGuinness told the House on 4 November that the murders were:

*"totally and absolutely wrong ... cruel ... unjustified". — [Official Report, Vol 89, No 1, p21, col 2].*

Those are fine words. Indeed, they are welcome words. However, those words come from a man who, by his own admission, had a huge influence in the Provisional IRA. He was second in command of the Derry brigade at one point, which coincided with the start of the implementation of the policy of disappearing people during the Troubles. Of course, Mr McGuinness said that he left the Provisional IRA in the early 1970s. However, the two questions that arise from his denunciation of making people disappear are these: what did he do to try to stop that policy when he was a senior member of the Provisional IRA; and, if he did try — if he did try — how come he failed? The list of the disappeared that the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims Remains provided shows that republicans continued to collude and terrorise their own community by disappearing citizens well into the 1980s, which was long after Martin McGuinness claims to have left the Provisional IRA. So, did he do anything to try to stop that policy? If so, why did he fail? If he cannot answer those questions, we must conclude that his opposition to the policy is somewhat new-found and, perhaps, self-serving.

The second element of the motion refers to the programme's allegations about the involvement of the Sinn Féin president in the murder of Jean McConville. The latest finger to be pointed his way comes from beyond the grave in the shape of Brendan Hughes, a man who, at one time, was surely closer to Gerry Adams than any other terrorist. It is the most serious of allegations, but there was more to the programme than an allegation about Gerry Adams's involvement in the abduction, torture and murder of Jean McConville and the disposal of her body without allowing her very large family the comfort of a funeral. There was also the input of Billy McKee, a 92-year-old man, who, to use horribly mixed language, is republican royalty. Billy McKee has no problem acknowledging that he was a founding member of the Provisional IRA.

What Billy McKee does seem to have a difficulty with, according to the programme, is Gerry Adams, who he challenged to come and say to his face that he was not a member of the IRA. Clearly, the Ulster Unionist Party is not the only organisation that has difficulty believing

that Gerry Adams was never in the Provisional IRA. The Provisional IRA does not believe that Gerry Adams was never in the Provisional IRA. Let me be clear: I believe Billy McKee, not Gerry Adams.

The programme, therefore, has implications for the broader issue of dealing with the past. Gerry Adams, if he is to be believed, says that Sinn Féin wants an independent, international truth process. As recently as yesterday, his colleague Pat Sheehan MLA said that they would engage fully if the right process were to be established.

Well, let us look at the only available evidence, which comes from the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. It is, by definition, independent, but it is also international because it has two commissioners, one appointed by the UK Government and the other by the Government of the Republic of Ireland. It was established in April 1999, fourteen and a half years ago. It offers privilege to anybody providing information. In other words, you cannot be prosecuted for anything that you tell the independent commission, so it is a form of immunity from prosecution. Basically, the British and Irish Governments are bending over backwards to help republicans to come forward with information.

Of the 16 people who are listed as the disappeared, only nine bodies have been found. In the case of Jean McConville, that was not because of information supplied by members of the Provisional IRA. Her remains were discovered by a member of the public. So, after nearly 15 years, only half the disappeared have been recovered because of information supplied by republicans — republicans who enjoy the privilege of immunity from prosecution if they engage in the process, which is independent and international.

Only half the families have had the comfort of a Christian burial because republicans engaged successfully. In dealing with the past, half the truth is simply not enough. Half the truth is not enough to properly deal with the past. Half the remains recovered is not enough for those who lost their loved ones to terrorists who abducted them, tortured them, killed them, disposed of their bodies and denied the families the comfort of a funeral.

I propose the motion. We will not support the Sinn Féin amendment because you cannot disappear the reference to Gerry Adams from the programme, you cannot disappear the words of Brendan Hughes and Billy McKee, and

you cannot disappear the stain of promoting a policy that is simply barbaric.

By the same token, neither will we oppose the DUP amendment because, clearly, Lisa Dorrian's family has the same right to the truth and comfort of a burial.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Mr Nesbitt:** So, although Lisa Dorrian was not part of the programme, we shall support the DUP amendment.

**Mr Mitchel McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to move the amendment tabled by my party:

*Leave out all after first "disappeared" and insert:*

*"; acknowledges the pain and anguish of the families whose loved ones were killed and secretly buried during the course of the conflict and offers them our full support; commends the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR) in providing a mechanism whereby information relating to the location of the remains of the victims can be obtained; notes previous acknowledgments by the members of the commission's forensic team of the cooperation and assistance they received from republicans in their efforts to locate the remains of the victims; calls on all those with information to cooperate fully with the latest appeal from the ICLVR in the aftermath of the documentary, in order to bring some level of comfort to the families; and further calls on anyone who has previously been in touch with the commission to contact them again in order to assist the commission to reassess the information available to it."*

We have, of course, debated this issue on a number of occasions, and what characterised that debate was that, although we may largely repeat points, there has always been an all-party agreement on the requirement for those who have information, no matter how little, to make it available to the commission so that the continued agony of the families of the disappeared can be alleviated.

That is, until today's debate. The motion from the Unionist Party, particularly with its reference to Gerry Adams, is, perhaps, ill-judged and not properly thought through. However, it could equally be deliberately designed to fragment the unanimous support of the Assembly over a

long time for the families of the disappeared. If that is the case, it would be very regrettable.

Obviously, Sinn Féin cannot support this motion as presented. Our amendment is designed to redirect us back to the commitment to the families of the disappeared. I appeal to the Unionist Party to accept our amendment in the interest of unanimity on this vital matter.

### 5.30 pm

Everyone in this Chamber will understand that this Assembly cannot supplant the role and authority of the PSNI, the prosecuting authorities or the courts, or indeed the Garda Síochána, who thankfully, now free from political interference, across that range of the judiciary and the legal and the policing processes — they are the only agencies that can investigate properly the issues that the Unionist Party has unfortunately inserted into this debate on the families and their campaign in relation to the disappeared.

Hopefully, a positive response may emerge from the Unionist Party during this discussion which will allay concern that its professed support for the families will be deprioritised as it seeks to indulge in political point-scoring.

Perhaps other unionist spokespersons across the Chamber will recognise the mistaken thrust of the motion and accept and support our amendment. At this point, I should make it clear that if our amendment succeeds, we will be prepared to accept the DUP amendment also, as it includes the issue of the disappearance of Lisa Dorrian and restates the fact that these matters remain subject to ongoing investigation.

Unless and until every family has had the remains of their disappeared loved ones restored to them, this Assembly with a united voice should speak to that simple and dignified demand. I commend and support all the families who have suffered a grievous injustice and who have campaigned with dignity for many years to locate the remains of their loved ones.

It may be helpful to remind ourselves of the stated IRA position on this tragic matter. In April 1999, the IRA issued a statement which coincided with the establishment of the commission, accepting responsibility for the deaths of a number of people it had killed and secretly buried. At that time, it outlined its position and commitment to cooperation with the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. It stated:

*"our intention has been to do all within our power to rectify any injustice for which we accept full responsibility and to alleviate the suffering of the families. We are sorry that this has taken so long to resolve and for prolonged anguish caused to the families."*

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Mitchel McLaughlin:** No, if you do not mind.

I thank everyone who has worked to help the families, including the independent commission, the PSNI, an Garda Síochána and the experts and staff who have been brought in to assist in that work. They deserve our full support.

Opinions may differ on this matter, but I accept that the IRA has provided full disclosure of all of the information that was available to it. Obviously, that has resulted in the recovery of some of the missing bodies, but it is equally clear that that has not been sufficient to fulfil the heartfelt desire of all the families. Therefore, the appeal for more information needs to be heard loud and clear from this Assembly — not a clarion noise of disagreement and squabbling amongst the political parties, but a united voice and a clear statement. That is the fault line that runs through the motion that has just been outlined by the leader of the Unionist Party.

A determined commitment to see this issue resolved — a message that is clear, definitive and capable of being heard and understood by anyone who possesses any fragment of information that will lead to further recovery, especially those who may not have responded so far — has to be our singular focus today.

Republicans have worked to address this injustice, and that has been recognised by the commission. I can quote the commission if people require it, but I have already done so in previous debates, and it is a matter of record. The commission has accepted that it has had 100% cooperation and support from republicans in respect of the very difficult issue —

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Humphrey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Mitchel McLaughlin:** No, I am sorry.

Mr Knupfer from the commission acknowledged the incredible difficulties and challenges facing the search teams when he said that, in some of the cases, the people directly involved or with

the information may have died. Members will recognise that, when reviewing events that have taken place over a 40-year span, memories will have faded. Locations will have changed and been affected by land erosion, agriculture and afforestation activity. Those sites, in some circumstances, have changed dramatically.

Let me make it clear that none of that minimises the IRA's responsibility for the suffering endured by the families — a responsibility that the IRA has accepted. It is imperative that efforts continue to find the remaining bodies that are missing. That is true in all circumstances, not just those that the IRA were involved in. The IRA was not responsible for all of the missing people that the commission is attempting to find. The suffering of the families has gone on too long and has been too acute and too agonising for politicians to play political games with emotions and expectations. We should return to the consistent position, until today, of this Assembly speaking with one voice, a clear message and a focus on the job that remains to be done.

As I have said, the remains of a number of people have been found, but others, despite some information being made available to the commission, have yet to be recovered. Joe Lynskey disappeared in September 1972; Kevin McKee disappeared on 2 October 1972, along with Seamus Wright; Columba McVeigh disappeared on 1 November 1975; Robert Nairac disappeared in May 1977; Seamus Ruddy disappeared in Paris on 9 May 1985; Brendan McGraw disappeared on 8 April 1978; and Lisa Dorrian went missing on 28 February 2005.

Let there be no doubt that the qualified, limited success so far demonstrates that we have a system, which, with cooperation, continued determination and focus by all political parties, can bring more support and succour to those families. For us to divide or dissipate that unity would be a terrible mistake. In closing, I appeal to the unionist party to reconsider the disastrous trajectory that it is on at the present time. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let us not have comments from a sedentary position.

**Mr Mitchel McLaughlin:** This will not help. You have to question your own conscience. Will this motion help a single family? Will it help anybody? Of course not. Will it make it more difficult for the commission? We should examine the option that has been identified by the Assembly: unity, unanimity on the issue

and standing four-square behind the efforts of the commission for the disappeared.

**Mr Weir:** I beg to move amendment No 2:

*At end insert:*

*"and anyone with information on the disappearance and whereabouts of Lisa Dorrian to immediately bring that forward to either the PSNI or the ICLVR; and further calls on the Minister of Justice to ensure that the necessary resources are available to the relevant criminal justice agencies to bring to justice those responsible for the murders of the disappeared."*

Before I move into the detail of the amendment that stands in my name and that of my colleague Paul Givan, I want to deal with the motion. At the outset, I state that we support the motion before us. Clearly, we will be disappointing the Member opposite because we will oppose Sinn Féin's amendment. Let me make it absolutely clear that we agree completely with the wording of the motion that has been put in front of us. We seek to add to it through our amendment, and I will come to that later. We agree so completely with the motion that we have taken the unusual step of not seeking to alter a word or a comma through our amendment; we simply seek to add to it. We believe that anyone who is a true democrat in our society should support the motion.

