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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 January 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

January Monitoring 2013-14

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to update the Assembly on the outcome of the January monitoring round.

Before moving to January monitoring, I want to provide the Assembly with a short summary of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement and, in particular, the implications for the Northern Ireland Executive Budget going forward.

The Chancellor's 2013 autumn statement continued the recent trend of reducing resource expenditure, with Whitehall Departments being asked to find a further 1% saving in 2014-15 and 2015-16. However, the continued protection for health and education budgets in England meant that the impact on Northern Ireland was largely mitigated because those areas have full comparability under the Barnett formula.

The reallocation of resources outlined by the Chancellor then resulted in a number of Barnett additions to our resource and capital budgets in 2014-15 and 2015-16. That means that, as a result of the autumn statement, our resource expenditure will increase by £48.9 million in 2014-15 and £55.7 million in 2015-16, while our capital expenditure will increase by £7.1 million next year and £6.1 million in 2015-16. We also received additional financial transactions capital funding amounting to £3.3 million in 2014-15 and £22.3 million in 2015-16.

Members will recall that, in my statement to the Assembly on the October monitoring round, I made reference to the significant challenges facing the Executive next year in managing the significant resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) and capital DEL overcommitments. Although the additional autumn statement Barnett consequentials are helpful, there are other significant financial pressures building up

across the Departments for next year and beyond. In fact, the financial outlook is becoming ever more challenging. The latest Office for Budget Responsibility projections suggest that our resource DEL budget, in particular, will remain severely constrained until the end of the decade.

It is in this context that I am particularly concerned about the lack of progress on welfare reform. I find it simply astonishing that some in the Executive still fail to grasp the serious financial consequences involved. Not only will a continued lack of progress reduce our resource DEL budget by £15 million in this financial year but the penalty next year will be at least £60 million. Indications are that the cost to the Executive will very quickly increase to over £200 million a year. That is simply not affordable within a reducing resource DEL budget envelope. Of course, it is also money that would otherwise have been used to deliver public services for the people of Northern Ireland.

Before I go into the detail of the monitoring round, it is worth pointing out that the focus continues to be on non-ring-fenced resource items, which I will hereafter refer to as resource expenditure or resource DEL. The Executive still monitor the ring-fenced resource and administrative expenditure positions, and those are included in the tables attached to the statement.

The key strategic financial management issue for the Executive for the remainder of this financial year will be to ensure that Her Majesty's Treasury Budget exchange scheme limits are not breached at the year end. However, given the resource and capital DEL overcommitments next year, combined with the other potential pressures, we aim to maximise the funding carried forward into 2014-15.

The limits on the Budget exchange scheme amount to 0.6% of resource DEL and 1.5% of capital DEL. That, of course, excludes the Department of Justice, which is subject to separate end-of-year flexibility arrangements.

The actual amounts will be finalised and agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury later this year, but they are likely to be around £51 million in resource DEL and £12 million in capital DEL. Importantly, any end-of-year underspends in excess of those amounts will be lost to Northern Ireland.

The starting point for this monitoring round was the October monitoring outcome, which concluded with a £19.4 million overcommitment of non-ring-fenced resource expenditure and £8 million with regard to capital investment.

A number of adjustments made at the centre impacted on the overall financial position in this monitoring round. I will highlight those items.

Members may recall that, after the October monitoring round, the Executive held a balance of £4.8 million resource DEL to fund spend under the social investment fund, childcare strategy and Delivering Social Change projects in this financial year. Further expenditure on those funds of £2 million meant that the remaining £2.8 million became available for allocation in this round.

As I mentioned, the Budget exchange scheme allows the Executive to carry forward and draw down end-of-year underspends up to a limit agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury. The scheme requires the devolved Administrations to adjust drawdown to the final out-turn position. It became available only recently and showed that there were additional underspends in 2012-13 at block level of £1.8 million resource DEL and £0.6 million in capital DEL. There were also additional resource DEL Barnett consequential for 2013-14 amounting to £0.3 million, as announced in the Chancellor's 2013 autumn statement. Those additional amounts were also made available for allocation.

The latest regional rate forecast indicated that income in this year is expected to be £0.8 million less than was anticipated at the October monitoring round. This is due to the continued difficult property market conditions and created a £0.8 million resource DEL pressure in this monitoring round.

The Executive previously set aside £5 million of resource DEL to meet the cost associated with the devolution from Westminster of powers that would allow the Assembly to set the rate of air passenger duty on long-haul flights. I am pleased to report that Her Majesty's Treasury has now agreed that the actual cost in this year will be only £2 million. The remaining £3 million was, therefore, made available for allocation.

Funding was also released to the centre for reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, the centrally managed EU budget and salaries for individuals working in statutory bodies. In total, that amounted to £4.6 million resource DEL and £1 million capital DEL.

All of those centre items impacted on the starting position in this monitoring round. When those were taken into account, along with the October monitoring overcommitment, the result was a reduction in the starting overcommitment to £7.8 million of resource expenditure and £6.4 million of capital investment.

That set the starting position for the January monitoring round, before departmental reduced requirements, reclassifications and internal reallocations were taken into account.

The Departments declared reduced requirements in this monitoring round of £32.6 million in resource expenditure and £34.9 million in capital investment. Full details are included in the tables provided. In that context, a particular issue that I wish to highlight is the schools and further education end-year flexibility (EYF) schemes. Starting with the schools end-year flexibility scheme, I confirm that the Department of Education has not drawn down any of the existing £46.7 million EYF stock and has also not declared any reduced requirements for school reserves this year. As a consequence, the existing schools end-year flexibility stock of £46.7 million will be carried forward into 2014-15.

Members will recall that, in the June monitoring round, the Executive agreed to establish an end-year flexibility scheme for the further education (FE) colleges. That scheme commenced this year, with an EYF stock of zero. The Department for Employment and Learning has advised that it intends to add £6 million to the FE college EYF stock in this monitoring round, resulting in a reduced requirement of that amount being surrendered to the centre. That amount will be added to the EYF stock, meaning that £6 million will be carried forward into 2014-15.

It is good practice that Departments seek to manage any emerging pressures internally before bringing forward bids for additional allocations. Although the public expenditure control framework allows Departments scope to undertake many such movements on a unilateral basis, movements across spending areas in excess of the de minimis threshold are subject to Executive approval. In some instances, Departments have also sought permission to move allocations across spending areas to facilitate the transfer of responsibility

for a particular function from one business area to another. The internal reallocations agreed by the Executive in this monitoring round are included in the tables. The Executive also agreed a number of reclassifications between the resource and capital categories in this round. There were also reclassifications between the ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced resource DEL categories. Those reclassifications are also shown in the tables.

Before I move on to the allocations made in this round, I have to return to the welfare reform issue. As I have said, I am hugely disappointed that no progress has been made on that issue. As a result, the Executive had no option but to set aside £15 million to cover the cost of financial penalties for the remaining three months of this financial year. This, in effect, as one Executive colleague described it, is dead money returning to the Treasury, which is unable to be spent on services that benefit our citizens.

Mr McCarthy: Shame.

Mr Hamilton: Those who resist the inevitability of welfare reform can answer for why our health budget, our roads budget or our schools budget have to lose out this year, and potentially next year too.

All the above issues impacted on the amount — *[Interruption.]* Maybe that is a resolution on welfare reform coming through. I might have known.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. I ask all Members to please check their mobile phones.

Mr Campbell: It is not as bad as £5 million leaving.

Mr Hamilton: That is right. It is not the worst crime.

All the above issues impacted on the amount of resources available to the Executive in this monitoring round. Taking into account the starting position, the reduced requirements, reclassifications and welfare reform penalties resulted in £13 million of resource expenditure and £26.9 million capital investment resources being available to the Executive.

Against the available resources, the Departments submitted bids amounting to £98 million for resource expenditure and £26.6 million for capital expenditure. The bids are detailed in the tables. The Executive agreed allocations totalling £37.9 million in resource

expenditure and £26.6 million in capital investment. Those allocations are detailed in the tables, and I will highlight just a few of the main ones.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will receive an allocation of £30 million towards key healthcare pressures. Although there are further significant pressures in our healthcare system this year, I have made it clear to the Health Minister that I expect his Department to contain the remaining costs. That said, the £30 million will help to alleviate the significant front line pressures that have emerged across the health and social care system during 2013-14. It will play a critical role in addressing a range of pressures on the front line services that affect the most vulnerable in our society, including patients, looked-after children and the elderly population. It will also directly benefit a large number of patients and other service users.

10.45 am

The Department for Regional Development was allocated £23.8 million, which will go mainly towards improving and maintaining our road network, with some funding also going towards improvements to local bus stations. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will receive an allocation of £3 million for expenditure disallowed under the common agricultural policy. Furthermore, the Executive agreed to provide a further £3.3 million for the rural development programme. The Department for Social Development will also receive an allocation of £2.5 million for urban regeneration schemes.

I would also like to update Members on the position in relation to ring-fenced financial transactions capital funding. Members will recall that this funding can only be used for the purpose of providing loans or equity investment to the private sector. Following the October monitoring round, some £20.9 million of financial transactions capital remained unallocated. However, due to delay in the implementation of the agrifood loan scheme, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment surrendered £10 million in this round. My officials have been working closely with Departments to identify schemes that could use this type of funding. As a result of this work, I am pleased to announce that the Executive agreed to provide £35 million of financial transactions capital funding to the University of Ulster to assist in financing its greater Belfast development scheme. £25 million of this funding will be provided in this year, with a further £10 million to be provided in 2014-15. This loan funding is, of course,

repayable, but the university benefited from a zero rate of interest and, in return, agreed to provide the Executive with £7 million from its accumulated reserves. This will be an extra benefit to the Executive in 2015-16 and 2016-17.

This is exactly the sort of infrastructure project that Northern Ireland needs, not just to improve higher education provision and regeneration of that part of Belfast city centre, but to provide a much-needed boost to our construction sector. This funding demonstrates the Executive's commitment to the University of Ulster scheme, which hopes to receive significant financing from the European Investment Bank (EIB). The University of Ulster relocation will bring huge regeneration benefits to that area of Belfast, and I am pleased that the Executive agreed to play their part. I also thank the Employment and Learning Minister and his officials, and, indeed, the University of Ulster, for their part in taking this forward.

Following this allocation, £5.9 million of ring-fenced financial transactions capital funding remains unallocated. Members should note that I, along with Finance Ministers from the other devolved Administrations, recently negotiated a scheme with Her Majesty's Treasury that will allow us to carry forward up to 20% of financial transactions capital funding into 2014-15 and 10% into 2015-16. The Executive will now carry forward the remaining balance of £5.9 million under this scheme, which of course means that no financial transactions funding will be lost to Northern Ireland this year.

The Executive exit the January monitoring round with an overcommitment of £24.8 million of resource expenditure, while £0.3 million of capital investment remains unallocated. I believe that this level of resource expenditure overcommitment is perfectly manageable. I intend to closely monitor the financial position across Departments over the remaining months of this year to ensure that the carry-forward of funding under the Budget exchange scheme is maximised and that no funding is lost to Northern Ireland. Executive colleagues have agreed to cooperate fully in this task.

The Executive have shown that they can deliver on cross-departmental working, as evidenced in the financial transactions capital deal struck with the University of Ulster. We have shown that we can deliver on innovative proposals and, with public expenditure in Northern Ireland under pressure in future years, it is in that spirit that I wish to move forward on all areas of Executive business.

I commend this statement to the Assembly.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is my party's view that the £15 million welfare reform money that the Minister referred to is not dead money. That £15 million is still in the pockets of many low-income people on working household budgets. It is more likely to be spent in the local economy through retail and other areas. That £15 million is not dead money; it is money that is quite important to the local economy.