As the proposer indicated, this issue has been refocused and brought to the fore as a result of the recent BBC programme. It was a very moving programme that was very professionally put together. Indeed, anybody who saw it could not help but be affected by it. However, in many ways, it was simply refocusing on a problem that, in some cases, stretches back more than 40 years.

Let us be absolutely clear about this: we talk about the disappeared, but perhaps a clearer term is those who were abducted, brutally tortured and murdered. Among the many evils that were perpetrated during the Troubles, this was one of the greatest that was inflicted on our society. For families, the knock on the door and the abduction of a relative — a son or a daughter, a mother or a father — is an unimaginable horror. Indeed, as has been indicated, sometimes, when violence is talked about, the phrase "mindless thuggery" is almost dismissed. The reality is that this was very well thought through. It was, as has been indicated, a deliberate policy by which principally republicans sought control over areas. It was a

policy by which, mistakenly, they sought some form of petty revenge on people in their community, and one through which they wanted to establish terrorist supremacy.

The single act of it happening is bad enough, but that has been multiplied as the families have been deprived of the opportunity to mourn the victims and bury their family members. It was not just one incident in a night. It is something that, for many families, has gone on for decades. One of the saddest elements of this, as generations have passed, is that family members of the disappeared, who are no longer with us, have never had the opportunity to be able to come to terms with what happened and to get a degree of closure.

I take exception to the remarks of the Member who has just spoken. He effectively commended republicans when he said that they had worked to correct this injustice. Let us remember that, in the bulk of cases, it was the same republican terrorists who perpetrated that injustice in the first place. So, at this stage, I give no credit to those who have taken subsequent action.

The Sinn Féin amendment fulfils the honeyed words and certain wall of silence that have come from republicanism. It is an attempted whitewash of the motion. If we have to break consensus to ensure that there is not a whitewash on the disappeared, that is something that we are prepared to do. The amendment highlights all that is wrong about the attitude, particularly of Sinn Féin, towards the past and the disappeared. Its attitude towards the motion was, first, to try to suppress it and to question whether it had the legal authority to come to the Chamber, and secondly, to distract from it. Am I being cynical? Less than 24 hours ago, Sinn Féin's proposals to the Haass talks on parades and flags were leaked. Was that simply an attempt to distract from this issue? Thirdly, through its amendment, it has tried to ignore realities.

Truth has been talked about, and supposedly truth has been proposed by some of the Members opposite. I am mindful of the instructions from the Speaker, but when we reach the situation in which the president of Sinn Féin is denying the truth of his own involvement with the IRA, something which, as indicated by the proposer, even people within the republican movement, let alone anybody outside, do not believe, how can we have any faith in that form of truth? It also shows its attitude towards the disappeared. It is dodging reality and responsibility, and we get honeyed

words instead of practical help. So, we oppose its amendment.

Our amendment deals with two issues. The Minister of Justice is not here to respond, but our amendment calls upon him to ensure that adequate resources are available. I believe that those are being provided, and I hope that the Minister or, at least, some Members from his party can confirm that. It is important to have that level of support.

Our amendment also deals with the experience of Lisa Dorrian. From my experience, in my generation, the Dorrian family is the family that I have had most direct contact with. For those who do not know, Lisa was a young girl who came from my constituency. She grew up in Conlig and latterly lived in Bangor. She got involved with the wrong crowd, but she had realised the difficulties that she was in. At the time of her disappearance, she was intending to leave Northern Ireland and use some compensation money to set up her own business. However, that 25-year-old girl was denied that opportunity, because, on the night of 27/28 February, she was abducted from the caravan park in Ballyhalbert. While no organisation has claimed responsibility, and it has been unclear, it is widely believed that some form of loyalists were involved.

Although the exact circumstances are not known, it is clear that Lisa was abducted, tortured, murdered and buried somewhere. Since then, the family has appealed for information, and there have been a number of false hopes and false trails leading to searches on land. In fact, at one stage, there was a rumour that her body had been dumped at sea. If anybody wants to highlight the ongoing nightmare for her family, they should visit the website that is dedicated to Lisa Dorrian. As part of that, you will see a clock that ticks by every second since her disappearance. Indeed, the ticking clock for Lisa Dorrian is the reality for all the families of the disappeared.

There is a euphemism about a fate worse than death, which has been used in different contexts. The families of the disappeared, whether that is Lisa Dorrian or the others, are left with a fate worse than death. I suspect that most if not all of us in the House have at some stage lost a relative and a loved one, whether a mother, a father, a brother or a sister, and some have been unfortunate enough to lose a child, and we all know the trauma of that. However, at least all of us in the Chamber will have had the opportunity to grieve, to attend a funeral and to go to a graveside. No such privilege has been given to the families of the disappeared,

which is why it is a fate worse than death for them.

**5.45 pm**

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** I will give way briefly. I have only a few seconds left.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Thank you, I will be very brief. Does the Member agree that it is not only the fact of that particular inhumanity but the fact that their reputation and good name have also been destroyed?

**Mr Weir:** That is so, which is part of the tragedy.

When the Member who spoke previously was concluding, he complained that, in many ways, the motion was not going to do a great deal of good and that it was only words. Although we support the motion and have tabled an amendment, he is right in one sense, because all that the House can offer today is words: it can give moral support. However, there are those in the community connected with all of the disappeared who can go further and deliver on actions and start to bring the nightmare to a close for all those families — for Lisa's family and for all the families of the disappeared.

In conclusion, I urge the House to support the motion and our amendment. I also urge all those who are outside the Chamber and have information to bring the nightmare to an end and to ensure that we will have no need for debates on the disappeared in the future, because there will at least be some closure for the families.

**Mr Attwood:** Whatever transpires in the debate and the final votes, and whatever people do or do not say during the next hour, one thing is very clear: the eloquence of the families of the disappeared and other victims and survivors is far greater than anything that we vote on or can say, which is not to diminish what we are doing.

The truth of the matter is that, as with the debate that we had in the days after the summer recess, our politics over the past 40 or 50 years, and especially over the past 20 years, has gone through a number of phases. There was the ceasefire phase, the devolution phase, the devolution of justice phase, and the united stand against terror phase. If our politics is to be defined in any way at this time, it must be that the needs of victims and survivors, including the disappeared, must have primacy

and that this must be their time and place. In that regard, given that our party met Haass and O'Sullivan yesterday and that other parties in the Chamber met them this afternoon and may be meeting them as I speak, we need to ensure that the first test of the Haass/O'Sullivan talks in respect of the disappeared or all the other victims and survivors is to deal with the past in a comprehensive and ethical way.

The first judge of all parties, governments, terror groups and other agencies in these negotiations has to be, first and foremost, whether we deal with the past in a comprehensive and ethical way. Our most eloquent response to the programme on the disappeared and all the other memorials, commemorations and events of the past two, three and four weeks is to deal with the legacy of the past, through Haass, in a comprehensive and ethical way. If we do not face up to that responsibility and accept that challenge, and if we do not respond in solidarity and compassion with the victims and survivors through Haass and O'Sullivan, the debate does not add anything to the needs of victims and survivors and those who suffer the pain of the past.

I did not intend to go down this road, but I will. I have to say that the comments made by Sinn Féin today were shocking and appalling in equal measure. Let me explain why: Mr McLaughlin asked the Ulster Unionist Party to appeal to its conscience and accept the Sinn Féin amendment. He deployed the conscience argument, yet it appears that conscience escaped all those who were involved or knew the whereabouts of those who did not disappear, Mr McLaughlin, but were disappeared. Invoking the word "conscience", given that horror, trauma and tragedy, sat very uncomfortably with the Chamber tonight.

More than that, Sinn Féin indicts others for allegedly playing political games. It then says to the Ulster Unionist Party and the other parties in the Chamber who support the motion that, if they accept Sinn Féin's amendment, Sinn Féin will accept the DUP one. That act of party political bartering also sat very uncomfortably with the Chamber. When you analyse that, you find that it means, "Let us delete the words 'Gerry Adams' and trade them for the words 'Lisa Dorrian'." Tonight, Sinn Féin's offer to the Chamber was that it would include a reference to another victim if the House gave up the reference to Gerry Adams.

Furthermore, the reason why it is time for the Chamber —

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Attwood:** Yes.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I ask the Member to reflect that the IRA did not give the names of those who were disappeared all at once; it had to be coerced into admitting that others had been disappeared.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has another minute.

**Mr Attwood:** That comment stands on its own strength and authority.

It is time for Members in this Chamber to stand in solidarity with the disappeared and, at this time and in this place, say that there is also a need for the truth about and accountability for the disappeared.

It is also appropriate that the Chamber stands, not just with the Ulster Unionist Party motion but with the DUP amendment, and for this reason: in response to 'The Disappeared' programme, the Sinn Féin leader said that what happened was wrong and despicable. This question is left hanging: was it the secret burials that were wrong and despicable or the killing of all those who were disappeared?

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

**Mr Attwood:** That is the question that should be faced up to in the Chamber and in the community.

**Mr Lyttle:** On behalf of the Alliance Party, I offer support for the motion and for all the families of the disappeared. We will oppose amendment No 1 and support amendment No 2.

I welcome the opportunity to pay tribute to the dignity, courage and perseverance of the victims' families in locating the remains of their loved ones. It is difficult to comprehend the sheer suffering experienced by the families, but, as other Members mentioned, this powerful piece of RTÉ/BBC investigative journalism has given voice to their experience and campaign. It is, indeed, one of the most harrowing and darkest aspects of the violence perpetrated against our community. The forcible removal of people from families, and their torture and burial in unknown locations, has to be among the worst human rights abuses imaginable. It is an indelible evil on the history of our community.

Although there were many stories in the programme, I think of Dymphna Kerr, who refuses to visit the bogland where Columba is

believed to be buried, and the words that she said:

*"I have an image in my head of Columba standing there crying, looking into a hole ... I never done anything to the IRA, neither did my mum, so why are they torturing us — 38 years on and they are still torturing us ... All we want is to put him in the grave in Donaghmore beside my mum and dad."*

It is extremely difficult not to be moved by those sentiments, and I hope that anyone with any information connected to that issue is listening to those words and responds.

What also stick out are the malicious and false accounts of loved ones that were given, surely only magnifying the pain and suffering of families further. Indeed, for me, the documentary captured in no uncertain terms the frightening extent to which the IRA was willing to go to control communities. It exposed, more than ever, that the rhetoric of soldiers fighting a war could not be used to cloak acts of such naked sectarian evil. It also exposed a failure to adhere to the universal truth that the means used by any cause must be as pure as the ends sought.

I think that we are reaching a tipping point, as Mr Attwood alluded to, in the search for truth in this community. The victims and survivors have fought long and hard for truth, and they are not going away. The compulsion for people to tell the truth is more powerful than ever when we listen to their testimonies. I think that we have reached a tipping point for people such as Gerry Adams, or anyone with information, if they really believe in uniting this community, or this island, to give full disclosure on all those issues. I contend that, if they do not do so, we have to question their commitment to uniting this community and this island.

It is important that we acknowledge the work done by organisations to support victims and survivors, such as WAVE, for example. I think of the words of Sandra Peake of the WAVE trauma centre, noting the challenges that the families of the disappeared have faced, when she said that one of the biggest issues was in relation to the isolation that many of the families faced and the fact that they were unable to speak. I think they are finding their voices now, and I welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to add support to that voice.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will the Member also recognise, as has already been mentioned, the pain and hurt

experienced by Lisa Dorrian's family, who was disappeared from my constituency?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Absolutely, and I use today as an opportunity to appeal to anyone with information about the disappearance of Lisa Dorrian to come forward. As has been mentioned, although her disappearance is not covered by the terms of the legislation relating to the disappeared, the Dorrian family have endured the same torment. They have been unable to give Lisa a decent burial and have many unanswered questions about what happened to their daughter and sister. There are people who will know what happened to Lisa, and I appeal to them to examine their consciences and come forward with any information that they have.

This is a very personal issue for the families of the disappeared, but it is also part of the wider issue of how we deal with the legacy of our past in Northern Ireland. I believe that the approach to it to date has been painfully piecemeal and, as a result, many families in Northern Ireland enjoy little or no truth recovery about the death of their loved ones. My party has consistently held that the legacy of our recent past is far too important and effects far too many people to be dealt with in that way. We have called on numerous occasions for the British and Irish Governments to convene talks to deal with the legacy of the past in an ethical and comprehensive manner. To date they have failed to respond to that duty, but I welcome the Haass process that is before us. It gives us an opportunity as political parties to set our ambition high and to represent the voice of victims and survivors in their quest for answers.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Mr Lyttle:** I believe that we owe it to the families of the disappeared and all victims and survivors to give them much better.

**Mr Poots:** I paid attention to what Mr McLaughlin said and I have searched my conscience. My conscience says that, if you know of evil, it would be wrong to say nothing about it. What has happened has been evil manifested upon us, and both the motion proposed by the Ulster Unionist Party and the amendment from our party adequately reflect that.

**6.00 pm**

This documentary was shown on television recently. The following day, I was listening to 'The Nolan Show' as Alban Maginness spoke. Alban said that he had watched the documentary with his wife and son in entire silence, and afterwards they felt cold. I watched it with my wife and my son in silence, and afterwards we felt cold. That was its powerful impact. It started in 1972, with the Roman Catholic monk Joseph Lynskey. I do not have time to go through all the names, but we had Jean McConville, a widowed mother of 10. We had Columba McVeigh, a 17-year-old — just out of childhood really. We had Brendan McGraw, who was 23, not long married and whose wife was expecting his first child. We also had Charlie Armstrong. The protectors of the Roman Catholic community did not allow him to go to his Roman Catholic mass; instead, he was disappeared. Then we had Eugene Simons on New Year's Day 1981. That year started off with him being disappeared — murdered and taken away by the IRA.

On Remembrance Sunday, Mr Adams, for whatever reason, was interviewed by the BBC. It was a very unusual decision to interview him on that particular day, but he accused me of making "vicious, obscene and offensive" comments. As we look at this particular issue and this debate, we should consider the words that he used. When you consider the word "vicious", what could be more vicious than taking a widowed mother of 10 children away? And not just taking her away, but then executing her, more than likely after torture. What could be more vicious? When you have done that act, what could be more offensive than not even allowing the family to have the body returned, and to bury that body some 50 miles away on a beach? What could be more offensive than the republican movement lying through its teeth about it for years by saying that Mrs McConville had not been killed and would be coming back? Mrs McConville — a Protestant woman living in west Belfast and a mother of 10 children raised in the Roman Catholic faith — was disappeared by the IRA in the most "vicious", "offensive" and "obscene" way possible.

The fact is that the republican movement has been wholly offensive about this, because it has lied through its teeth. On the one hand, we have Gerry Adams who said that he was never a member of the IRA and had nothing to do with it. On the other hand, we have the Price sisters, Brendan "Darkie" Hughes, Richard O'Rawe and Billy McKee all saying that he was in the IRA and that he was involved in the disappearance of Jean McConville.

**Mr Givan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Givan:** Does the Member agree with me that the party that calls for the truth from everybody else needs to address the truth of what it did in the past if we are ever going to deal with the legacy of that and move on?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute.

**Mr Poots:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. The fact is that somebody is lying through their teeth. There is a saying in this country that you speak no ill of the dead, but republicans are speaking ill of their own dead. I am very surprised to hear republicans speaking of Brendan Hughes in the way that they do, given that he was, and would have been seen to be, one of theirs. However, when it suits them, he is cast to one side.

The fact is that, in the Haass talks, we are looking at the past and at issues about the truth, and the fact is that there is no desire in republicanism to tell the truth about these issues. If republicans cannot tell the truth about these issues and about their murky past on these issues, how can we expect them to tell the truth on any other issue? Therefore, any prospect of there being a process of some truth extraction commission is rendered impossible by republicans' engagement and activities in this particular process.

It is hugely offensive that, just a few years ago, they were saying that those actions were not criminal acts. Murder is murder is murder.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Mr Poots:** It is criminal. It is vicious. It is obscene. It is offensive. My advice to Mr McLaughlin and his colleagues is that they should search their own consciences.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus beidh mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar leasú Shinn Féin. At the outset, I want to say that I will not take any interventions during my contribution. I will be speaking — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let us not have remarks from a sedentary position.

**Mr McCartney:** I will speak in support of the amendment that was tabled on behalf of my party, Sinn Féin. In moving our amendment, Mitchel McLaughlin outlined Sinn Féin's position on the issue. Indeed, he outlined the role that the party and, in particular, the Sinn Féin leadership have played to try to ensure that grieving families are given their right to bury their loved ones. He also outlined the IRA's position and quoted from its statement in April 1999. It said

*"our intention has been to do all within our power to rectify an injustice, for which we accept full responsibility".*

The role that the Sinn Féin leadership played in assisting the commission that was set up to assist in the recovery of those bodies is also on public record. The commission has acknowledged that role and how it has assisted in bringing some comfort to a number of those families. However, other families still wait in the hope that similar comfort will be theirs. I place on the record and acknowledge the great dignity that those families have displayed throughout. Again, let me state that the injustice that was visited upon those families should never have happened. I include the Dorrian family in that. An injustice remains an injustice until it is put right. It is unjust in all circumstances to deny families their right to bury a loved one with dignity and, in these circumstances, a Christian burial. Therefore, all of us should do all that we can to ensure that people continue to come forward to assist in any way to end that injustice. It was wrong, and it was unjust. We must do all that we can to bring that injustice to an end and urge all those who can assist in any way to do so.

I also want to bring a word of caution to those who use the issue in an attempt to find some political margin or advantage. Those families deserve better. Their words of compassion in the midst of their undoubted misery is in stark contrast to those who seek political gain. The Ulster Unionist Party motion and the DUP amendment set a poor and worrying precedent in putting forward a named person, who, in this instance, is Gerry Adams. The place and method to test the validity of any allegation is by due process, not an Assembly motion. Many people over many years and in a variety of fora and media have been subject to trial by allegation. The Assembly should not lend itself to that practice. Due process is the means by which we achieve justice, not an Assembly motion.

The Assembly should send out a clear message that we are united in assisting the

families and in working together to bring this injustice to an end. The motion is designed to divide. Our amendment ensures that unity will be maintained.

**Mr Anderson:** I support the amendment from my two party colleagues. Today, we once again debate the dark and disturbing subject of the disappeared. We return to it because of the recent BBC/RTÉ documentary, which was an excellent piece of investigative journalism that not only highlighted the issue so effectively but, again, exposed the moral bankruptcy of Sinn Féin and the IRA on this vital matter. Viewers were struck by the very stark contrast between the genuine tears, trauma and deep sorrow of the bereaved families on the one hand and the crocodile tears and utter hypocrisy of Gerry Adams on the other. Anyone with a heart and an ounce of decency cannot fail to be utterly sickened by his weasel words and assertions that we are all to blame. No, Mr Adams, we are not all to blame: it is the evil perpetrators who abducted, tortured and murdered their victims and then buried them in unmarked graves who are the guilty party. The Members opposite who place their president on a pedestal must now realise that his past is coming back to haunt him and those who continue to support him. People on both sides of the border, quite frankly, do not believe a word that he says, especially when he denies being a member of the Provisional IRA in west Belfast.

Sinn Féin's amendment is high on rhetoric, but the words are weasel words. It is not only Gerry Adams who needs to take a good look at himself, but one of those who proposed the Sinn Féin amendment, Mitchel McLaughlin. We heard his rhetoric today, but let us remember also that he is on record in 2005 as having said that the killing of Jean McConville was not a criminal act. As far as I am aware, he has not retracted that disgraceful statement.

The facts are well known. For anyone to abduct, interrogate and murder a widow and mother, knowing that her children would be left orphaned, and then lie to those innocent children about the fate of their mother is beyond the comprehension of all right-thinking people. Even their brutality was not enough, for this evil organisation then secretly buried her, tortured one of her sons and failed to give the family any information for decades. Instead, they continued to lie.

I challenge anyone here today to stand up in this House and say that that despicable deed was not a criminal act. Better still, let them go and say it to the McConville family, face to face. It was not only a criminal act but a criminal act

of the most depraved and brutal nature. Those who ordered it and carried it out were criminals and murderers and are beneath contempt. The time has come — indeed, it is long past — for Sinn Féin to provide us with answers. We have had enough of the hand-wringing, the finger-pointing and the self-justification.

I am fairly sure that there are Members sitting on the opposite Benches who know something or know someone who might know something. They can provide us with some of the information that they refer to in their amendment. The public needs honest and straight answers to very simple questions. What was Gerry Adams's role in the abduction and murder of Mrs McConville? Sinn Féin is very good at talking about dealing with the past and moving on, but we will never deal with the past unless the republican movement is prepared to open up and own up to its wicked and evil past.

My party's amendment expands the motion to include the case of the young north Down woman Lisa Dorrian, who vanished in February 2005. It is important that this tragic case is not overlooked or forgotten. Those who perpetrated that dreadful crime are also beneath contempt. Lisa's body has never been found, and her grieving family is still left waiting. Her case must be kept in the public domain until there is closure and Lisa is given a Christian burial. Again, I urge anyone with any information in this particular case to report it to the PSNI or the ICLVR.