As to the Committee's concerns about the moneys being returned and allocated, once again we find that £30 million has been given to the Department of Health. Although we are all sympathetic with the Department of Health and the needs of our communities and patients in the system, it is quite clear that the Department of Finance here is pumping huge amounts of money into Health with each monitoring round. Is it the case that the Department of Health and its Minister are not managing their budget correctly? Will the Department of Finance continue to prop up the Department of Health through these interventions in 2014?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Chair for his question. I want to begin by saying that he is wrong about welfare reform, and I think that everybody in the House, apart from the colleagues sitting around him, know that he is wrong about welfare reform. Whether we proceeded with the Bill or not, the £15 million the Member is talking about would not have been taken out of the pockets of any recipient of welfare in Northern Ireland. Work continues, and I have to commend my colleague the Minister for Social Development for the sterling work that he has done in negotiations with the Department for Work and Pensions to develop a package of measures that I believe will ameliorate the worst effects of welfare reform in Northern Ireland. It will ameliorate it in a way that will be the envy of anyone in England, and certainly, from my discussions with the finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales, I know that it is something that they are incredibly jealous of.

If we had not made provision for that £15 million, which will be £60 million next year and will rise very rapidly to over £200 million, we would have denied that money to some of the very same people whom the Member stands and tries to speak fondly about. By taking £15 million away this year from expenditure that we could put into health, education and other areas of DSD, we would have denied some of the very same vulnerable people key services that they require from day to day.

When the Member and his colleagues deny the inevitability of moving forward on welfare reform, which will be based on a package of measures that will take away some of the worst effects that people in Northern Ireland will suffer as a result of welfare reform, let him think about the effects that he will have — not in the future but right now — on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. Denying that £15 million of expenditure in the remainder of this year, £60 million next year and £200 million thereafter will have a very serious effect on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

I am not sure whether the Member supported the allocation of some £30 million to the Department of Health. I would have thought that most Members think that it is a positive thing to give that money to a health service that is under constant pressure and is always looking for resources to do the sorts of things that it can do. I would have thought that that would be universally welcomed in the House.

I accept that, along with the Department of Justice, the Minister of Health should not be bidding for resources. However, when he faces the sort of pressures he does, I think that it is only right that he brings those to the attention of the Executive, if not to get additional resources, which, in this case, he has, then at least, as we head towards a new spending round in 2015-16 and beyond, to make the Executive aware of the pressures that he is under. I am happy to recommend to the Executive and gain agreement on an allocation of £30 million to the Health Minister, not just because of the good work that that will be able to do in relieving some of those pressures towards the end of this year but because I know that his intentions are good. He has shown that his intentions are good through the £700 million that he has taken out of the system in waste and administration costs, and, through Transforming Your Care, he has outlined a future for the health service that will ensure that, although we still provide the highest level of service, it will not cost as much in the future as it has in the past.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Some elements of it are welcome. Is the Minister confident that all financial transaction capital funding will be spent? I am aware that some moneys can slip, and I want to make sure that it hits the ground and is spent before it has to be redeemed or handed back.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. In asking about financial transaction capital funding, he highlights something that, on one hand, will pose a rising benefit to the

Executive but, on the other, will pose an increasing challenge.

It is very clear that the Treasury wants to increase the element of capital expenditure that it gives to us through the block grant. That is a good thing, but it will do that through financial transactions capital funding, which will pose us some difficulties, as it will require us to work directly with the private sector and give it a loan or an equity share of projects. I think that that is positive in that it will see the public sector work with the private sector and that is to be encouraged. However, it has been something of a culture shock to many that we now have to think proactively about bringing forward those projects.

At the start and certainly back in June or July when I took up my post — I am sure that my predecessor will agree with this — I have to admit that we were somewhat concerned that we might not be able to spend all the money in this year because of the need to develop schemes.

Thankfully, we have negotiated an arrangement with Treasury whereby we can carry forward 20% of expenditure this year. That is roughly £8 million, and we can carry forward £10 million next year, which is a higher total. It is around £60 million next year, so that is about £6 million that we can carry forward next year. I hope that next year we will be able to develop some more projects that will absorb all that expenditure. The answer to the Member's question is that I think that we will spend it all. More importantly, none of it will be lost, but there is still a challenge for Departments to come forward with innovative projects that can absorb that expenditure. I also have to say that there is a challenge to the private sector to come forward with some ideas as well.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis.

I thank the Minister for his statement. Referring to the reduced requirements in table A on page 14, we see that the figure against legal cases is £2.1 million. Officials told the Committee a short time ago that that figure would be £1.9 million. Will the Minister give us the detail that lies behind that figure?

Mr Hamilton: I cannot at this stage. I am happy to respond in writing to the Member, and I will, in fact, even copy the response to the Committee. I am not sure exactly what legal costs he refers to, but, rather than give him a

half-baked answer, I will correspond with him and give him as full an answer as I can.

Mr Cree: It is good to see the statement this morning; it is very helpful. It is also good to see the centre and the moneys that are in it referred to, because that was a cloudy issue for a long time. Minister, you touched on financial transactions capital. I see from your report that £3.3 million additional moneys are coming in for 2014-15 and £22.3 million for 2015-16. We are carrying forward £5.9 million, presumably into 2014-15. How much will that actually be for 2015-16?

Mr Hamilton: It is just shy of £130 million; I think that it is now about £127 million for 2015-16. That emphasises the point that I was making to Mr Girvan, which is that this is quite rapidly ramping up as an element of our capital expenditure. The slower lead-in, where we have had roughly £40 million this year and slightly more than £60 million now with some changes that the Member pointed out for next year, kind of eases us into this mentality where we have to think about what sort of projects we can bring forward. Next year will be a bit more challenging again, given that there is a slight increase. However, the Member is right to highlight the fact that 2015-16, as we stand at the minute looking at it, will be a challenge with financial transaction capital. However, we have that intervening period in which to devise schemes, and I have been quite encouraged by how, all of a sudden, many Departments have started to get the potential of this. We have made some progress, as I said, on the agrifood loan scheme, which, I think, will absorb a significant amount of money next year and into the future. The University of Ulster scheme is taking not just a sizeable chunk this year but £10 million next year. I am actively working with Executive colleagues to devise other schemes, including some that are in the transport sector that I am looking at with the Member's party colleague the Minister for Regional Development.

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

Lots of ideas and thoughts are coming forward. We need to spend the next number of months working those up into viable propositions. We can then start to take them forward so that they can absorb some of that money in future years.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his statement. Much has been said about the welfare reform fines, and I wonder whether the Minister can say a bit more about which budget

lines will be affected by the need to find that money. Can he also comment on the concerning fact that, once again, the Housing Executive has given up another £17 million of its maintenance budget? In this full year, that now amounts to almost 50% of that budget, which surely is an area where we could really help our most vulnerable.

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right to point out the work in reverse and the concern with the Housing Executive not spending all its allocation on maintenance. It is disappointing that that money, which was earmarked specifically for that purpose at the start of the year, has not been spent in that area. That is where we wanted it to be spent, where it should have been spent and where it needed to be spent. It is unfortunate that it was not able to be spent on that. There are very good reasons around the procurement of contracts and ensuring that we got the right value for contracts, as well as ensuring that the Minister was not paying above the odds for some of the work that he wanted to see done in the Housing Executive's estate. In that sense, I am glad that we did not proceed, because we would have had a different problem in the future, which would have been people asking, "Why did you spend x amount more on this than you should have?". I am also grateful that he has consistently surrendered that money throughout the financial year in a timely way to allow us to reallocate it to other priorities. Other Departments will be the beneficiary of his sensible financial management in the Department for Social Development.

11.00 am

In respect of welfare reform — I dare say that this may not be the last time that it is raised today — it is not a matter of this, that or another Department having lost out. The Executive as a whole have lost out. As a consequence, Northern Ireland as a country has lost out, and our people, including the vulnerable people who may be most in receipt of social security, will lose out. Some of the pressures that were not met in the bids in this monitoring round include the likes of Health, which has vulnerable people in need of additional healthcare. There are severe pressures even in the Department of Justice, the Member's party colleague's Department. This will get only worse because, in the public expenditure landscape, we see not only pressures in our own budgets but pressure coming from Westminster in the allocations that it gives us. It is on the resource side, where this money is coming from, that the biggest pressures are, so I am deeply concerned. It is

regrettable, to say the least, that we have had to make this provision now. It would be shameful if we had to do the same for £60 million next year. When we get into the scale of £200 million in future years, that is unthinkable.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. Despite the bad and not unexpected news around the welfare fines, it contains a lot of positive elements. Identified in the statement are the levels of unfunded pressures along with levels of overcommitment. Is there any concern, in light of the levels of those two elements, that we risk any breach of Treasury controls?

Mr Hamilton: Unthinkable as it would be to make provision for £200 million, it would be unthinkable that we would breach Treasury control totals. That is certainly not something that I want to do in my first year in control of Northern Ireland's Budget.

Exiting the monitoring round with pressures of £24.8 million on the resource side and around £0.3 million on the capital side is manageable at this time of year if we look at historical patterns in our public expenditure. The Member is right to highlight the unfunded pressures that are emerging. We will allocate resources to Departments at the start of the year, but pressures just emerge or sometimes we can see them looming on the horizon.

In the context of the Chancellor's remarks in the past fortnight when he expressed his belief that the UK Budget required a further £25 billion in cuts and the effect that that would have on Northern Ireland, it is important that Departments start to think now about how they can continue to reform the services that they provide so that we still get the same high quality of service, protect the most vulnerable and encourage the growth of our economy but do so in new, innovative and creative ways, so that we get more for less. The picture that we face moving forward is that we will be under serious pressure on the resource side and there will be emerging unfunded pressures in future years, as there have been in the past.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. A significant increase in capital funding is being surrendered this year compared with last year, and a large chunk of that is from the Helm Housing grant repayment of £8.1 million. Given that DSD faces significant pressures on social housing right across the district, can the Minister give me any further clarification of why that crucial money

was returned rather than spent on social housing?

Mr Hamilton: I think that there was a particular issue with the repayment of a housing association grant for advanced land purchase in the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's constituency, so she probably has better detail on the local aspects of that than I do. These situations arise from time to time where there is a requirement to surrender money. It is unfortunate that the projects that the money was earmarked for have not gone ahead. However, it is good that the Minister was able to relinquish it early. I would rather have got it earlier in the year, but it is better to get it now than to face the situation where that crystallises closer to year end and there is an inability to do anything with the money.

It is not as if we are sitting with lots of unallocated capital funding either. We have been able to put the money that the Minister for Social Development relinquished to good use elsewhere, including the roads budget. From time to time, circumstances like this arise in which Departments have to relinquish some of their capital money. In fact, even the Minister of Culture had to relinquish £4.5 million for the stadia issue. That was through no fault of hers; it was because of legal challenges and planning issues. So, from time to time, these issues materialise, where a good project is progressing but perhaps a little more slowly than we would want it to, and it is far better that Ministers, like the Minister of Culture and the Minister for Social Development, relinquish money early so that we can spend it elsewhere on other beneficial projects.

Mr McQuillan: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. How beneficial will the allocations be to our construction sector?

Mr Hamilton: The allocations that we have made in this monitoring round will be extremely beneficial to and continue to assist the sector, which has suffered very badly in the downturn. Pre-Christmas, I was encouraged by indications from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors that its analysis of the work of that sector in Northern Ireland suggested that it was coming out of recession and, in fact, may even be out of its recession. That has to be weighed against the news of the likes of Mivan going into administration in the last week or so. It is a sector that is still very finely balanced. We as an Executive cannot take our concentration away from doing what we can, within our available resources, to assist the construction

sector, which has suffered so heavily during the downturn.

On specific projects, the allocation of over £20 million to the roads budget will greatly assist aspects and areas of the construction sector, as will the very sizeable allocation to the University of Ulster's Belfast campus. That project was going ahead already, but it is a sign of our commitment not just to the project itself but to that type of project and to projects that are very labour-intensive on the construction side that we have decided to use £35 million worth of financial transactions capital to underpin the scheme.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister. I refer to the £30 million health allocation. The Minister referred to "key healthcare pressures" and went on to talk about children, the vulnerable and the elderly. Against the growing narrative of pressures in accident and emergency, which we believe amount to a crisis in the health service, how are his comments consistent with the fact that £20 million of the £30 million is for clinical negligence cases? Is that not, in fact, a health service failings scandal and a waste of public money?

Mr Hamilton: Let me just correct the Member on the issue of clinical negligence: bids of £65 million that were put forward by the Minister of Health included £20 million for clinical negligence as a pressure. The Health Minister will be able to give the Member finer detail than I will be able to, but I understand that the origins of the pressures are that the courts are starting to move through settling and deciding on those cases much more quickly than they did in the past. In fact, I understand that the courts were picking up on a recommendation made by the Public Accounts Committee, of which the Member's colleague is the Deputy Chair, to settle cases as quickly as possible. Therefore, although that is not an unforeseen pressure, it is a pressure that has materialised much more quickly than was previously expected.

If the Member cares to look at the way in which the statement has been crafted and at what that money has been allocated to, he will see that it is £30 million for pressures in the health service. I have had discussions with the Health Minister, and he has assured me that the money will go primarily to front line pressures, the likes of which the Member has spoken about; to other pressures in the care system; and to pressures in looking after the elderly. The front line is where I expect the money to go, and that is where Executive colleagues agreed for it to go. However, that is not to say that the Minister does not face other pressures,

including clinical negligence pressures. The Member can dismiss them, but they are a legal reality and have to be dealt with because of past mistakes.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his statement. In it, we see a reduced capital expenditure requirement of £3.5 million against the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. I am interested in hearing the Minister's understanding of what is and what is not happening at the Maze site and the reasons why.

Mr Hamilton: What goes on or does not go on at the Maze site is not a direct responsibility of my Department. I have to deal, as I have in this set of circumstances, with the reality of no progress on particular projects on that site. That question is better put to those who are responsible, namely the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. It is unfortunate that we are not able to progress the full potential of the development of that site. I appreciate that there are huge sensitivities around certain aspects of the development of that site and I share those sensitivities, but I am sure that the Member will agree that, beyond one particular project earmarked for that site, there is huge economic and social benefit for Northern Ireland. I want that to be progressed as a matter of urgency because, like the University of Ulster's Belfast campus, there is huge regenerative potential and huge economic benefit from the site. I want to see progress on that, and I do not see why, if we cannot move on one aspect, that means that we cannot move on the important redevelopment and economic aspects that have the potential, I understand, to create around 5,000 jobs for Northern Ireland.

Mr McCrea: I am sure that the Minister, like me, will be somewhat surprised that the official opposition are not in their place to question his statement. Nonetheless, I am sure that he will not lose any sleep over it.

The Minister will have heard the Chair of the Committee's lame excuse for its opposition to welfare reform, but can the Minister outline when the £15 million will be paid out by the Executive for not proceeding with welfare reform?

Mr Hamilton: The Member referred to them as the official opposition; I would not refer to them in such grand terms. I understand that one member of the party that he refers to is off today because his wife has given birth. I do not know whether that accounts for where Mr McCrea is, but I am sure he is offering his congratulations in some way or another.

I will move quickly on to welfare reform. The Member rightly identified that the defence put forward by those who are denying progress on welfare reform is pretty feeble, and I do not think that there is a sound and robust argument coming back on why they think that it is a good thing that Northern Ireland's budget has lost £15 million this year and will lose £60 million next year and £200 million beyond that. It is not a matter of talking about when we will lose it; through January monitoring, we are making provision for £15 million because we fully expect that £15 million will be taken out of our Budget when we finalise the accounts at the end of the year, around August. Treasury does not withdraw money from your account or anything like that, nor does it not send the money over. Treasury will correct it all at the year end. However, the prudent and sensible thing to do is to make provision for that now.

The effects of not moving forward on welfare reform are starting to hit the people of Northern Ireland. Up to now, it was just seen by some as being a threat that was never going to materialise. Let me say to the Member and to the House that it is no longer a threat; it is a reality. We are starting to see that money is coming out of our budget, and that is affecting our ability to deliver key services to vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. That figure will ramp up and ramp up and, therefore, the effect on vulnerable people will ramp up and ramp up as we move into future years.

It is indefensible that we are losing that money when we have not moved forward on something that we know we have to do. It is not as though everybody in the House thinks that welfare reform is a wonderful and great thing. If we had had a blank sheet of paper, we would not have come forward with the proposals that the Government came forward with. However, we all know that we have to move forward on it. We have, through the good offices of the Minister for Social Development, negotiated a package of measures that will take away the worst effects for people in Northern Ireland. My party and, I think, other parties are content to sign up to that. In circumstances where that package of measures is in place and, at the same time, where £15 million this year, £60 million next year and £200 million in years beyond will come out of our budget, it is up to others to defend why they are not moving forward on welfare reform.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his statement. As Chair of the Committee for Regional Development, I welcome the £23.8 million for mainly road improvement schemes.

There appears to be a significant reduced requirement from the DRD for roads.

Can he give the House an explanation for the reduction?

11.15 am

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I am pleased to be able to allocate, with Executive support, over £20 million to the roads budget, particularly for structural maintenance, road patching, and so forth. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, the Member will know that DRD is very good at spending those sorts of volumes of money at year end to improve the road network across Northern Ireland.

The reduced expenditure that the Member highlighted is another example, as Ms Boyle pointed out, of reduced requirements on the capital side, but this is another example of a good thing. There are two tranches: £2.3 million for the A2 and £8.9 million for the A8 and the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line. We were able to get money for the A2 from the EU sustainable competitiveness programme, and we got money for the A8 and the Coleraine to Londonderry line through the EU Trans-European Transport Network scheme. That money came to Northern Ireland from the European budget, which meant that we could release the money that we had granted to both schemes as an Executive and spend it on other capital projects. Although it may appear in the tables in the report as a negative, because we do not want Departments to give up money that was earmarked for certain projects, in these cases, it is a good thing for Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. He will have heard me cry "shame" when he said that £15 million had to be handed back. It is a crying shame and a disgrace that people who desperately need that funding will be deprived simply because Members will not get their heads together and realise that welfare reform will come about whether we like it or not, and people will be denied that funding.

I want to ask the Minister about the £30 million that will be allocated to the Health Department. Why has he left it open to the Health Minister to distribute that allocation as he sees fit as opposed to other allocations that are made for specific purposes? I am thinking particularly about children's services. I got an email this morning, as would indeed the Minister because he represents Ballynahinch and Newcastle, stating that Home-Start is on its knees and is

going to close. This is about children's services. The email mentions £5 million for children's services, but how can we guarantee that that £5 million will go to children's services in places such as Newcastle and Ballynahinch or other areas where Home-Start is on its knees and on the way out?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his series of questions. He was absolutely right to shout "shame" when I revealed the extent of the penalties that we will face as a result of not moving forward on welfare reform. I have worked with the Member in the constituency for a number of years and, previously, as a councillor. Throughout that time, no matter what political disagreements he and I might have had from time to time, I have known him as somebody who stood up, in particular, for the most vulnerable people in our society, especially in the Strangford constituency. With his track record in doing that, he has realised and highlighted the fact that, although we know that welfare reform is not all good news, and there are bad elements to it, we face a reality here that we will have to deal with.

He and I know that we will lose £15 million this year, £60 million next year and then £200 million. It is worth emphasising that we have now started on this conveyor belt towards £200 million of resource budget, which goes to the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, whether it be through the Health Department, DSD or whatever. That will have a seriously detrimental effect on his constituents, my constituents and the constituents of every Member.

If we were to give £300 million to the health budget, we would be able to spend it. However, I think the Member will agree that, in the very tight financial circumstances in which we find ourselves, it is good to be able to find £30 million to give to the health budget to relieve some of the pressures that it faces. I said that I expect the Health Minister to continue to manage the pressures in his budget proactively and aggressively. I want him to bear down and hollow out the pressures as best he possibly can. The allocation is not earmarked because many of the pressures, as the Member will know, are continually evolving. Mr McKinney, for example, raised A&E pressures, which we have seen very graphically, and there are other pressures that go up and go down. The Member mentioned child services, and there is a range of pressures in that area. I understand, from talking to the Health Minister, that many of them are coming from inquiries into what the likes of Jimmy Savile and other individuals have done. More

people are coming forward and that is putting pressure — a good pressure — on that budget.

On the specifics of Home-Start, our Member of Parliament Mr Shannon has been in correspondence with me on its behalf, and I replied agreeing to have a meeting with him. I do not have responsibility for what it does, but I have an interest in what it does, and I am content to meet representatives of the organisation as a whole. It is maybe unfair to single out Home-Start, but I think that organisations such as that do a lot of good work, not just in delivering services here and now but in preventing other areas of government in Northern Ireland having pressures on their expenditure in the longer term, whether that is justice, social development or whatever it might be.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the investment in the Belfast campus of the University of Ulster to assist in the financing of its development scheme. Can the Minister give us any indication of when that work is likely to start on the new campus? Is a date set for its completion?

Mr Hamilton: Even though we are funding the project through the financial transactions capital allocation that I announced today, it is not a project that we manage. That is the nature of financial transactions capital: it is money that goes from the Executive to people in the private sector. In this case, it is the University of Ulster, and it is managing the project. There is an interest from the Department for Employment and Learning, and I know that the Member sits on the Employment and Learning Committee. In addition to what we are giving in the shape of a loan of £35 million over the next two years, I understand that that Department has given a capital grant of £16 million. One of the conditions of that is that twice-yearly progress reports have to be produced by the university so that the Department for Employment and Learning gets appropriate oversight.

I understand that preliminary work has already started on site. Those driving past it will see cranes on the horizon and that some buildings have been demolished to prepare for the more substantive work. I understand that it is the intention of the university to complete the work by March 2018, the idea being to start moving the first tranche of students onto the site in the academic year beginning in September 2018.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am glad that he is here in person and not down at the High Court indulging in that ministerial squabble.

On the DARD issue, will the Minister explain what the £3 million reallocated due to the CAP disallowances from Europe is for? I also note the Omagh hospital reallocation of £3.2 million to the fire station, which is welcome, but may we seek an assurance that the Omagh hospital will not be unduly delayed?

Mr Hamilton: That is more a matter for the Minister of Health as his Department's centre of procurement expertise will deal with the specifics of taking that forward. I am glad that this is another example where, even though a particular project cannot move forward, we have been able to reclassify the money for another worthy project in the west Tyrone area.

As the Member will know, the CAP disallowances are a pressure that we have been facing for some considerable number of years. The amount going back to the European Union because of disallowance was incredibly high. Considerable effort has been put in by officials from Land and Property Services to better map Northern Ireland so that the disallowance is minimised in years to come. It is incredibly difficult to get a complete handle on that, but I am confident and have been assured that the work that we have invested in getting better mapping is paying off and that the amount of disallowance is dropping as a result.

Mr Beggs: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement and the additional £30 million for the health service. However, the health bid submitted to the Health Committee was for £67 million, and it included £43 million for inescapable pressures: clinical negligence, children's services, quality and safety of services, unscheduled pressures and winter pressures. Does the Minister believe that, given this time of peak winter demand, with the trusts already in deficit, it will be possible for them to balance their budget without affecting front line services or extending waiting lists?

Does he accept that the comment using the word "obscene" made by the First Minister towards the then Health Minister in 2011 seems more and more out of touch with what others are finding as they operate as Health Minister?