As I have said, words are not enough. We need action, and the relatives need justice. That is why our amendment calls on the Justice Minister to ensure that resources are made available so that justice can be done and be seen to be done in all the cases of the disappeared.

Finally, I want to say that we will never accept those who carried out those vile deeds as victims. They were the perpetrators; they were the guilty people. They cannot and must not be equated with those whom they so cruelly made victims. The glorification of terror and terrorism is obscene and wrong and must end. I support my party's amendment.

**Dr McDonnell:** Like others, I welcome the opportunity to offer support to the families of the disappeared. I support the motion and the second amendment, and I reject all efforts to obfuscate, confuse or divert the focus of blame for the whole horror that is the disappeared.

Sometimes, we guard our words on this subject out of due consideration and sympathy for the bereaved families, who depend on the goodwill of the associates of those who murdered and buried their loved ones and depend on them for information to facilitate the recovery of the loved ones' remains. We know that our reticence can provide a hiding place for the guilty ones. Under the right circumstances, such as in this welcome debate, we should speak fearlessly and tell the truth.

For me, the first truth is that the kidnapping, murder and secret burial in a lonely and desolate place of any of our people is not just some incidental aspect of the conflict that we all came through. It was, in fact, a well-planned horror beyond any rational words. Even in the tortured history of our island, it is an ugly chapter that stands out and stands apart. There are still too many families out there who desperately want the remains of a disappeared loved one returned to them. There are families who have had remains returned and been able to bury their loved ones, but there are almost certainly other families who have yet to learn for sure that their missing members were victims of this evil practice. Beyond the return of remains, what these families want above all else is the truth — the basic, simple truth. The number of people who know where bodies are or were buried is probably small but substantial.

### 6.15 pm

The second truth is that disappearing people is a very complex business, particularly if it is long-distance and cross-border, so the total number of people involved in these brutal disappearances must run into substantial numbers, and there were dozens more who carefully planted the malicious lies designed to cover the tracks and mislead the distraught families. We had families of the disappeared travelling the country asking questions and looking for answers and getting nothing but lies. We had a whole political machine — hundreds of people — dedicated to frustrating them, lying to them and supplying false leads and false hopes. Many of them probably did not know the truth, but that was no excuse then and it is certainly no excuse now for helping to sow the seeds of confusion. What they did was totally evil, it remains totally evil, and while they still deny or refuse to tell the truth, it will always be evil.

All those hundreds of people are not dead nor have they gone away. They are still out there, they still know a lot and they could still tell a lot. Some of them are still in association with some element of the provisional movement, whether

Sinn Féin or otherwise. We can be absolutely certain that some are still in the ranks. They are still there, still staying silent and still staying away from the truth. Some of them are still to this day repeating the lies that set up innocent people for murder in the first place. They are still there and they are still guilty, as long as they refuse to come forward to help the bereaved families.

We do not need some elaborate international truth machinery in order for them to do the decent thing. We do not need to be able to deal with all our past before we address the absolute worst bits. We will no doubt be told that we should not politicise this issue — indeed, we have already been told that the families do not want that. Nor should we allow anyone to use that argument as a hiding place. Sometimes the truth is very simple. As I look around the Chamber, I ask myself at times who could advance the situation for the families of the disappeared. Who could help? Out there, some of the shooters, some of the grave-diggers and some of the interrogators, some of the scouts and some of the drivers may well have gone off with the dissidents, but a lot of them did not. There are still dozens of people out there who each know a little bit of the truth and the lies about the disappeared.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Dr McDonnell:** They are amenable to the influence and leadership of today's provisional movement, including Sinn Féin, and all that is needed is the will to do the decent thing and come clean.

**Lord Morrow:** I support the motion and the amendment standing in the names of my party colleagues Peter Weir and Paul Givan.

We never debate this matter but a lump comes to our throats. We find that words are not adequate in such a situation. I suspect that whatever I say — indeed, whatever anyone else might say in this House today — it will fall far short of what should be said when we debate an emotive issue such as this.

I want to concentrate my few remarks today on one family. I am not in any way suggesting that that family's pain is greater or lesser than that of other families, but I talk about the McVeigh family because I know the McVeighs. I know Columba McVeigh, and I met Mrs McVeigh at her request. Dr Paisley and I met her on one occasion in Dungannon. I will never forget that meeting. When I met Mrs McVeigh, one thing

struck me immediately: this woman did not come seeking revenge nor was she even trying to get equal. She just wanted one thing in life before she left this scene of time, and that was the return of her youngest son, Columba. Columba McVeigh was a young fella on the threshold of life. His family live in the small town of Donaghmore, which is some two or two and a half miles from Dungannon. They are just like any ordinary working-class family, seeking to get on with their life and to do the best that they can. On that day, I will never forget Mrs McVeigh saying to us, "I only want his body so that we can have it interred in the family plot in Donaghmore", which is where his father, at that stage, was already buried. She said, "Before I die, I want him there." That was never to be. Mrs McVeigh has passed away — an elderly woman who was racked with agony, sorrow and grief over a son who had just disappeared for no apparent reason whatsoever. I suspect that those who took him had their own idea about why they should take him, which can never, ever be justified. Sadly, Mrs McVeigh passed away and was never able to be reunited with the remains of her youngest son.

We in the Assembly owe it to the families to do all that we possibly can to ensure that the bodies of the disappeared are recovered. I include in that, as the amendment does, the young lady Lisa Dorrian. We, as an Assembly, should unite today. I make this appeal to those who want to divide the House on the issue: you are just increasing the families' pain, sorrow and grief; you are doing nothing to extricate them from their pain. I appeal to those who tabled the amendment on which the House would divide to stop and think about what they are doing. We in the DUP have tabled an amendment that we believe does not in any way dilute or take away from the original motion; rather, we believe that it adds to it by including the name of that young lady who disappeared all those years ago. Is that too much to ask now, in this age when we are supposed to be moving on? We cannot move on until the resolution of this matter is brought about. We owe it to the families to ensure that we, as an Assembly, at least —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Lord Morrow:** — do what we can. I challenge Members: if you divide the House, you will add more grief and sorrow to those families. Do not do it.

**Mr D Bradley:** I begin, on this occasion, by reading a poem to the House:

*"Oh! breathe not his name, let it sleep in the shade,  
Where cold and unhonoured his relics are laid;  
Sad, silent, and dark, be the tears that we shed,  
As the night-dew that falls on the grass o'er his head.*

*But the night-dew that falls, tho' in silence it weeps,  
Shall brighten with verdure the grave where he sleeps,  
And the tear that we shed, though in secret it rolls,  
Shall long keep his memory green in our souls."*

A family member of one of the disappeared gave me that poem by Thomas Moore. It was, in fact, written in memory of the great Irish patriot Robert Emmet.

It is very appropriate under the circumstances of this debate, because the epitaphs of the remaining disappeared have not been written. They are Kevin McKee, Seamus Wright, Seamus Ruddy, Columba McVeigh, Robert Nairac, Brendan McGraw, Joe Lynskey and Lisa Dorrian.

The recent RTÉ/BBC documentary on the disappeared has brought into sharp focus the awful plight of the families of the disappeared. "Disgraceful" is hardly a strong enough word to describe the horror of the kidnapping, the judging, the sentencing and the execution of the disappeared by those who had the arrogance to claim that they were the rightful Government of Ireland with the power to act in such a way in the name of the people of Ireland and who castigated the rest of us as traitors when we condemned their actions. Not content with murder, they often blackened the names of their victims in an attempt to justify their terrible deeds and, in some cases, did not have the courage to admit what they had done. They said nothing and imposed omertà on the local community.

Those who quite rightly demand justice, equality, human rights and the truth about the past must also ensure that they, too, afford the same rights to others who yearn, and now is the time for those who have said nothing or have not said enough to speak and come forward with that vital information. The families of the disappeared have asked all of us in public life, including the Members of this House, to assist

them. The families have told me that we can help by reinforcing, in all that we say about the disappeared, that any information given to the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains is privileged and can be used only for the recovery of the bodies of the disappeared and cannot be passed on to any other agency or authority or used in a prosecution.

As I have done previously, I once again use the platform that this debate allows me to appeal to anyone, including Members of this House who have any influence over those who were involved in the actions that led to the disappearances, to redouble their efforts, to return to their sources and to help ensure that no effort is spared to bring closure for the families. Likewise, I ask anyone outside this House who may have information to use the mechanisms already outlined or any other channel with which they feel comfortable to convey information to the commission. The families have waited long enough. They deserve closure. Let all of us here do all in our power to help them gain that.

**Mr G Robinson:** First, I express my support for the families who are still waiting for the return of their loved ones following their barbaric and brutal loss and the inhuman treatment of victims and relatives by the IRA and others. I only hope that, some day, republicans will realise the great hurt and suffering that they have inflicted on this entire community. There can be absolutely no justification for the kidnap and murder of people in the manner that the IRA saw fit to employ. It is at best brutal and vicious, but I would describe it as cold-blooded murder and thuggery.

I also believe that it is impossible that senior people in the IRA, including the Sinn Féin president, were not aware of the vicinity and location of the remains of the disappeared. The president could be more helpful in bringing this sad torture of human beings to a conclusion. It is now only proper and morally correct that the families of the remaining disappeared have the divine right to say a dignified farewell to their relatives and loved ones. The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains has the thankless task of trying to bring closure to families by returning loved ones to their families.

However, that can be done only when those who know where the victims are tell the truth about the locations.

**6.30 pm**

Remember that we are dealing with human beings: fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. Sadly, some have already passed away without their loved ones being found. When we remember that we are dealing with human beings, I hope that those who can help will divulge their information to an appropriate source, such as the police, local churches and so on. It is my sincere wish that information be passed to the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains or any authority that can properly deal with the information.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, when people talk about dealing with the past, the pain of the past and moving forward in a shared future in the context of Northern Ireland, it is very difficult for anybody in the wider community to believe that they are sincere in doing that when they talk about and are involved in the glorification of murder and terror such as Easter, the Maze anniversary, the Shankill bombing, Castlederg and so on? Terror is terror, and murder is murder. The glorification is just as evil —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. An intervention should be short. The Member has a minute added to his time.

**Mr G Robinson:** I agree entirely with what my colleague said.

I hope that that shameful part of history can be brought to a conclusion and that families can be put out of their distress and misery. I also commend the recent TV documentary, which highlighted the great suffering and loss experienced by the McConville family and others. I also include the family of Lisa Dorrian, who have also suffered the loss of a loved one. I support the motion and the DUP amendment.