Mr Hamilton: Let us set the context of this. The Member's party colleague the then Health Minister got one of if not the most generous allocations of all Ministers in the previous Budget. The Member will remember the

context of the Budget that we faced back in 2011. That was the time when the Member's party was still running around with the Conservatives, which was the party that was slashing away at the Budget. That meant that we faced the pressure —

Mr Beggs: Protecting health services.

Mr Hamilton: The Member said "protecting health services" but, as he full well knows, we got the Budget envelope that we got. We received a considerably reduced Budget, yet, even out of that overall reduced total, we still gave a considerably more generous allocation to the Health Department than any other Department in Northern Ireland. Following that, since the current Minister took over from the Member's party colleague, he has aggressively cut away at the waste and mismanagement that was still in the system when his party colleague was responsible for health.

The previous Health Minister turned a completely blind eye to the waste and inefficiency that was in the system, to the extent where the current Minister has reduced costs by £700 million. Let us think about the consequences of the fact that £700 million of costs have been reduced from the Health budget. The mapping out of a vision for the future of the health service through Transforming Your Care has given us a road map to a health service that will be better for the people of Northern Ireland and which will deliver more for the same amount of money than in the past.

It is a fact and a reality that the Health budget will always face pressures, because things sometimes come from nowhere. The Member will be aware of that from his constituency work and, indeed, from what we have seen in the news in the past number of weeks. I am glad that, even under the current budgetary pressures, we have been able to release some £30 million for the Health Minister to deal with the pressures that he is facing in the way that he sees best.

Mr Wilson: The Minister is quite right to set aside £15 million this year for the consequences of the head-in-the-sand economic policy that is being followed by Sinn Féin. I notice the silence of the SDLP on that issue as well, and I think that it is a bit ironic that we got £49 million in the autumn statement and then volunteer to hand over £60 million. I have to say that that will not be lost on the Treasury, where there are some people who think that we have too much money already.

I want to ask the Minister about the return of the money from the Housing Executive for the window maintenance contracts. The Minister for Social Development has done an excellent job in getting the price of those contracts down by 21.7%, although he has been criticised and is now subject to a political inquiry for doing it. Can the Finance Minister give us an assurance that, although the money has been handed back this year, the price-cutting, value-saving, resource-saving contracts that have been negotiated as a result of the work that the Minister for Social Development has done will be financed in the 2014-15 year?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in response to a couple of other questions, sometimes, as the Member will know better than most, reduced requirements appear in the tables that accompany the statement, which are automatically seen by others as negative. Sometimes, there can be a negative reason for that but, in this case, it is a positive thing. Our colleague the Minister for Social Development has seriously drilled down on the price of the contract and, if he had followed advice, he would have let the contract at inflated prices of a fifth more, and we would have spent all the expenditure allocated this year. The taxpayer and the ratepayer in Northern Ireland would have been the worse off for that. In the longer term, we can use those savings to spend on other services, as we have done this year.

It would be wrong if, after having been so sensible and prudent, the Minister for Social Development were to suffer in some way in his budget. Of course, we must never lose sight of the fact that, while he has been negotiating reduced prices for those contracts, people who have required the service of those windows and the maintenance of their properties have been missing out. There are still people who are in need, and we need to ensure that, with the money that the Minister for Social Development has saved, we serve those people as best we can in future years.

11.30 am

Mr Givan: I commend the Minister for finding the money, in a very difficult financial environment, to allocate £30 million to the Health Department. However, I think that the public will focus on the issue that, due to the failure of others in the House to take tough decisions and act as responsible people in government, they are being penalised and

deprived of £15 million in key services that will now have to be returned to the Treasury.

Look at the Department of Justice. The Minister will know that, outside Health, it is the other Department that faces significant financial pressure. The Prison Service exit scheme, which, as the Minister will be aware, is an invest-to-save programme, has released upwards of 500 officers. There are now fewer than 30 individuals remaining. Behind those individuals are families who are ready to move on. Those individuals have been told that they will be allowed to leave, but the money still has not been found. Looking into the next financial year, will the Department of Justice be able to meet that commitment to allow that programme to complete?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. He will know better than most, through his role as Chair of the Justice Committee, the extent of pressures that the overall justice budget is under. I can say on that front that the Minister of Justice and I have begun engagement on those pressures, principally around the police budget. There are obviously other pressures in the justice family as well. We are having engagement to hollow out the full extent of those pressures and, indeed, whether there is scope for further efficiencies and savings in the justice budget.

On the issue of the unmet bid, I regret that I could not recommend an allocation to the Prison Service exit scheme, because it is a good scheme. It has been proven to work in the past. Unfortunately, a lack of financial resources has prevented us from allowing it to go forward at this time. The Executive have agreed to ensure that we put the appropriate mechanisms in our Budget process, which we will start again next month, to ensure that if funds are released in year, we can channel them into other schemes. We can channel them towards Health and Justice, and quite possibly towards the Prison Service exit scheme. I support the scheme because it is genuinely reform-orientated in that it releases some long-serving members of the service and also brings in others. Savings are made as a result. I would like to see an allocation go towards it if resources permit this year or, if not, next year, if possible.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement. We are probably all aware that in his autumn statement, the Chancellor at Westminster announced that free school meals for all infant schools would happen in years 1 and 2. Has that commitment in England been translated into Barnett additions for Northern

Ireland's resource budget? Can the Minister quantify those additions? If there is extra money, where has it gone and how is it being spent?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. He is correct: there were Barnett consequentials for the allocation in respect of free school meals in England for the first three years — nursery and years 1 and 2. I cannot remember offhand the exact quantity of the Barnett consequentials. However, I will get the Member that information. How we, as an Executive, move forward on that is an issue for us to agree on. Principally, in the first instance, it is for the Minister of Education to come forward with his views on whether spending those consequentials on a replica project in Northern Ireland is the best way to spend that money.

I have had interesting engagement with colleagues in other devolved Administrations who have suggested that, perhaps, it is not what they would do, and that they might better fund some existing schemes that provide similar support, such as breakfast clubs. We have some in Northern Ireland through extended-schools funding. However, they are not universal throughout the system. There could be other ways that we could have similar positive effects without having a direct facsimile of what England has done. Of course, that is the beauty of devolution: we have got the Barnett consequential and we can take a decision as an Executive as to where that is best spent, either in the education budget or indeed elsewhere in the Executive's budget.

Mr Allister: I note that Mr McCrea and, indeed, the Minister were concerned about the whereabouts of the other Mr McCrea. I understand that he may be in a faraway place. I am sure that there are many Members on the DUP Benches who, last night and this morning, wish that they, too, were in a faraway place.

With regard to the Minister's allocation of his resource fund, he gifted £30 million of the £38 million that he had available to the Department of Health. I think, in consequence, the House and the public are entitled to know a bit more about where the £30 million is going. I am really backing Mr McKinney's point that a third of that was asked for on the basis of medical negligence claims. Surely the Minister knows, before he pays it out, whether part of his £30 million is going to medical negligence cases. Is it going to actual front line services? Surely the public — no matter how necessary it is to deal with medical negligence cases — are entitled to know whether the £30 million is actually going to front line services.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that my colleagues and I could have a whip-round to get the Member to a far-off place.

Mr Allister: I am sure that that would suit very well.

Mr Hamilton: He is far enough away over there. That will do.

Mr Givan: He could not get to Westminster.

Mr Hamilton: He could not get to London. We will not help him to get to London anyway, that is for sure.

The Member will note that, in fact, all of the resource bids that I received from Departments other than the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, which should not have been bidding but did, were met. I am sure that the Member does not intend for it to sound like this, but, as have others, his remark sounds almost unwelcoming of the £30 million that is going to the health service. I am sure that that is not the intention of the Member but, of course, in his usual tone, that is the way that it sounds. It is an allocation to deal with pressures that the Minister of Health is facing. From extensive discussions that I had with him, I know that he is having a series of evolving pressures.

In making the allocation, I have been very clear that the Minister of Health has not got all that he wanted; he wanted in excess of £60 million — £65 million. Therefore, he is still facing pressures within his budget, and it is up to him to proactively manage that. I expect, as the Executive expect, that the predominance of the funding going to him will go to front line pressures, and we have seen evidence of those over the past number of weeks in newspapers and on television screens in Northern Ireland. That is where the most acute pressures are, and that is what I want to see dealt with.

The Member will be particularly aware, given his background, that when medical negligence cases are agreed, they have to be settled and dealt with in-year. The Minister of Health certainly faces pressures on that front as well, every bit as much as he does in relation to acute care, A&E, children's services and other aspects of his budget.

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Inland Waterways meeting, which was held in Armagh on the 20 November 2013.

The Executive were represented by me as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Gaeltacht Affairs. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a progress report from Dawn Livingstone, chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on the work of Waterways Ireland, which included the following achievements: the provision of 742 metres of additional moorings; sponsorship support was offered for 112 events with a total expenditure of €200,000; maintenance of the waterways with 99.65% of waterways remaining open to 30 September; and the production of three new publications — 'A Taste of the Waterways 2013', 'What's On 2013' and 'Guide to the Grand Canal'.

The chief executive set out the key strategic direction for Waterways Ireland for 2014-16 and highlighted the following strategic objectives: to manage and maintain the 1,000 kilometres of navigation that are in Waterways Ireland's care to provide safe, open and accessible outdoor access; to inspire more people to discover and enjoy recreational activities on the waterways and to explore their rich environment and heritage; to focus future development on unlocking opportunities to achieve recreational growth, economic benefits and social inclusion; to reorganise and optimise the use of resources to deliver a high-quality public service and to achieve budget efficiencies; to explore and optimise opportunities to earn income to fund future investment in the waterways; and to continue to develop Waterways Ireland to be the respected, valued custodian of the inland waterways.

Ministers noted that sponsor Departments are working with Waterways Ireland to finalise the business plan and budget for 2014. The Council received a presentation from the chief executive detailing the strategic challenges and how they can be met over the corporate plan

period of 2014-16. Once agreed, both plans will receive approval at a future NSMC meeting, following approval from both Finance Departments.

Ministers noted that planning approval for the project to reopen the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones has now been received from all relevant authorities. The interagency group that was set up to explore funding options for advancing the project met again on 9 October 2013 and continues to examine funding opportunities for the project.

The Council consented to three property disposals. They included two leases: one at Knockvicar, County Roscommon, for the construction of a 10-berth boat mooring facility; and one for an area of land to Grand Canal Sports to facilitate the provision of a ramp and platform for wheelchair access to the canal. The third involved granting a way leave to Leitrim County Council for an area of the Shannon-Erne waterway at Ballinamore for the installation of a new storm overflow pipe at its wastewater treatment works.

The Council agreed to meet again in inland waterways sectoral format in spring 2014.

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

The statement advises that the interagency group continues to examine funding opportunities for reopening the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. What progress has been made to secure funding? Can she update us on any discussions that she has had with the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister about tourism opportunities on the waterways?

Ms Ní Chuilín: With the Member's indulgence, I will take the last part of her question first. I have not had any discussions with Arlene Foster about tourism, but that is in the planned schedule for things to do on this matter. It is quite important that the canal is reopened, because the benefits of tourism are huge, particularly in Mrs Foster's constituency.

On the interagency meeting about securing funding, my economists are finalising, if they have not, the latest economic appraisal. They are also looking at its status, given that it has been some time since it was last done.

As the Member is aware, I have also met Pat Colgan from the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB) about any potential European funding. Again, in advance of the next sectoral meeting on languages and

waterways, I hope to have discussions with my ministerial counterpart, Jimmy Deenihan, about anything additional that we can bring.

Certainly, the Ulster canal remains top of my priorities. I hope that the Irish Government's economic situation has changed to a point where we can now start looking at ways in which we can develop that project.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chéad ráiteas ar maidin.