**Mr Allister:** Anyone with an ounce of humanity who watched the BBC programme a few weeks ago could not have failed but to be moved by the situation that was revealed, particularly pertaining to the McConville family. To see and to think of those 10 children about to be orphaned in a scene in which their mother was torn from the bosom of her family, with her children clinging to her, and then to be told that that act forwarded and advanced some political cause is a truly shocking indictment of that cause and of the inhumanity of those who did that dastardly deed.

The programme did not play to our politics; it played to our humanity. It was a challenge to all to search their conscience, even those

whose conscience is seared by years of justifying and supporting terrorism and, in the case of some, perpetrating terrorism. It appealed to whatever ounce of humanity might yet exist to do the right thing. The programme showed us the terrible consequences of that act, but it did not begin to tell the whole story. Anyone who has had the opportunity, as I have had, to meet members of the McConville family knows the dreadful life that many of those children were plunged into. They were separated and farmed out to various institutions. To have heard of some of the things that happened to them there, you begin to get the fuller picture of the horrendous horror of what was visited on that occasion. That is but one snapshot of the consequences of terrorism.

Then, today, hearing Sinn Féin, and Mr McLaughlin in particular, resorting to the mantra of reminding us, in a validation of what the IRA has said about all of this to justify and try to put a gloss on its actions, adds insult to that injury. This is the same Mr McLaughlin, who, as we were reminded, just a few years ago, in January 2005, told RTÉ that the killing of Jean McConville was not a crime. Why? In the words of Mr Bradley, it was done, it seems, by impostors who presented themselves as the lawful Government of Ireland, and, therefore, that which they did was not a crime. That was the distorted, hideous logic that caused that Member to suggest that this was not a crime. To this day, to the best of my knowledge, he has yet to resile from that. That is a shocking indictment of the humanity of anyone in the House.

Of course, the other aspect of the programme was the spotlight that it put upon Gerry Adams. Gerry Adams is the president, the leader, of a party at the top and heart of government in this land. It is not what I say about him that condemns him; it is what his own ilk said about him in that programme. It is what Brendan Hughes said about him, which was that he orchestrated, was responsible for and is knowledgeable of —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Mr Allister:** — the murder of Jean McConville. That is the reality that has to be addressed and a reality on which all in the House who sustain that party in government should reflect.

**Mr Givan:** On 4 November, the deputy First Minister, in response to a question from my colleague Brenda Hale said:

*"My full compassion and support are with the families. It has been a terrible ordeal; it has been a despicable ordeal. There is a huge responsibility on everybody, including me as a republican leader, to appeal to anybody who can assist the families out of the nightmare that they face daily." — [Official Report, Vol 89, No 1, p21, col 2].*

Fine words, Mr Speaker, put in stark contrast to the words of Oliver McVeigh, the brother of Columba McVeigh, about whom Lord Morrow spoke so powerfully. In response to the 'Spotlight' programme, Oliver McVeigh said on 'The Nolan Show', that he asked the deputy First Minister to practise what he preaches about people coming forward with information. He said that he met Martin McGuinness two years ago. He said that it was difficult for him to do so and that he was looking for assistance about things that he had heard locally. He asked Martin McGuinness to go personally to individuals whom he mentioned and ask them to come forward with information that might help to locate Columba. Martin McGuinness promised to come back to him. Later in the interview, Mr McVeigh said that he had met Mr McGuinness in a professional capacity on a number of occasions since. What did the deputy First Minister talk to him about? Sport. Was there any mention of the request that had been made? None.

So, fine words from those who sit opposite. Fine words from Mr McCartney, who appeals to everyone, especially republicans, to come forward. Speak to the deputy First Minister on behalf of the McVeigh family, who sought his help and got none, before you come into the Assembly and preach hollow words that run shallow.

Gerry Adams is, quite rightly, the subject of the motion. It puts the focus where it should be: on those responsible for the injustice caused. His denials leave us incredulous, and one wonders what planet he lives on. Tom Kelly put together an article that sums it up very well. It is the planet of "Gerryville". He said that:

*"Mr Adams vehemently denies any and all accusations against him as being personally vindictive, politically motivated, a conspiracy, the meanderings of disturbed minds or his all time favourite chestnut -anti peace process. In Gerryville it's Adams against the Establishment. No wonder the man has taken to hugging trees and tweeting about his favourite teddy bear."*

When Gerry Adams hugs his trees or tweets about Tom and Snowie, let him remember that

his republican movement denied the children of Jean McConville a mother to hug and denied the families of others a body to bury and a place for them to go and grieve. Let him remember the responsibilities of the republican movement that he led and leads to this day.

We have had contributions from a number of MLAs. Mitchel McLaughlin tells us to search our conscience. This, from a republican movement that would not know a conscience if it walked up and hit it in the face and said hello; from an organisation that is morally bankrupt and yet has the audacity to come in here and tell us to search our conscience. I trust that Members here have searched their conscience and will ensure that the focus remains where it should. This, from a party that says it is the party for human rights. Chris Lyttle quite rightly made the point that this is one of the gravest violations of human rights that there ever could have been, and yet they tell us to search our conscience.

Raymond McCartney says that we are point scoring by using families and by naming Gerry Adams. Yet only yesterday, 24 hours ago, the Member for South Down Ms Ruane used this Chamber to name a police officer.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Givan:** I will.

**Mr Poots:** Is the most unconscionable thing not to go out and take the life of someone else and disappear them? Therefore, the call for others to search their conscience is absolutely ironic in the circumstances.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute added to his time.

**Mr Givan:** I agree entirely.

When Members opposite complain about Gerry Adams being named, let them not be hypocritical and use this Chamber to name individuals who served the RUC with distinction. They tell us that we are playing politics in using families and by naming Gerry Adams: the hypocrisy is rank.

In finishing, Mr Speaker, I say that Alex Attwood made a very powerful contribution. He is exactly correct in what he said: that Sinn Féin is trying to trade the name of Gerry Adams for Lisa Dorrian. I trust that all Members of the Assembly who have always rejected violence, who have never allowed their conscience to be

seared by the terrorist activities that many opposite engaged in, will unite —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Mr Givan:** — and put the focus where it should be: on those who were responsible for the injustice caused to those who they disappeared.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin will not be supporting the UUP motion for the reasons outlined by my colleagues Mitchel McLaughlin and Raymond McCartney. Mitchel McLaughlin outlined the Sinn Féin position. I support the position that he outlined. Members in this Chamber subsequently distorted what he said —  
*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Ms Ruane:** I ask people to go back and read what Mitchel McLaughlin said. He acknowledged very clearly the hurt and pain suffered by the families of the disappeared.  
*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. It is quite obvious that the Member has not listened to my warning, either this morning or this afternoon. The Member should not make a contribution from a sedentary position. I mean Mr McCrea. Let me be absolutely clear.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I want to acknowledge the hurt and pain that I saw on that programme. Families deal with hurt and pain in many different ways. We know that we have had a bitter conflict here in the North. We know that over 4,000 people have suffered grievously. We know that a mother's pain at the loss of a loved one is pain, and that no mother should have to go through the pain that the mothers of the disappeared, and Lisa Dorrian's family, are going through. I ask that Members do not try to misrepresent a Sinn Féin position on Lisa Dorrian. Let me quite clear: Sinn Féin supports justice for the Dorrian family. I cannot be any clearer than that.

**6.45 pm**

What happened to the families of the disappeared is a wrong that can never be righted. I am thankful — I know that other Members are too — that some families have

found their remains and have some form of closure. I know that some families are critical of the efforts of republicans.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** No, I will not give way.

I know that some families are critical of the efforts of republicans. I understand and respect that, because none of us knows how we would react if we were in that situation. I also know that not all families feel like that. Those families have rightly taken the view that what happened to their loved ones should not have happened. However, I am mindful of a letter from one of the families, a letter that is in the public domain. Earlier in the debate, Members from all sides talked about the dignity and eloquence of the families. I will quote the dignity and eloquence of one particular family:

*"Only the small number of people involved in the killing and burial of my brother have information that might help. Everything else is speculation and rumour. I am satisfied that information has been passed onto the ICLVR in good faith. I ask those who have genuinely engaged with the ICLVR to continue to do so. I would call on anyone else with genuine information that might help locate the remains of any of those whose bodies have not yet been recovered to pass that information to the ICLVR through whatever conduit they choose. I would like to thank all of those who have been trying to help our family achieve closure: Gerry Adams, Fr Alex Reid, Fr Brendan O'Callaghan, the ICLVR, Geoff Knupfer and his team, and others who have been working quietly over the past 14 years. All we as a family want is to be able to bury our brother's remains beside our father, mother and sister."*

Sinn Féin supports that. I can assure the House that Sinn Féin will do everything that it can to help the families whose remains have not yet been recovered.

I will not deal with any of the political point-scoring and jostling. I will deal with that on another day and in other debates, whether the debate is about policing, the past, or whatever. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Ms Ruane:** Today is for a debate and discussion about the families of the

disappeared. I will not detract or be deflected from that in any way.

**Mr Elliott:** I will say at the outset that, although I normally take interventions and am not afraid to take interventions, on this occasion, I will reject and refuse anyone who wants to intervene, for the simple reason that I believe that the debate has been, by and large, very solemn and dignified. In fairness, that is how it should be, because it is the families whom we should have in our mind first and foremost at this time.

There have been a lot of positive contributions today. However, I have to say that none of those contributions, no matter whom it came from, was as powerful as what we saw from the families on 'The Disappeared'. I do not think that any of us here, on whatever side of the House that we sit, can reflect the powerful messages that came from those families. Like many others, I watched that programme and was extremely moved. I had read quite a bit about three of the disappeared in particular: Columba McVeigh, Jean McConville and Charlie Armstrong. However, one of the most powerful messages was in the screenshot of the TV interview that was carried out with the McConville family shortly after their mother's disappearance.

We saw those young children sitting on the settee. I do not know whether, at that stage, they knew that they would never see their mother again. I just do not know. Young children like that have expectations, and they probably expected that their mother would come walking back into the house some day.

I think that it was Mr Allister who highlighted the difficulties that the McConville family members went through during that time and in the coming years. In particular, it appears that social services almost neglected them and that they did not have any real support from the community, apart from their family.

Members rightly touched on the part of our motion that put a focus on the Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams. The TV programme put a focus on him, family members have put a focus on him, and it is absolutely right that the motion should do the same. There are questions to be answered, help to be given and assistance to come forward. All that I ask is that that assistance is given.

I heard Members from the Benches on my right indicate that they calling for that assistance and information to come forward. However, it is quite clear that there are people still living who

have that information and who are not coming forward to the commission. Why? I do not know. However, I will make one suggestion about why that might be the case. When those dastardly acts were carried out, were those bodies ever meant to be found? I think that there is a question there that is left hanging. I believe that the mindset of the people who took those individuals away, murdered them and buried them was that they never wanted them to be found. I do not believe that they had it in their minds that they would ever be found. It was part of the campaign and project that they would never be found and would be gone forever, out of sight and out of mind. Those families have had to live with that for years, and most of them have had to suffer it in the quiet of their homes and their hearts.

I will turn to some of the contributions to the debate. It was opened by my party leader, Mike Nesbitt. He highlighted that Sinn Féin disclosed that there was a "policy" to take people from their homes and families and to torture them, murder them and ensure that their bodies disappeared. He highlighted the input from the late Brendan Hughes and Billy McKee, and he listed that 16 people were disappeared but that only eight bodies were recovered because of information from the IRA. Jean McConville's body was recovered, but not because of information from the IRA.

I appreciate the DUP amendment. We accept that amendment on the basis that Lisa Dorrian's family is also suffering and needs answers.

Mitchel McLaughlin moved amendment No 1 but said that he would not support the motion. He said that it was a divisive motion by the Ulster Unionist Party, and he called on Members to weigh in behind amendment No 1 to bring unity to the House. One way that we can have unity in the House is if everybody weighs in behind the motion, which lends a factual and truthful aspect to the issue.

I mentioned the DUP's amendment, which Mr Weir moved. If that amendment is agreed, the motion would include Lisa Dorrian, and we are happy to accept that.

Alex Attwood highlighted Sinn Féin's appalling attitude in appealing to unionist consciences. I accept that, and I am sure that the majority in the House also accept it.

Mr Lyttle, from the Alliance Party, paid tribute to the dignity of the families and spoke of how that and their suffering must be recognised. He also, quite rightly, highlighted the malicious and

false accounts that were put out by the IRA after the kidnappings, abductions and murders.

I pay tribute to Alasdair McDonnell, who spoke one of the most telling lines in the debate. It was quite simple: what happened was totally evil. I do not think that any of us can describe it in any other form. What has gone on since is equally evil: namely, the withholding of information. Providing that information to the families to give them some hope, comfort and dignity would be hugely helpful and respectful to everyone concerned. If we were to get that information, help and respect, we could move this process forward.

It is about dealing with the past. This is part of the past, but it is also a significant part of the present and a part of the future for those families who suffered and continue to suffer. I do not know whether those who were involved have a conscience at all, but the conscience of unionists was appealed to here today. I am appealing to the conscience of those who know anything to give up that information to help the families who are still grieving.

I listened to the relevant poem read by Dominic Bradley, which gives at least a glimmer of hope to some families and something to cling to. Obviously, it will not end the suffering or despair that most of them feel, but at least it provides a sense of dignity and gives them a fitting thought that they can live with.

It is appropriate that the debate was dignified. I call on all Members to weigh in and support the Ulster Unionist Party's motion with the DUP's amendment. It would not be helpful to divide the House. The House has not been divided on this issue before. It would be appropriate if we all weighed in together. I am calling on Sinn Féin members in particular to look at their conscience, to weigh up what is right and to weigh in behind the motion.

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

*Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the recent BBC/RTÉ documentary on the disappeared, which outlined the harrowing practice of republican terrorists in abducting, killing and secretly*

*burying people; further notes with extreme concern allegations of the involvement of the president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams TD, in the murder of one of these people, namely Jean McConville; stands firmly with the families of the disappeared who have suffered greatly as a result of the actions of republican terrorists; recognises the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR) in providing a mechanism whereby information can be obtained; and calls on all those with information to cooperate fully with the latest appeal from the ICLVR in the aftermath of this programme in order to bring some level of comfort to the families and anyone with information on the disappearance and whereabouts of Lisa Dorrian to immediately bring that forward to either the PSNI or the ICLVR; and further calls on the Minister of Justice to ensure that the necessary resources are available to the relevant criminal justice agencies to bring to justice those responsible for the murders of the disappeared.*

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

## Assembly Business

**Mr Spratt:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You gave a number of warnings to the House this morning and did not allow any further points of order. However, I ask you to examine the comments of Cairíona Ruane in relation to the RUC. They were very hurtful to many in this House. Many of us served, and I served for 30 years, impartially and without fear or favour for anyone. Her comments continually, and the comments and the bile that came from her yesterday, are appalling.

Further, Mr Speaker, will you examine the fact that she named a serving or former police officer in the House yesterday? She said that there was an ongoing investigation. Well, no one should be named in this House if there is an ongoing investigation.

**7.00 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. Let me look at Hansard and come back to the Member. However, I see that very much as being part of the cut and thrust of debate.

**Mr Spratt:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. You have raised a point of order, so let me answer it. I said I would read Hansard and come back to the Member directly. I see a lot of these points of order that are the cut and thrust of debate. Members from all parties have, at various times, named people in this Chamber, so let us be — *[Interruption.]* Order. So let us be very careful. Certainly I will look at Hansard and come back to the Member.

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### C S Lewis

**Mr Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who are called to speak will have approximately six minutes.

**Mr Douglas:** Thanks to the Minister for attending this Adjournment debate.

On 22 November 1963 — 50 years ago this Friday — the world was stunned to learn of the death of President John F Kennedy, who was assassinated. On the same day that JFK tragically lost his life in Dallas, Texas, Clive Staples Lewis died, one week before his 65th birthday, at the Kilns, Oxford, England. The death of Lewis, a renowned author, theologian and academic, did not make many headlines. Let me mention a few points about the remarkable life of C S Lewis, who was born about two and a half miles from this Building.

Like JFK, C S Lewis was known to his family as Jack. That was a name he chose for himself at the age of three, ignoring anyone who called him Clive. Just as the mystique continues to surround the untimely death of JFK, so too, half a century later, do the writings of C S Lewis keep their enduring hold upon the popular imagination of millions around the world.

C S Lewis was born on 29 November 1898 in Dundela Avenue, Strandtown. He was baptised in St Mark's Church, Dundela by his grandfather Thomas Hamilton, who was rector at the church. In 1905, the family moved to the Little Lea on the Circular Road, a house that his father had built. That house is the location of the wardrobe that plays such an important role in those famous children's stories, 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. The house is privately owned and is not accessible to the public.

C S Lewis attended Campbell College in east Belfast. Earlier tonight, the East Belfast Partnership organised an event at Campbell College called "Lewis by Lamplight", which is part of the C S Lewis Festival. The famous lamp, thought to be the inspiration for the lamp in Narnia where Lucy first met Mr Tumnus, was officially switched on by First Minister, Peter

Robinson, and one of the Campbell College pupils.

I pay tribute to the East Belfast Partnership, which has organised the excellent inaugural C S Lewis Festival that is taking place this week. Although the festival will be based in east Belfast, where C S Lewis spent his childhood, it will feature other events across the city, with theatre, exhibitions, art, music, tours and outdoor events running until Saturday 23 November. It will be an opportunity for people in Belfast and beyond to remember and celebrate the life of a literary genius.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will the Member join me in welcoming the fact that, this coming Friday, on the fiftieth anniversary of the death of C S Lewis, at Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, he is to be permanently remembered? That is a fitting tribute to a great poet and ambassador not only for east Belfast but Northern Ireland.

**Mr Douglas:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with him. I will mention that later, and maybe add to what he said.

The fantastic programme of events organised by the East Belfast Partnership is a great way to celebrate the life of one of Belfast's greatest sons. Already there has been a great response to the planned events from young and old alike, but, in order to build on the momentum and interest that has been shown, I suggest that we investigate the designation of a C S Lewis celebration day on the date of his birthday, which is 29 November.

After Campbell College, which he left due to respiratory problems, C S Lewis was sent to the health resort town of Malvern in Worcestershire. There, he attended a local preparatory school and went on in his academic career to become the creator of some of the most loved children's stories. Yet he was much more than a children's author. He was also a brilliant scholar, holding prestigious academic positions, first at Oxford, then at Cambridge, as well as becoming one of the world's most influential Christian thinkers. 'The Irish Times' this morning contained an interesting article, including these words:

*"Even 50 years after his death, no one can equal this Irish man's gift for presenting the essentials of Christian faith in straightforward language."*

Lewis is described as an Irishman and as a child of pre-partitioned Ireland with roots throughout the island. Undoubtedly, Lewis was influenced by the country as a whole, but he was also a proud Ulsterman. His heart was firmly fixed in the northern counties, especially County Down. He once remarked to his Ulster student David Bleakley, who was a lovely man who became an MP for east Belfast:

*"Heaven is Oxford lifted and placed in the middle of County Down."*

Although he spent his whole career teaching at Oxford and Cambridge, for him, County Down was heaven. A year after marrying the gifted American writer Joy Davidman, they belatedly honeymooned in Crawfordsburn, County Down in July 1958.

C S Lewis grew up in Ulster. He continued to return for his vacation almost every year of his life, except when prevented by war or illness. In fact, he was wounded in the First World War. What an amazing life for one of our east Belfast born and reared sons, who wrote sci-fi novels, Christian books, children's sagas, academic criticism and created the most famous lion and wardrobe in literature.

I am sure that most of us have seen the bronze piece of art at the Holywood Arches. Stood, fittingly, outside Holywood Arches library, the life-size statue is called "The Searcher". It depicts the young man Digory opening a door of the old Victorian wardrobe for those who wish to enter the magical world of Narnia. Renowned Ulster artist and sculptor Ross Wilson, to whom we owe much for spearheading a C S Lewis revival in east Belfast, unveiled the bronze statue in 1998 on the centenary of C S Lewis's birth. Inscribed on that sculpture are these words of Ross Wilson:

*"C.S. Lewis did not just hang clothes in a wardrobe, he hung ideas — great ideas of sacrifice, redemption, victory, and freedom for the Sons of Adam and the Daughters of Eve"*.

He goes on:

*"Set within the commonplace, revelation within something that looks ordinary on the outside — revelation through investigation. We should not stop looking, some of the greatest things can be found in the most ordinary of places, like a wardrobe."*

Is it not amazing, Mr Speaker, that 'The Chronicles of Narnia' have sold well over 100

million copies? In fact, in 2008, a survey found that most people believed that his book 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' from 'The Chronicles of Narnia' was the best children's book of all time. 'Mere Christianity' and 'The Screwtape Letters', two openly Christian books by Lewis, sell about 300,000 copies each year. So, tonight, we celebrate the life and legacy of a literary giant who made, and continues to make, such an impact on the world.

This week, that life and legacy of C S Lewis will be honoured, as the Member said, with a permanent tribute in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner. A memorial stone inscribed with a quotation highlighting C S Lewis's Christian faith will be placed among those for playwrights and poets, including such notable people as Robert Burns, William Shakespeare and John Keats, cementing his place among the nation's greatest writers of all time.

It is fitting that tonight we are honouring one of Belfast's greatest sons here in our seat of government. I believe that it would be entirely appropriate if we were to mark the life of C S Lewis, whose legacy remains varied and vast, with a permanent tribute in Parliament Buildings. Mr Speaker, I sent you a letter this week requesting that we look at having some sort of art piece permanently in this Building.