Further to the options for opening the Upper Lough Erne to Clones section of the Ulster canal, does the Minister have a definite time frame for that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, his ongoing interest in waterways and the Ulster canal. As I stated previously in the House, given that this is a very significant project for both Governments, certain timelines have to be considered based on the availability of funding.

Funding availability has dictated options for timelines. A single design and construction contract, for example, can take up to two years. Three or four smaller contracts spread over three to five years is an option, as is a large number of small contracts over six to eight years. We are looking at additional options.

11.45 am

As the Member may be aware, the fact is that the original proposition has changed, but not just because of the availability of funding. We are looking at options based on funding that we have and potential funding that may be realised in the future, because, frankly, doing nothing or standing still around this project is not an option for me. I believe that it is certainly not an option for Minister Deenihan either.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. The chief executive set out a strategic direction for Waterways Ireland for 2014-16. In that, she mentioned budget efficiencies. Can the Minister highlight to the House what those might be?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is right: the new chief executive gave us a very good and detailed presentation. Indeed, the Member will be aware — if she is not, she will be when I finish my answer to her question — that there have been additional pressures on everybody across the board in achieving efficiencies.

However, as I have repeated to the Member and to other Members, and despite the meetings that I have had with Minister Deenihan around any proposed additional efficiencies that the Irish Government are saying are required, I am totally reluctant to go above and beyond any efficiencies that we agreed previously, and I have stated that to the chief executive of Waterways Ireland. That is the position. Following that, the Finance Departments and, indeed, officials and Ministers will hopefully be submitting additional or new budget plans very soon. I think that issues relating to any agreement to additional efficiencies lie beneath the Member's question, but I can categorically state that I have not agreed to those.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for her statement. Looking at the strategic direction for Waterways Ireland, I see that the need to explore and optimise opportunities to earn income has been highlighted. I also note and welcome the production of three new publications, 'A Taste of the Waterways 2013', 'What's On 2013' and 'Guide to the Grand Canal'. Does she believe that those initiatives have been successful in achieving an uptake in the number of users of the canal? What effect has that had in 2013 on the need to increase earnings and to up funds?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: the three publications that he mentioned have been very significant work for Waterways Ireland, but I want to use this opportunity to congratulate its partners as well. Waterways Ireland does not have enough money to do the things that it wants to do, as is the case with many of our all-island bodies. One of the things that struck me, and I remember junior Minister Bell asking a lot of questions of Dawn Livingstone, related to opportunities on the waterside to develop initiatives and events that could raise money. The difficulty is that, in order to achieve that, Waterways Ireland would have to spend significant money to make significant money to offset some gaps in its budget, and it is not in a position to do that.

One thing about the publications is that they reflected the opportunities for people who live and work on the waterways to make income. That is to be welcomed. I would like to see that developed to ensure that it is maintained and that those people have additional earnings and employment opportunities for the years ahead. Hopefully, in the years ahead, that will have some kickback for Waterways Ireland, in conjunction with the tourist product and partners in local government, to try to develop a

better product from one length of the waterways to another.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. I want to follow up on the question from the Chair of the Committee in relation to the Ulster canal project. Has the interagency group been working with our four EU officials from the Assembly to explore any cross-border projects that may arise from the next round of EU funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. She will have noted that I mentioned the chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body, Pat Colgan, the meeting that I had and the work of officials in both Departments with not just SEUPB but local government on the proposed areas for the Ulster canal. It is really important. From what I see, the theme of social inclusion in INTERREG V is where the potential lies to have any future money from Europe. I took part in some of the INTERREG IV waterways exchanges. They were very beneficial for people who have lived all their life and have their livelihood around the waterways, but we are also keen to open up our tourist product.

I assure the Member and others that I will continue to ensure that every opportunity, particularly through Europe, is explored. We need development to happen. It not only will provide construction opportunities for an area that has been starved of construction and investment for decades but will open up a waterway and connect people, families, villages and communities. It will provide social inclusion and enhance the tourist product for those areas. At the minute, the officials are doing their best, but they certainly need people like me in government to produce the goods in order to make that and their plans a better reality.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister indicate what level of economic return is anticipated following the investment in the development of our waterways?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The economic return has continued to increase over the years, albeit in a very steady way. As a result of the publications and the presentation that we received from Dawn Livingstone and the staff at Waterways Ireland, I became aware that the level of economic return has yielded significant economic benefits for people. By way of a couple of examples, private boating contributes €44 million per annum and the hire sector

contributes some €20 million per annum. Indirect spend on recreation is estimated at €100 million, and it provides 3,000 full-time jobs. That is fairly significant. Part of the answer that I gave to Anna Lo mentioned opportunities for people, particularly around waterways and areas that have been deprived of significant investment for decades. I am convinced, particularly when it comes to places such as the Ulster canal, that, if the construction happens and the project is developed to its full potential, the figures will certainly be multiplied to a better level. It is important that we concentrate on what we are doing best now, add to it and keep our eye on future developments, which are really crucial for economic regeneration in those areas.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar an fhoras um uiscebhealaí intíre na hÉireann. Ba mhaith liom cuireadh a thabhairt arís don Aire teacht agus an dea-obair atá ar siúl ag Cumann Uiscebhealaí Intíre na hÉireann ar an chainéal idir Lúr Cinn Trá agus Port an Dúnáin a fheiceáil. Ceapaim go dtabharfadh cuairt ón Aire spreagadh dóibh le gabháil ar aghaidh leis an obair sin.

I thank the Minister for her statement. I once again invite her to come down to Newry to see the excellent work being carried out by the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWA) on the canal between Newry and Portadown. I am sure that a visit from the Minister would be a great inspiration for it to continue that good work.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member again for his invitation. I appreciate it. I will liaise with him to ensure that we set a date this side of Easter, and I will be happy to accept his invitation to visit the canal in Newry. I am very supportive of the work, even though it is not within the remit of work that people have done around canals and waterways in towns and villages. I look forward to setting an early date and joining him in a visit to the canal.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire, agus gabhaim buíochas léi as a freagraí go dtí seo.

Given that Waterways Ireland does not report to any board, can the Minister tell us what arrangements are in place for governance and accountability?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is right that there is no board for Waterways Ireland as there is for other all-Ireland bodies. However, Waterways Ireland is accountable to DCAL and to the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) and, indeed, the NSMC. As Ministers, we discharge our oversight responsibilities for Waterways Ireland through the NSMC. That includes consideration and agreement of the budget, corporate plans, business plans, progress reports, business targets and project milestones.

I also want to provide the Member with the assurance that, in addition, we have bimonthly monitoring meetings that are chaired by senior civil servants from DCAL and DAHG. The chief executive and appropriate directors attend to account for business performance and corporate governance. Waterways Ireland's audit committee meets three times a year. It comprises three external members and has unrestricted access to internal and external auditors who access the work of internal audit and receive reports/ Finally, I can give additional assurance that DCAL and DAHG have increased the remit of Waterways Ireland's finance committee to enable more detailed scrutiny of audit and recommendations.

Mr Allister: For all its double-spaced padding, what is really in this statement? We hear about a few extra metres of moorings. We hear that there are three new publications: wow. We hear that we want to inspire people to discover and enjoy recreational activities on the waterways. Do we really need to spend time and money on sending Ministers to the formality of a council to talk about such mundane and inane things, which really are at the level of council functions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am disappointed that the Member has such a disparaging and pitiful attitude towards the work of Waterways Ireland and has no regard for the people who work, live and try to develop their businesses on the waterways and around those communities. He has no knowledge whatsoever of how important these publications and the government support are, and, as we all know, he has no regard for the connection of waterways the length and breadth of this island. If the Member has so little regard for anything that is said in the statement, I wonder why he is here today.

North/South Ministerial Council: Language Body

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-

LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission and in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) language body meeting that was held in Armagh on 20 November 2013.

The Executive were represented by me as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by lead Minister Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs, and Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I make it on behalf of us both.

12.00 noon

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies. Ministers noted progress reports from the chairpersons and chief executive officers of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency, which included the following achievements from July to November 2013. Foras na Gaeilge has maintained ongoing measures for the implementation of the new funding arrangements, including seeking expressions of interest from qualifying organisations wishing to be considered for selection as a lead organisation. Progress was also made with key schemes, including the advertisement of scéim na nOifigeach Gaeilge 2013-16, the Irish language officers scheme. In order to support the Irish language in the arts sector, 57 applications for funding were approved under the festivals scheme 2013 as well as 10 applications for funding under the drama companies scheme 2013. Seventy projects were approved in order to provide opportunities and events for 3,000 young people to use the Irish language, and seven Irish language booklets were circulated with the 'Irish Daily Mail' in September.

The Ulster-Scots Agency oversaw the enrolment of 20 primary schools in the scheme to work towards securing Ulster-Scots flagship school status and provided support for the Walled City Tattoo, which attracted 13,979 visitors to Derry as part of the City of Culture programme. It also delivered the Donegal Peace Proms in Letterkenny, which was the largest event of "The Gathering" in the county and involved the agency's first-ever collaboration with the Cross Border Orchestra of Ireland. In conjunction with North Down Borough Council, it showcased Ulster-Scots culture at Cockle Row Cottages in Groomsport

in July and August, attracting over 17,000 visitors. It also developed an east-west heritage project with the Scottish Maritime Museum about the Ulster-Scots shipbuilders of Belfast.

Progress was also made on collaboration between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. This included the submission of the joint revised equality scheme to the Equality Commission for approval, the updating of the safeguarding policy to include cyberbullying and the development of an initiative to provide cultural workshops for secondary schools in the integrated sector in conjunction with the delivery of the citizenship curriculum. A series of lectures took place on Ulster place names as part of two open days at the Public Record Office (PRONI), and there were discussions on a number of joint projects, including a display about the charter towns, a series of lectures for Key Stage 3 children and a heritage project on the stories of Hamilton, Montgomery and Conn O'Neill.

The Council noted progress to date on the development of the 2014-16 corporate plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency, including the emerging strategic objectives. Ministers further noted that draft 2014 business plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency had been prepared, with the focus on the delivery of key priorities for each agency. The Council also noted that the sponsor Departments would work together to finalise the 2014 business plans and budgets and the 2014-16 corporate plans. After Finance Ministers' approval, they will be brought forward for approval to a future NSMC meeting.

Ministers noted that the 2010 consolidated language body annual report and accounts were laid in the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly on 5 July 2013, and it is envisaged that the 2011 consolidated language body annual report and accounts will be certified and laid by 31 January 2014. The Council also noted that, with regard to the 2012 consolidated annual report and accounts, the field audit had been completed for Foras na Gaeilge and was due to take place shortly for the Ulster-Scots Agency. It further noted that certification by the Comptrollers and Auditors General will follow as soon as possible in the new year. Ministers acknowledged the ongoing cooperation with the independent offices of the C&AGs in both jurisdictions, as a result of which 11 consolidated annual reports and accounts for the language body have been published since 2005.

The Council agreed that its next language body meeting would take place in spring 2014.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I note that the business plans, budgets and corporate plans for 2014 are to be brought forward to a future NSMC meeting. Given that it is already 2014, will the Minister confirm that that will be sooner rather than later?

The Minister referred to the Walled City Tattoo. Will she support that project from the legacy funds, or will the burden for that fall to the Ulster-Scots Agency?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share the Member's frustration. I am trying to the best of my ability to ensure that the reports and everything else that needs to be done are brought to the NSMC sooner rather than later. I raised that and other issues at the last NSMC meeting. I offered assistance to both bodies to achieve that much earlier. We are looking at everything that we can do because it is unacceptable to me, as it is unacceptable for Members to hear the same thing from me, time and again, about what we intend to do. Sometimes an intention is realised; at other times it is not.