To conclude, I thank the staff in the Assembly Library for their help. They have been more than helpful in providing information for the Adjournment debate. I also thank the Linen Hall Library staff for all their help. Congratulations to the Linen Hall Library because it has organised a superb C S Lewis exhibition, *Through the Wardrobe*, which runs until 24 December. I encourage Members to go along to that if they get a chance.

Finally, 50 years after his death, C S Lewis continues to inspire and fascinate millions, just like the late Seamus Heaney, who was a hero of mine and another great literary figure. Lewis was a towering intellectual figure, a popular fiction author who inspired a global movie franchise around the world of Narnia, and an atheist turned Christian thinker. Lewis's gift to the world was his stories and his belief in the power of storytelling, which shone through each word that he wrote.

Let me leave you with one of his famous quotes, which I believe is so relevant to all of us in the Chamber. He said:

*"There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind."*

**Mrs McKeivitt:** As has been highlighted, this Friday marks 50 years since the death of C S Lewis, one of Belfast's most famous sons. Lewis is considered by many to be the greatest Christian writer of the second half of the 20th century. Born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1898, C S Lewis was a scholar and author best known for his beloved series of children's books 'The Chronicles of Narnia', including 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'.

Lewis went to Campbell College, a school just one mile from where we sit, before attending Oxford University as a student, where he later became a fellow. He spent most of his adult life in the grounds of Oxford where he taught, wrote and lectured for nearly 30 years. While he continued his work as a scholar, Lewis began a career as a Christian writer and novelist. He wrote 38 books during his lifetime, and not one of them has ever been out of print. Although it is 50 years since his death, I do not think that we will ever see the end of the enjoyment that each of his 38 books brought around the world.

The publisher Harper Collins boasts that Lewis's 'The Chronicles of Narnia' books alone have sold more than 100 million copies. 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', 'Prince Caspian' and 'The Voyage of the Dawn Treader', three of the Narnia books, were recently adapted to major motion pictures.

C S Lewis died at the age of 64 in his Oxford home on the same day as the assassination of President John F Kennedy.

If you type C S Lewis into Google, 21,300,000 results will come up in 0.18 seconds. A statue dedicated to Lewis stands in east Belfast, and an inaugural C S Lewis Festival takes place from today until 23 November, which will be funded by Belfast City Council. The new C S Lewis Trail, which will be launched during the festival, will take people through east Belfast and the landmarks that helped to shape the young writer's life and work.

### 7.15 pm

The C S Lewis exhibition on display in the Linen Hall Library includes a wonderful work by artist Jonathan Barry. Barry's work includes scenes from the 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. Only an Irish artist could capture an Irish author's imagination as Barry has done.

C S Lewis also has a strong connection with my constituency of South Down and the Carlingford lough region, particularly the beautiful Kilbroney Forest Park in Rostrevor. That forest was the

natural environment and cultural setting from which C S Lewis derived inspiration for 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. To celebrate that occasion, I am pleased to say that Newry and Mourne District Council, in collaboration with the Mourne Mountains Landscape Partnership, plan to implement a Narnia trail in Kilbroney Forest Park. I have read the concept report for the project, and I am confident that it will be an excellent addition to the area. Unfortunately, the trail will not be ready for this anniversary, but a walk along the Narnia trail would certainly be a wonderful way to mark future anniversaries of this most respected author.

Have we done enough here at home in the land where C S Lewis was born to honour a man adored by millions? Are we guilty of neglecting C S Lewis? We have done much to recognise and honour people such as George Best and Van Morrison, but have we done enough for C S Lewis? In support of the Member who spoke previously, I would support any affiliation, whether through art or in some other way. I am happy to discuss a way in which we can celebrate the life of C S Lewis.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Danny Kinahan.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. You caught me slightly off guard. I thought that I was going to be last, but I am very pleased to be called. I congratulate Belfast City Council and the East Belfast Partnership on their commemorations for C S Lewis. We are right to celebrate a fine intellectual man who had three Oxford degrees. Even though he was from County Down, as a County Antrim man, I give him all the praise that he deserves.

I also grew up on 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' and all his books. I even played games in other people's houses and got shut in a cupboard for more than an hour and a half on one occasion but, sadly, found no way out to the snow or a Mr Tumnus to help me. I feel that we should look at not only how we can commemorate him but how we can, sadly in a commercial way, make more of our great writers. We have Brian Friel; Brian Moore; the poet Louis MacNeice; Seamus Heaney, of course; Oscar Wilde; and Samuel Beckett. Only last week, I spoke about a sporting hall of fame, and we should look at something such as that as a means of commemoration. C S Lewis is known worldwide, and I read that the film brought in \$750 million alone. Here is someone who would really draw people to Northern Ireland. If that means a trail in the Mournes or something in Belfast, we should look at that in an even wider way. A sculpture has been

created, so perhaps we should have a sculpture chase around Ireland whereby people could move from one art object to another and link it to something such as the Titanic, so that it brings people here. I like the idea of a statue or something else to commemorate him here, but let us make it work for Northern Ireland.

As a young child, probably a particularly naughty one, my parents tried to bring me up on 'The Screwtape Letters' and the fact that the devil was sitting on my shoulder tempting me. Little did I know that I would end up here. Lewis was a Christian whom we should all respect. He did not simply accept what he was told. Members referred to the fact that, in line with 'Mere Christianity', he was continually looking at how we could be more human. He was trying to set out a rational basis for Christianity and, with it, build a compassionate morality. He believed:

*"Christianity is not a religion of flitting angels and blind faith, but of free will, an innate sense of justice and the grace of God."*

Maybe we should all reflect on that because those are the three values that we should use here in the Chamber.

Let us look through the examples from Lewis's life. Having created a pact with Edward Moore, who was later killed in the First World War, he went on to look after Mrs Moore, as he had promised. There is a set of values that all of us must admire. Then, in 'Shadowlands', we see the awful end to his life and that of Joy Davidman. It is a heartbreaking but wonderful example of love. Again, he is setting us examples.

I will end on two further quotations. I was expecting to be called to speak last and to have to cross these off as other Members used them.

*"True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."*

Another is:

*"You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream."*

He sets fantastic examples, and we should sit down and work out how we should commemorate him. I welcome tonight's debate. It is extremely good to see.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank Mr Douglas for securing the debate. It is a real relief to be able to debate something uniquely positive, and I am grateful

for the opportunity to be able to celebrate the life of C S Lewis in the week of the fiftieth anniversary of his death. He was one of east Belfast's finest sons. I will make sure that we emphasise that tonight, being an east Belfast boy myself.

I grew up on the 'Chronicles of Narnia' and, in particular, 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'. The creative writings of C S Lewis have inspired imagination and a love of reading and storytelling among children all over the world.

For me, two quotations from the 'Chronicles of Narnia' capture the symbolism and fun of C S Lewis's children's literature. The first is:

*"I am [in your world], said Aslan, 'but there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.'"*

Another quotation is:

*"Girls aren't very good at keeping maps in their brains', said Edmund, 'That's because we've got something in them', replied Lucy."*

That is a small insight into the mischief and fun that he brings to his children's writing, as well as its symbolism.

I have also been guided in my adult faith by the world-renowned Christian writings of C S Lewis, which others mentioned, such as 'Mere Christianity' and the fantastic 'The Screwtape Letters'. In 'Mere Christianity', C S Lewis writes:

*"As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you."*

We could be here all night reading some of the quotations from 'The Screwtape Letters'. Here are some of the ones that I enjoy most:

*"It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out."*

He also says:

*"When He [God] talks of their losing their selves, He means only abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done*

*that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever."*

He also writes:

*"The humans live in time but our Enemy (God) destines them for eternity."*

I think that the creative way in which C S Lewis turns 'The Screwtape Letters' on its head is a brilliant direction for us all.

The aspect of the life of C S Lewis that I love most, as an east Belfast boy who went to Belmont Primary School and was christened in the same church, St Mark's, is the fondness and healthy pride that he had for east Belfast. In the 1955 work, 'Surprised By Joy', he writes, with a degree of self-praise, I suppose:

*"I think we Strandtown and Belmont people had among us as much kindness, wit, beauty and taste as any circle of the same size that I have ever known."*

He really does have a mischievous passion for east Belfast, despite having lived in other areas.

Various literary commentators argue that C S Lewis's frustration with some of the sectarian conflict in Belfast led him to be a passionate ecumenical Christian. I think it is perhaps worth reflecting on what he would have made of some of the events that we have seen in our community over the past year. We can learn a lot from the teachings and writings that he would have applied to those situations.

We are also able to celebrate the statue that has been erected yards from my office at the Holywood Arches. It is a daily reminder of one of east Belfast's finest sons. Indeed, some of the movies that have been inspired by his writing have been the highest grossing this century, as has been mentioned. He truly has become a worldwide figure, yet still belongs to east Belfast.

I also join in paying tribute to the East Belfast Partnership, Wendy Langham, Sandy Smyth and Belfast City Council for inaugurating the C S Lewis Festival that is taking place this week. There are going to be some fantastic events. Bus tours, readings and trails have all been mentioned. People can visit the Connswater Community Greenway C S Lewis Festival website to find out how they can get involved. It really is a fitting way to celebrate and to bring to life everything that was great about C S Lewis. I agree that, in response to the question of

whether we have done enough, many people would say that, until now, perhaps we have not done enough to celebrate and mark the life of C S Lewis.

In response to the suggestion made by Mr Douglas this evening, maybe we could go one further and think about creating a Poets' Corner in the Assembly, where C S Lewis and some of the other great artists that have been mentioned could be celebrated in a united way. Indeed, I am aware of people who are working in relation to a children's literature centre on an Ireland basis. Perhaps those MLAs among us who are passionate about the life of C S Lewis, children's literature and the arts in general could get together to consider some of the suggestions that are coming forward tonight. I support everything that has been said in relation to the amazing life of C S Lewis.

**Mr Newton:** Like others, I commend my party colleague Sammy Douglas for securing the debate. It is fitting that we have the debate this evening and fitting that we pay tribute to C S Lewis, his life, his values, his achievements and the standards that he set. It would have been remiss if we had allowed the fiftieth anniversary of his passing to go without marking it in some fitting way. It is all the more important that we pay tribute to him as he is honoured in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner. I have to say that the fiftieth anniversary would have passed me by, only that I read an article about him being honoured in Poets' Corner. I am glad that we have not allowed this landmark to pass without speaking here today.

As others have said, he is one of Belfast's most famous sons. He was proud of his east Belfast roots and his roots in this country. Indeed, as has been said, even though he moved away, he was a regular visitor to the Province. He recalled his life in east Belfast — if you do not mind, Mr Speaker, I am going to read it so that I get it accurate — and, indeed, his life in his childhood home, which, as others have said, is still on the Circular Road and is a private home. I understand that the chap who owns it is sick of people driving up in buses and taking photographs of his house, to the extent that he has had to put private gates on the home. They were knocking the door and wanting to know whether they could come in to have a look around.