I am very supportive of the Walled City Tattoo and have gone on record as saying that. Since then, I have had a meeting with the Speaker and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster. I am looking at channelling investment to future tattoos through legacy programmes rather than having the burden fall on the agency, though it will still have a role to play. Given the significance of the event, which I attended, and its potential not only to provide social inclusion and cultural awareness but as an economic driver, the Executive need to look at opportunities to provide investment and have a better, joined-up approach to it and similar events.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a dara ráiteas anseo inniu.

I thank the Minister for her second statement today. Will she outline the key strategic priorities for the Ulster-Scots Agency in the corporate business plans?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Ulster-Scots Agency presented its key strategic objectives, which include the recognition of 20 Ulster-Scots flagship school programmes. That has been very successful. The agency also intends to establish two Ulster-

Scots heartland areas; brand and market 50 Ulster-Scots heritage sites through the Discover Ulster Scots initiative; and develop a programme of activities around the Ulster Scots and the Great War of 1914-18, leading into the decade of centenaries. It also intends to support the development of a North/South and east-west Bruce heritage trail. Those are the key themes in the strategic objectives to which the Ulster-Scots Agency is working, and I fully support them.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she explain to the House the detail of the latest developments in the new funding arrangements announced by Foras na Gaeilge last week whereby certain groups have lead organisation status? What responsibilities will each of those have?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is aware that Foras na Gaeilge met last Friday, when it decided that the lead organisations would be as follows: Gaelscoileanna, which will have responsibility for Irish-medium immersion education and Irish-medium preschool; Conradh na Gaeilge, which will have responsibility for awareness raising, language protection and representation; Gael Linn will have responsibility for education in the English language sector and for adults; Oireachtas na Gaeilge will have responsibility for supporting the use of Irish and the establishment of networks; Glór na nGael will have responsibility for community and economic development; and Cumann na bhFiann will have responsibility for the development of opportunities for the use of Irish and of networks for young people.

I am sure that Foras na Gaeilge will come before the Committee, not only to explain the decisions that it made last week, which I just read out for the record, but to look at practical ways in which they can be implemented across the island. These programmes and this core funding are about all-Ireland responsibility for the Irish language, focusing on those in most need and making sure that it goes to people in the community and has a longer and more enduring impact on the development of the Irish language.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for her statement on language. We see good levels of activity and delivery through both Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency. However, I want to ask about the ongoing implementation of the new funding arrangements under Foras na Gaeilge. The Minister is aware of reservations about those arrangements among a number of language

activists, some of whom are long-standing and of some stature. Will she indicate where that dispute, argument or discussion is and ensure that Foras na Gaeilge looks after and includes all people in the sector?

I note that the east Belfast Irish language centre has started work. I understand that a three-year tester class provided the impetus for that. Are there any plans for the Ulster-Scots Agency to take a similar approach because, clearly, the agencies can learn from each other?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. Just to reassure him, I also met some of the groups that were resistant to or had difficulties with the new funding arrangements, and I will continue to meet people in the sector. I met many people across the sector, and I want to ensure, as I have always stated, that core funding is not about big administrative costs or big offices but goes into the community. It is about protecting and enhancing the Irish language and for people who wish to learn it. There is still a role for those people through the core funding arrangements and, indeed, other funding arrangements through different bodies and different opportunities in the North. I am keen to make sure that they are enhanced and developed. There will be a change management process in Foras na Gaeilge. There should be an appointment this week — certainly next week at the latest — to help groups with the transition.

I welcome the Member's comments on the work with the East Belfast Mission. That happened through the Líofa initiative, not through any work of Foras na Gaeilge thus far. Foras na Gaeilge has given support, but it has not been one of its core functions. Although the Ulster-Scots Agency is not going for a Líofa-type initiative, it is certainly looking at aspects of heritage. I am looking forward not only to the work set out in its strategic objectives and key priorities but additional programmes that I can help to support. It is crucial for me and for us all to get behind the work of these agencies, bodies, groups and individuals, which, in a quiet way, are getting on with it. The Member is doing the right thing in not only supporting that work but looking for other opportunities. That is what we need to do.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. In the new corporate plan for 2014-16 is there any plan for collaboration between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may not be as aware of this as others, but Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency have joint projects. I mentioned in the statement their equality scheme, which was presented to the Equality Commission. I believe that they have added to that. I certainly think that they have taken on board some of the evidence heard at the CAL Committee on child protection. They are in touch with people in the community and are taking on board anything that they can do to enhance joint working. That is one good example.

They have been working with the integrated sector. However, they have also gone to the maintained and Catholic sectors to talk collectively about their work and to enrich young people's views of cultural heritage. That joint work is important. As the Member and other Members have done, we need to support that work and encourage additional work. It is crucial that people have full respect for identity, cultural heritage and language because only then can we fully accept each other's cultural identities and backgrounds. We certainly need to get on with that.

Mr Irwin: Can the Minister give us more details on the development of an east-west heritage project with the Scottish Maritime Museum on the Ulster-Scots shipbuilders of Belfast or any other east-west initiatives?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Other than what is in the statement, I am happy to write to the Member. As the Member is aware, I was concerned that the east-west dimension was not fully reflected. I met his colleague the then Minister of Finance to look at ways in which we could develop that within the rules and regulations that we are governed by. In fairness to the Ulster-Scots Agency, it has risen to that challenge.

We are looking at connections, both North/South and east-west. We looked at Slí Cholmcille, the Colmcille trail, and we are now looking at Robert the Bruce and others. It is very important that the same respect and value is put on North/South and east-west connections and that we can learn from each other. It is only when we do that and do it continually that we can enrich the programmes that we have to offer and build on the need to develop future programmes for future corporate plans and business plans.

12.15 pm

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister

outline for us the benefits of the Discover Ulster Scots initiative? Is it supported by any other Executive Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Discover Ulster Scots initiative is one example of work in which the Ulster-Scots Agency, through its partners, has tried to build on tourism aspects. This touches partly on the question that Mr Irwin asked. The initiative is primarily about maximising the positive impact of Ulster Scots on tourism. As the Member for East Antrim will be aware, tourism is one of the key building blocks of the Executive's Programme for Government.

The agency intends to support cultural tourism as one of the most important elements of Ireland's tourism product, which, as I said in a previous statement, is really important for the stimulation of job creation and economic regeneration. The Ulster-Scots Agency also intends to use this initiative as a vehicle for increasing the international appeal of Ulster Scots. The way in which it has done that has been beneficial. It is a good exemplar that we can use across not just this body but Foras na Gaeilge and other bodies. The Member will be delighted to know that this has all been done for a sum of £20,000.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat arís, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas fosta leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I gcomhthéacs an ráitis a d'eisigh Foras na Gaeilge Dé hAoine seo caite, d'fhág sé sin droch-bhlas i mbéal Gaeilgeoirí anseo sa Tuaisceart, nó níl oiread agus grúpa amháin as an chuid seo tire a bhfuil stádas mar cheann-eagraíocht aige. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad é a déarfadh sí leis na daoine sin san earnáil Ghaeilge anseo a cheapann go bhfuil breith an bháis tugtha ar eagraíochtaí ar nós Pobal, Iontaobhas Ultach, Altram agus eagraíochtaí eile nach iad; eagraíochtaí a bhfuil saineolas agus saintaithí acu agus a bhfuil fréamhacha acu i measc an phobail anseo.

Many people in the Irish-speaking community here in the North feel that the statement issued by Foras na Gaeilge last week has left an extremely sour taste on their tongue. I note that no group from the North has obtained the status of lead organisation. What would the Minister say to those in the Irish language sector here who say that this new system is a death sentence for long-standing organisations such as Pobal, Iontaobhas Ultach, Altram and others, which have accumulated vast expertise and experience and are deeply rooted in the community here?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. The Member will be aware — indeed, I said this in an answer to his colleague — that the funding is on an all-island basis. While the groups may have offices in Dublin and be based there, they all have an all-island complexion. I will ensure that, at the very least, one quarter of that work will be felt in the North and that staff will be based in the North representing language development and sitting on the partnership forums.

The new core funding arrangements have been in the making for some time. Indeed, as I said to his colleague, a change management process will be available to help groups who want to avail themselves of additional or other opportunities from Foras na Gaeilge or any other Departments.

I am totally committed to ensuring that the Irish language is funded, maintained and sustained. I have made that commitment even outside of the funding that is invested through Foras na Gaeilge. I will continue to meet not just the groups that the Member has mentioned, two of which I have met, but other stakeholders who want to ensure that there is better collaboration across the island and longer-term security to meet the future needs of people in the Irish language sector.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. An dtig leis an Aire a rá linn, le do thoil, cé hiad na scéimeanna agus na tograí atá maoinithe cheana féin ag Foras na Gaeilge nach dtagann faoin scéim bun-mhaoinithe? Will the Minister tell us which schemes and projects already funded by Foras na Gaeilge do not come under the new funding arrangements?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. There is a list of numerous schemes that meet the information requested by the Member. I am happy to provide her with a breakdown of those schemes in writing. In addition, in 2013, Foras na Gaeilge committed over £2 million to a variety of schemes and projects to promote the Irish language. The Member will be aware, because she has raised this with me before, that half of that was spent on supporting the language officers in the community scheme that works across the development of people to work in the community. Other schemes supported by Foras include festivals, drama, bilingual signage projects, the production of electronic and printed magazines and newspapers and, indeed, youth clubs and organisations.

However, as I said, I am happy to provide the Member with a full breakdown of all the schemes.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. The next item of business on the Order Paper is a motion on non-farming rural dwellers —

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Yesterday, during Question Time with the Employment and Learning Minister, I inadvertently missed my slot for a topical question, and I apologise to the House for that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK, I thank you for having the courtesy to come to the House and apologise in person, even though you interrupted me in the middle of my statement.

Private Members' Business

Rural Dwellers: Planning Policy

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

Mr McElduff: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward revised legislation, which would adequately meet the needs of this and future generations of rural dwellers, given that rural planning policy PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside restricts the majority of non-farming rural dwellers from applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé an-sásta an rún seo a mholadh. I am happy to propose the motion and pleased that the Minister of the Environment is attending the debate. The motivation for tabling the motion is really about meeting the needs of the rural community and helping young people, for example, from a rural background to live in the countryside where, very often, they were raised. It is about the need to maintain and encourage vibrant and sustainable rural communities. The motion's emphasis is on problems faced by the majority of people who live in rural areas — rural dwellers who are not directly involved in farming.

In some cases, at least, farming families have some possibilities when it comes to developing a house on their farm.

That is welcome — of course it is — and it is perhaps too restricted, but the emphasis in the debate is on all those people who live in country areas for whom there is even less scope and much less hope of building a single dwelling in the countryside to meet their residential requirements.

I and our party say that any assessment of needs criteria should not be limited to agricultural need alone. I am mindful of many young people who will be returning emigrants and who entertain some hope of living in the area where they were reared. Recently, a school from south Derry visited the Assembly at the invitation of my colleague Ian Milne. I asked the young people in a vox pop-style way how many of them lived beyond the development limits of a town or a village. At least 80% of those young people from the wider Magherafelt district put their hand up to show that they lived in a rural area beyond the settlement limits of a town or village. I suggest that, for those young people, the possibilities of building their own home in the country are extremely limited as the rules stand. I also want to provide for care and support arrangements for people's ageing relatives. That area is too restrictive as well.

Some people have said to me that the countryside is for living in as well as for looking at, and the current opportunities for people who are not directly involved in farming are far too limited. I accept that we need to balance support for rural communities with the need to protect our countryside, but I will point out that I also accept that there is limited provision for non-farming rural dwellers. I am sure that the Minister will detail the areas of replacement dwellings, social and affordable housing schemes, clusters, ribbon developments and dispersed rural communities. The Department may say to people that there are possibilities for a dispersed rural community, but my understanding is that, in the likes of County Tyrone, for example, there might be as few as one dispersed rural community formally identified. So, it is all right saying that those things exist, but they are far too limited.