C S Lewis recalled his childhood home and said that it was:

*"almost a character in my story. I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics*

*explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes and the noise of the wind under the tiles. Also of endless books ... From our front door we looked down over wide fields to Belfast Lough and across it to the long mountain line of the Antrim shore."*

Therefore, he was proud of his east Belfast and County Down links but also looked longingly at that County Antrim scene.

### 7.30 pm

He has a worldwide reputation, as has been said. He is more appreciated, I think, in America. Is it not often case that prophets are not appreciated in their own land and that their value is really appreciated in other lands? His 'Chronicles of Narnia' has sold 100 million copies worldwide, an achievement that is unlikely to be bettered, certainly in our lifetime, and it was converted into blockbuster films, on top of all that has been said about his life.

Much has been said about him, but Mrs McKeivitt and Danny Kinahan questioned whether we have made enough of C S Lewis. Mr Lyttle made the point that he was christened in the same church as C S Lewis, and I will say that just yesterday the minister was looking for everybody who was christened there for their freewill offerings, so you may want to go and make contact with that minister. *[Laughter.]* He said that it has been a long time since you have been to make an offer to the church.

Anyway, the question is whether we have made enough of C S Lewis. Compared with what America has done for him, the answer has to be no, because the fact is that scores of Americans arrive here every year to look at where C S Lewis trod, went to school and enjoyed his playful childhood. I suppose that we have not made enough of that.

I was pleased to play a small part via Belfast City Council in securing funding for the C S Lewis festival, which is a springboard that we can use to go on to even greater things. We remember that, for other reasons, we were neglectful, nearly ashamed of and did not want to speak about the Titanic for such a long time. However, we have neglected C S Lewis. We have neglected the magnitude of the man and the figure that he is worldwide, but we now have a springboard and, in line with what Mrs McKeivitt and Mr Kinahan said, C S Lewis could make a huge contribution to Northern Ireland life in the future. Look at what is left of C S Lewis around Belfast. Look at where we came from with that great ship Titanic —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost gone.

**Mr Newton:** Let me just finish on this point. C S Lewis offers us an opportunity to use that springboard to move on to even greater things, to celebrate his life and stature, and to honour him in a way that we have never done before. By doing so, we can make a contribution to his life and all his values, and we can honour and embrace those values in the life of Northern Ireland.

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt do Sammy Douglas as comóradh 50 bliain de bhás C S Lewis a roghnú mar ábhar díospóireachta.

I thank Sammy Douglas for selecting the fiftieth anniversary of the death of C S Lewis as a topic for the Adjournment debate. As we have heard, there is no doubt that C S Lewis was an intellectual giant of the 20th century and arguably one of the most influential Christian writers of his day. His major contributions were in the forms of literary criticism, children's literature, fantasy literature and popular theology. His work brought him international renown and acclaim.

C S Lewis, as many mentioned, wrote more than 30 books, allowing him to reach a vast audience. It was also mentioned with fondness that his works include 'The Chronicles of Narnia', 'Out of the Silent Planet', 'The Four Loves' and 'Mere Christianity', to name but a few. So, it is fitting that the inaugural C S Lewis Festival will take place from 18 to 23 November to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the death of that renowned author, theologian and academic. Fair play to Belfast City Council for doing that. He famously wrote 'The Chronicles of Narnia', which many of us hold dear. The new C S Lewis Trail, which will also be launched during the festival to transport us through Lewis's east Belfast and the landmarks that helped to shape his young life and work, will be a lasting tribute for us all to enjoy.

The East Belfast Partnership is organising the festival in conjunction with the council, and the Arts Council has acted as an adviser on aspects of the festival. The Replay Theatre Company, which is a funded client of the Arts Council, is also participating. The Replay Theatre Company will tour an interactive adventure that is inspired by C S Lewis's 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' to P4 classes in Belfast primary schools to excite their

imaginations and to inspire them to explore the author's wonderful worlds.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, through the Ulster-Scots Agency, was also involved in a joint project with Tourism Ireland that records Lewis's Ulster-Scots ancestral links and demonstrates a connection with his east Belfast routes. The book reveals that Lewis's maternal line indicates a strong, previously undiscovered, Ulster-Scots lineage that can be traced back to James II of Scotland. As we know, there are many more events to appeal to adults and children alike.

The C S Lewis Festival, which focuses on the full range of the writer's artistic and cultural work and on his writing for children and young people, is a means to recover ownership of the global Narnia brand for the North. It will help us to throw a spotlight on a hidden and wonderful history of the east of the city and its association with one of the most accomplished and renowned writers and academics of his generation. It is a great way to celebrate the life of one of Belfast's greatest sons. He is recognised as one of the most talented authors in the world, and he has brought our city international acclaim.

To commemorate the anniversary, Libraries NI is running a programme of events, including exhibitions, talks and readings. They will be centred around Holywood Arches Library and Belfast Central Library, both of which are close to the area where C S Lewis was born. As mentioned previously, the Linen Hall Library will also mark the anniversary, with such events as 'Through the Wardrobe', which includes C S Lewis's personal items from the library's archives. That is part of the inaugural C S Lewis Festival, which is run by the East Belfast Partnership and the Connswater Community Greenway Group.

Linen Hall Library is also facilitating an Ulster-Scots Agency event at which local author Sandy Smith will present the findings of his recently published book, 'C.S. Lewis and the Island of his Birth'. As I mentioned, his new book has lifted the lid on C S Lewis's early life in Belfast and reveals his strong links.

As Danny Kinahan, Sammy and others outlined, a memorial plaque to C S Lewis has also been placed at Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. It will be unveiled on 22 November, which is the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

In commemoration of Lewis, visitors to the area can visit murals that are dedicated to the man

and his Narnia creations, and they can take in 'The Searcher' statue at Holywood Arches, which was created by the great artist Ross Wilson. 'The Searcher' was erected outside the Holywood Arches Library in east Belfast in 1998 on the centenary of Lewis's birth.

I think that the legacy for east Belfast needs to be continued. One way in which we can commemorate C S Lewis's legacy is to support the arts in east Belfast in particular. This year, my Department has provided small funding to scope and develop an arts strategy for east Belfast. That will be important for the future of the area. I look forward to receiving a copy of the draft strategy and discussing it with Sammy, Robin and other East Belfast Members soon. The East Belfast Arts Festival has already achieved a lot of valuable work, and it is important that that momentum is not lost. Much of that new arts activity also tries to reach out beyond east Belfast, with Woodstock using city centre locations such as the Black Box and the Garrick, and the arts festival working closely with Féile an Phobail in west Belfast.

East Belfast has a rich heritage in the arts. It has areas of distinction and character and wonderful stories to tell, as well as social and political issues that could be ameliorated through redevelopment and the arts in this city.

There are no boundaries to the appeal of C S Lewis. His work appeals to those of different generations, religious beliefs and social circumstances. A common bond is created between us all where we can share in the enjoyment of his literature. Literature and the arts can create many opportunities for experiences to be shared and bonds to be developed. I believe, in particular, that the arts and festivals can continue to play a part in helping all areas across the North in an ongoing transition from conflict to peace.

The key is not necessarily just about throwing together people from different backgrounds and environments in the hope that it will magic away the barriers and differences between them and, indeed, even between us. It is about building up self-confidence in individuals and their communities, recognising and valuing those communities, and developing and supporting a strong sense of self-worth. That sense of self-worth is important. It is also about the relations that are less strained by insecurities over identity and difference. That should be our legacy and a C S Lewis legacy.

Achieving that has everything to do with participation and empowerment. Festivals and arts activities, particularly those that are taking

place in east Belfast now, can help to do that. I am delighted that this topic is the subject of today's Adjournment debate, and I thank Mr Douglas for securing it. I look forward in helping in any way not only to support the legacy of C S Lewis but to do it through east Belfast and, indeed, across the city and beyond.

*Adjourned at 7.41 pm.*

## WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

*The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the Official Report (Hansard) process.*

### Regional Development

#### A26: DUALLING

*Published at 12 noon on Tuesday 19 November 2013*

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I wish to inform Members of my decision to proceed with the £65 million A26 Dualling – Glarryford to Drones Road scheme.

As Members will be aware, following the October Monitoring Round announcement in the Assembly on 21 October 2013, I welcomed the Executive's decision to secure £75 million of capital funding for my Department for 2014/15. As a result of this, the A26 Frosses Road Dualling scheme is one of the projects I identified to take forward. Public Inquiries have been held and the Inspector's report was submitted to the Department in April 2013.

The Inspector recommended that the proposed dual carriageway should be constructed more or less in accordance with the preferred route.

The Inspector made three minor recommendations relating to accommodation works, all of which were accepted by the Department.

Part V of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 sets out the statutory requirements for the assessment of environmental impacts of road schemes. Having caused an Appropriate Assessment to be carried out and having considered the Environmental Statement and the consultation responses to it, I am satisfied that the likely significant environmental effects of the proposed scheme have been properly assessed and have been sufficient to inform judgements on the scheme. Accordingly, in light of the assessment undertaken and information presented within the Statement to Inform the Appropriate Assessment and the Environmental Statement, I accept the Department's conclusion (as the Competent Authority) that construction and operation of the A26 Dualling Scheme would not by itself, or in combination with other known plans or projects,

adversely affect the integrity of the Main Valley Bogs, Special Areas of Conservation.

I have carefully considered the Department's Statement and agree with its conclusions. I have therefore decided to proceed with the scheme. In doing so, I commit my Department to carrying out the necessary works to facilitate the Inspector's recommendations and the environmental design measures, as well as the mitigation measures detailed in the A26 Departmental Statement.

Construction of the scheme will provide approximately 7 km of new carriageway between the B64 Glarryford crossroads (the end of the existing dual carriageway) and the A44 Drones Road junction.

The new dual carriageway will closely follow the existing road corridor, with the section adjacent to the Frosses Trees going marginally off-line, thus protecting these iconic sets of trees. The new dual carriageway will have significant benefits to the road user, with the main objective of the scheme being to reduce congestion, improve journey times and road safety. To improve road safety, a central reserve road restraint system will be erected along the full length of the dual carriageway and will prevent central reserve crossover.

The scheme will benefit the economy. The local construction industry will also benefit through an increase in demand for construction materials, as well as giving a significant boost to commercial trade in the surrounding area.

I have asked my Department to publish the formal Notice of its intention to proceed with the scheme and to make the necessary Statutory Orders. Subject to successful procurement, construction of the scheme is programmed to start late 2014.

Please note the above statement is embargoed until 12:00 on 19 November 2013.







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