Our party is happy to absorb into our motion the amendment in the name of Mr Maginness and Mr Eastwood. That is because it perhaps gives the motion the maximum chance of achieving consensus or support in the Chamber today. It also helps in the sense that it refers specifically to the proposed single planning policy statement (PPS), which is inclusive of PPS 21. So, happy to absorb the amendment; no problem.

As a councillor between 2000 and 2010, like many others who represented people at local government level, I attended hundreds of site meetings, which were of huge importance to local people. The demand for dwellings came from families that have close ties to a given area, and people were always mindful that the traditional settlement pattern in Ireland, North

and South, was largely rural. Some may have, but I and others never argued that every site was a good site. Not every site was the perfect site, but there is such a thing as a good site in the country where you can achieve integration, road safety, sight lines, sympathetic design etc. So, not every site is a good site, but there is such a thing as a good site in the country.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that he never argued that every site is a good site, and I totally accept that. Did he ever argue that a site was a bad site?

Mr McElduff: Believe it or not, on one occasion I did. It was in the Carrickmore area, and I reached an agreement with the applicant that I felt that he had been misled by, in that case, an agent to whom he had paid a fee. He applied for the sake of it, with no hope of success, and I told him that his best bet was to agree that it is a poor site and to re-enter a better site. So, I am very pleased that Tom Elliott extracted a positive from me there. I am very grateful, Tom.

12.30 pm

Let us go back to the recent history of all this. In 2006, we had Minister Rooker's attempt to impose a blanket ban on rural planning. We had draft PPS 14, which was, effectively, a green belt policy disallowing rural planning except in a very restrictive set of circumstances. There was a presumption against development in the countryside.

In September 2007, there was a review of rural planning policy, and then we had draft PPS 21, which was introduced more latterly in 2010. All the while, a group was set up to look at the needs of non-farming rural dwellers, which was a recognition by the Executive that there was a problem in this area. The SDLP amendment also acknowledges, by accepting the word "revised", that there is an issue that needs to be addressed. A review of all that was said to have concluded in June 2013, but it definitely did not succeed in meeting the needs of non-farming rural dwellers. That review was far from comprehensive.

There is a need to establish the principle of a single dwelling in the countryside and that there is a possibility of it being a good site if it achieves integration etc. I am not in favour of speculative building — of people building houses in the country and then trying to sell them on. We could live with occupancy or residency conditions for people who have a local tie, but the basic point —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr McElduff: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that if this is designed to help rural dwellers, and if residency conditions are attached, only those who have cash or can get money from sources that do not require them to get loans are likely to be able to build a house? Increasingly, building societies and banks are saying that if there are restrictions such as residency conditions, they will not lend money.

Mr McElduff: There are difficulties, of course. I would like to see the introduction of a local clause, but seemingly that would run into difficulties with the European Commission and might result in infraction proceedings or whatever.

So, this is not without its difficulties, but I hope that the Department of the Environment will look more seriously at the needs of non-farming rural dwellers who, at this time, are practically written out of the script. They need some possibilities, some scope and some hope. There should be provision for well-sited, well-designed new dwellings within, for example, non-nucleated settlements. At this time, young people who are thinking about building a house in the countryside are not making those applications because they know that they are destined for failure.

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

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 12 has been withdrawn.

Waste Disposal

1. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of the Environment what actions he intends to take in light of the recent review of waste disposal at the Mobuoy site and the lessons learned from the future regulation of the waste industry in Northern Ireland by Christopher Mills. (AQO 5336/11-15)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The independent report provided by Mr Chris Mills powerfully illustrates the problems that we have with waste management in Northern Ireland. Mr Mills confirmed that the scale of the illegal Campsie waste dump is large by UK standards, with an estimated total of 516,000 tons discovered at the site. He also found that it is not an isolated problem, with criminality being widespread in Northern Ireland's waste industry. He estimated that the cumulative lost revenue and cost of clean-up could run into hundreds of millions of pounds.

Mr Mills reported that there are a number of compliance failings across the waste sector. He also noted that that is a problem across the UK and Ireland and in other developed nations. He recommended a number of solutions, including potential legislative tightening of duty of care and fit-and-proper-person tests; more systematic and effective regulatory oversight by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA); better linking among NIEA, the Planning Service, the PSNI and other enforcement agencies; and better use of the "polluter pays" principle. Above all, Mr Mills called for a single and comprehensive strategy. The strategy should do two things: reduce the creation of waste in the first place; and create a much more robust and compliant waste system for the remaining waste that is created.

I released the Mills report to ensure that everyone has access to its recommendations. I am determined that the management and

regulation of waste in Northern Ireland will be dramatically improved. That is critical to protecting our environment and supporting industry growth. As I stated, I have directed the NIEA chief executive to prepare proposals for implementing the report's recommendations. As soon as I have received and approved the proposals, I will announce the actions that will drive the changes needed to improve waste regulation in Northern Ireland.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. Mr Mills is highly critical of the regulatory authorities and stated that the planning office played a pivotal role in authorising developments that were ultimately used for illegal dumping. Will the Minister assure the House that every effort will be made to put in place a joined-up approach by all the relevant authorities, agencies and Departments that will help combat this organised crime and put the criminal gangs out of action across Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: The need for a joined-up approach was highlighted, as if it were needed, by Mr Mills in the report. Where gaps exist anywhere in legislation, regulation or enforcement, there are unscrupulous people out there willing to expose them for their personal and criminal profit and gain. Therefore, it is incumbent on all of us, especially on me as Minister of the Environment, to close the gaps that exist and ensure that there is a more joined-up approach between the Department and other agencies and within the Department among planning, NIEA, those charged with waste and those responsible for enforcement. I have every intention of doing so and look forward to bringing my action plan forward in the coming weeks.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Will the Minister clarify how much it will cost to fully clear and decontaminate the Mobuoy site?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist. NIEA is engaging top-class experts to advise on clean-up options at the Campsie site, including cost estimates. Mr Mills estimated that the cost could run into hundreds of millions of pounds. Obviously, we all hope that that does not materialise.

Clean-up decisions will be based on the expert advice that we are currently receiving. As that is happening, the NIEA has already received some high-risk waste, removed it, and increased its monitoring of the surrounding

environment. Every legal effort is being used to recover those costs from the polluters. Obviously, there is a criminal investigation ongoing, and that should assist us in doing so. It is a high priority for enforcement action. If it is not fully successful, I will consider fully funding options at a later stage.

Mrs D Kelly: With respect to a joined-up approach with the PSNI and, indeed, an all-Ireland approach, what discussions has the Minister had, if any, in relation to tackling organised crime on an all-Ireland basis?

Mr Durkan: As outlined in my initial answer, this problem is not exclusive to the North. It is not exclusive to this island; it is a problem across developed nations. On an all-Ireland basis, it is an issue that I have discussed with my counterpart, Phil Hogan, at my last North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the environment sector. We realised that there is a lot of trans-frontier shipment of waste going on, a lot legally and, as the report highlights, a lot illegally. It is therefore vitally important that we work together. I spoke earlier of the importance of agencies here working closely together and in a joined-up manner. It is vitally important that that continues across the island. There is a good lot of work going on between my officials and their counterparts in the Republic.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. Will he confirm whether anyone has been convicted or charged with any offences in relation to the Mobuoy site?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Elliott for that question. There is a criminal investigation ongoing and I am not at liberty to disclose the details or progress of that.

Road Deaths

2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the rise in road deaths in 2013. (AQO 5337/11-15)

11. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's strategy for reducing the number of road accidents in 2014. (AQO 5346/11-15)

Mr Durkan: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I propose to answer questions 2 and 11 together and would be grateful for additional time to do so. I know that this is an issue of huge importance and interest in the Chamber.

The provisional number of road deaths here in 2013 was 56, compared with 48 in 2012. My sincere sympathy is with all the families affected by these tragedies. That was a rise of 17% on the 2012 figure, but is 5% lower than the figure for 2011, when there were 59 deaths. It mirrors the position in Ireland, where there was also a 17% increase in fatalities last year. An increase in motorcyclist fatalities, from four deaths in 2012 to 10 in 2013, is a particular concern. Figures for serious injuries are not yet available, but indications towards the end of 2013 were that they appeared to have fallen.

It is impossible to be definitive about the reasons for the rise in deaths because of the range of different factors that can impact on road safety and on individual collisions. Further, there are no details at this time on the main causes of fatal and serious collisions in 2013. Those will not become clear until the police complete investigations and produce verified statistical reports. Indeed, those might not indicate any particular underlying issue. We might be, sadly, witnessing an effect of what are now, thankfully, statistically quite small numbers.

However, we do know that in 2012 the principal causes of collisions in which someone died or was seriously injured were speeding, inattention or attention diverted and drink- or drug- driving. I think I can say with some confidence that those causes will again feature prominently when data emerges for 2013.

The rise in fatalities in 2013 and at the start of this year is saddening. To date this year, eight people have died, compared with three last year and one the year before. We must not get disillusioned. The overall trend in road casualties in recent years has been down. Indeed, over the past five years the number of people killed on our roads in Northern Ireland has halved, but we must not allow ourselves to be complacent. We must work tirelessly to make 2014 a safer year on our roads.

I am committed to continue working in partnership with all stakeholders to deliver our road safety strategy, which contains over 200 action measures to reduce road casualties. To that end, and in response to the rise in road deaths at the beginning 2014, I last week convened an urgent meeting of the road safety forum. At the meeting, which was very well attended by stakeholders, the police presented an anonymised report on the fatal collisions, which was followed by a discussion on what more might be done.

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

Mr Durkan: The meeting agreed that we need to continue our efforts, take every opportunity to communicate road safety messages and take a number of immediate actions.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. The Minister, more than most in the House, knows that the loss of a life on a road is more than just a statistic. I echo his comments and pass my condolences to the families of all the people who are deceased.

Will the Minister outline to the House how his Department and its agencies work to support excellent community-led initiatives such as the Ulster GAA's Live to Play campaign, which aims to encourage road users, particularly young people, to be safe on our roads?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist. The dissemination of the DOE's road safety messages is very important and, over the years, has proved extremely successful. The principal focus is often seen to be our television campaigns, which have a great record. Statistics show that they work and strike a resonance with viewers. However, an equally important part of our information and education campaign is the work that we do with organisations such as the GAA and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, both of which attended the urgent meeting that I convened last week.

It is vital that we use all avenues at our disposal to get the message out to road users, particularly young road users, who are sadly still over-represented in the figures for casualties and fatalities on our roads. Therefore, I refresh my appeal to Members to use the opportunities and any influence they have to get organisations such as their local club or school to reinforce road safety messages to their members.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers to date, and I follow on from the sentiment of my colleague Mr Flanagan. Will the Minister outline some of the outcomes that were agreed at the forum? Indeed, does he have any plans to engage with the Minister of Education, given the dangers, especially for young people, on this issue?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist arís. In my opinion, last week's meeting was very productive, and I was heartened by the turnout. Over 30 people from different organisations attended. One of the agreed outcomes was that the PSNI gave a commitment to increase visible traffic policing, including the positioning of speed cameras, particularly in areas that might be susceptible to road traffic accidents. A Member has said in the House that he believes that such cameras should be located in areas where speeding is a real problem and danger rather than in areas where they might simply be perceived as a cash cow.

Last Monday in the Chamber, my ministerial colleague Danny Kennedy gave an undertaking, which was reinforced by a DRD official, who said that it was going to look at its gritting procedures. The very clubs that I mentioned — the GAA and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster — undertook to get DOE information to their members. My Department will use its vehicle testing centres to hand out information and reinforce road safety messages, and I have given the go-ahead for a new television campaign and a print media campaign. There was an ad in the papers yesterday, which is an updated compilation of previous campaigns.

2.15 pm

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Obviously, I am mindful of those who have been affected by recent road deaths in Northern Ireland. Our thoughts are with them at this time. Keeping with the theme of the television campaigns, is the Minister's Department monitoring the success or otherwise of the television campaigns and whether, in fact, there is a possibility of a turn-off factor associated with some of the more graphic campaigns?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Cameron for her question. Our road safety campaigns have played and will continue to play a significant part in our ambition to work towards zero road deaths in Northern Ireland. I recognise that it is difficult to measure the sole or unique contribution that any specific area of road safety, including advertising, makes towards reducing casualties. I think that there is a consensus that the huge reductions that we have seen over the years are due to a combination of improved education and information, improved engineering and, indeed, stronger enforcement. Research shows that DOE campaigns are very influential in

improving driver attitudes and producing positive changes in behaviour.

A recent study by Oxford Economics isolated the role of DOE advertising. It calculated that, from 1995 to 2011, over 20,000 men, women and children in Northern Ireland have been saved from death and serious injury on our roads. Further analysis and surveys that have been carried out with road users show how high in their minds, when they are behind the wheel or on the road, our advertising campaigns are and how effective they are in reinforcing that message.

I take on board the Member's concerns that there might almost be a saturation or switch-off point. We will continue to monitor the situation. I, for one, do not want to put money in one direction to reduce casualties when it might be better spent in another.

Ms Lo: Poor visibility is a major factor in many accidents that involve pedestrians. In the Republic, for example, there are national campaigns to provide high-visibility wear to pedestrians and media campaigns to encourage people to put reflective strips on their clothing or children's school bags. Will the Minister consider doing something similar?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Chairperson of the Environment Committee for her supplementary question. It is important that we look at what happens elsewhere and good practice that we can follow. However, this is not revolutionary thinking. The measures that have been outlined by Ms Lo have previously, if my memory serves me correctly, been taken and highlighted here.

One area that I will focus on in coming months is a campaign to increase the awareness of all road users, not just drivers but cyclists and, of course, pedestrians, who are the most at-risk road users, and to reinforce the simple messages that, I am sure, all of us learned at school, such as wearing high-visibility clothing. A previous questioner asked whether I had had any dealings with the Minister of Education on the issue. I am certainly happy to talk to him and explore measures we could take through schools to perhaps give out high-visibility jackets or bands to improve safety for pedestrians.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

3. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of the Environment why the designation programme for areas of special scientific interest has not

been completed 28 years after the enabling legislation was passed. (AQO 5338/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The area of special scientific interest (ASSIs) programme remains one of my Department's key priorities. That is reflected in previous and current Programme for Government targets. Declaring an ASSI is a complex and resource-intensive activity that requires the efforts of many individuals. They include scientific surveyors, administrative staff, data-mapping specialists and liaison officers. Once they have been declared, ASSIs require management and monitoring. As the number of ASSIs increases, so do the resources that are required to undertake those essential activities. In addition, NIEA has European obligations to fulfil, such as the habitats and birds directives, and other competing priorities to deal with. As a result, the declaration programme has not yet been completed, but strong and targeted progress continues to be made.

Mr Wells: As the Minister knows, the relevant legislation here is the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The equivalent legislation in GB is the 1981 Act. Since that was initiated in GB, 4,100 SSSIs — as they are called in England — have been designated. There have been 1,465 in Scotland and 1,019 in Wales. A total of 6,584 SSSIs have been designated. All the designation was completed 20 years ago. Here, where the latest figure is between 200 and 300 ASSIs, we are still, 28 years later, trying to explain why we cannot designate such a small number of areas. Is that not the case?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Wells for that supplementary statement. To date, NIEA has designated 360 areas of special scientific interest that cover 105,000 hectares, which represents approximately 7.5% of the total land mass of Northern Ireland. I have given assurances that work will be ongoing and is ongoing to ensure that the rest of our ASSIs are designated. The targets have been reduced, due to the intensity of resources and the tasks required to designate. Initially, the target to be designated each year was 25, and that has been reduced to 15. I might add that that was some years ago, prior to my predecessor taking up the post. I know that the Member has a special interest in this, which I share, and I am determined to see more done, and more done well.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister accept that an arbitrary figure of the number of ASSI designations each year is not the best way to

decide on designations? Rather, it should be on site-specific and environmental aspects.

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Overend for her question. Yes, I agree that that is the best way. I do not think that we should go by figures. We have to go by quality rather than quantity. However, those targets have been set through the Programme for Government and, as a Department, we are obliged to meet them. I would be happy to beat those targets and go beyond what is required. However, it is vital that what is being done is done well.

Mr Allister: When an ASSI is designated on land that includes active farmland, it brings a great restraint and burden on the active farmer in terms of restraining some of his activities, yet there is no compensatory package for the fact that the farmer is denied the right to exercise rights that he previously had.

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

Mr Allister: Will the Minister look at introducing compensation and recognise that that would make the introduction of ASSIs much more compatible with the views of farmers and make them much more amenable to them?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Allister for his question. This could be a case where, possibly, the law is an ASSI. *[Laughter.]* The issue has been raised with me on a couple of occasions, and I discussed it with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development as recently as last week. It is incumbent on our Departments to work together to ensure environmental protection, but not at the expense of farmers trying to make a living. I do not think that the economy and the environment should be at loggerheads, nor do they need to be.

I am looking at a potential future land use strategy with officials, and that will involve some consultation with DARD and other bodies, notably the Ulster Farmers' Union. I think that it could be of advantage to all landowners, land users and environmentalists across the North.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Belfast metropolitan area plan. (AQO 5339/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Department of the Environment adopts area development plans after all necessary statutory consultation

processes and independent examinations of the issues raised have been completed. The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) completed its independent public inquiry into the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) in May 2008 and sent its report in stages to DOE between January 2009 and January 2012.

My predecessor, Alex Attwood, published all the PAC reports on the draft plan in June 2012. My Department has now completed its scrutiny of those reports and all other material considerations and has finalised the draft plan for adoption and publication. My Department submitted BMAP to the Department for Regional Development for assessment of the plan against the regional development strategy 2035. I confirm that the plan was awarded a certificate of general conformity on 21 October last year.

I recognise the importance of the plan for the region's future development, as well as the need to ensure that it is adopted and published in its final form as soon as possible. I have sought agreement from my ministerial colleagues that my Department now adopts and publishes the plan.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has the Attorney General advised him that the Belfast metropolitan plan is a cross-cutting issue and requires Executive approval?

Mr Durkan: I am aware of the view that BMAP is a cross-cutting policy issue and, therefore, of the view that it needs Executive approval. In my initial answer, I outlined that I have sought approval from my ministerial colleagues to proceed with publication, particularly given the uncertainty that the delay in publication is causing outside among developers, businesses and so many others. So, I am aware of the issues. I recognise that point of view and have now brought the issue to the Executive for discussion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers up to now. He is aware that, over a lengthy period, there have been concerns about the growing numbers of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) and the impact that that has on residential neighbourhoods. What consideration has he given to the policy framework governing approvals for HMOs?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh míle maith agat as an cheist. HMOs, or the lack of control over them, is an issue that has, indeed, come to the fore in some parts of Belfast. Therefore, it is

imperative that BMAP addresses those issues and gives more certainty and protections to residents in those areas. I am hopeful that, upon the publication of BMAP, the Member will be satisfied that those protections have been put in place.

Mr McKinney: What views have the business community expressed about the adoption of BMAP?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr McKinney for the question. I have received correspondence from various areas of the construction industry expressing grave concerns over the continued delay in the adoption of BMAP. Many house builders see the adoption of BMAP as critical to the recovery in their sector. Additions to the workforce can be sustained only by a continuous supply of planning approvals. A substantial number in the business community, including builders, have participated in the plan process since its initiation. It is no exaggeration to say that those participating in the public inquiry into BMAP have invested millions of pounds, engaging specialist consultants and legal advisers, undertaking specialist studies and submitting evidence to the inquiry to secure zoning of land for housing and employment.

2.30 pm

Whilst the release by my predecessor, Alex Attwood, of the report by the Planning Appeals Commission has provided some assurance to landowners, many builders who have been supported by their banks through the most severe recession in living memory are now under severe pressure from those banks to deliver on these sites to recover the significant sums invested in the BMAP process. We have a duty of care to those people, and that is why I am determined that BMAP should be published as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of oral questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Tyres: Illegally Dumped

1. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what steps, if any, his Department has taken to trace the large number of waste tyres that have been dumped illegally in south Antrim in recent months. (AQT 581/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Waste tyres are a very big issue in some parts of the North and in some parts of

the island more than others. My work and my Department's work in tackling the problems caused by waste tyres includes collaboration with our counterparts in the South. It is important that we promote better the ways in which tyres can be disposed of responsibly and the advantages to businesses and the wider economy of so doing. That would include highlighting further the potential reuse and recycling of tyres for very useful initiatives.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he provide assurances that his Department is progressing the more recent recommendations to better record and report used tyres?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Cameron for her supplementary. Yes, my Department has taken on board those recommendations and is fully committed to implementing them and carrying them out in practice.

DVA: Coleraine Jobs

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has had any further contact with Westminster in relation to the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) situation and whether he can give us an update on the current position, given that he will be aware of the continuing anxiety of those who are employed at DVA offices, and the very successful campaign, which he was involved in, to ensure that the jobs were retained in Coleraine, which has an impact in my North Antrim constituency and in other locations in Northern Ireland. (AQT 582/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Storey for that question and the fact that he thinks that the campaign was successful. Unfortunately, as of yet, we are not aware of whether the campaign has been successful. It certainly was successful in uniting the House, and that is something that was and is appreciated very much by the DVA workers whose jobs are under threat.

Together with senior officials, I went to London on 6 November and met Mr Robert Goodwill, the Minister responsible for making this decision. I took the opportunity to emphasise to him the huge damage that the removal of these jobs from the North, particularly from Mr Storey's constituency, would have economically and socially. I also reiterated the lack of business sense in so doing, given the exemplary record of delivery that the central office in Coleraine has. He seemed familiar with the arguments, which gave me heart. He was well abreast of the situation. Subsequent

to that, I provided an aide-memoire to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who have engaged with the Prime Minister on the subject. It was intimated to me by Mr Goodwill that the final decision on the issue might well lie higher than his office. I believe that there is interest in this at the highest political level, and I am hopeful of a positive outcome for all involved.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer. With regard to ensuring that we do all in our power to retain jobs in Northern Ireland, does the Minister have any concern about the recent announcement on the discontinuation of the printing of the tax disc, which may or may not be indirectly linked to the long-term strategic plan regarding the retention of jobs in Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: I have been suspicious — some might say "paranoid" — about any development in vehicle licensing since taking this post. However, I have been assured by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in London that there is no link between the two. At the moment, I would like to fight one battle at a time, and the one that we are fighting together is huge. I am hopeful that we will succeed.

Rose Energy

3. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on any appeals or alternative schemes being considered following his predecessor's decision on Rose Energy. (AQT 583/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Overend for her question. Well, I do not really thank her for it; rather, I acknowledge her question. There was a judicial review, and it is awaiting a hearing. I have been contacted by the original objectors to the plant. I believe that they are seeking some contribution from the Department to their legal costs, given that their position, they believe, has been vindicated by the ruling of the Planning Appeals Commission.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his response. Considering that Moy Park is currently undertaking a programme of expansion and considering the fact that the agrifood report 'Going for Growth' suggested that the poultry sector had immediate potential for growth, what is the Minister doing through his planning policies to assist the wider sector to reach its full potential while meeting its obligations under the nitrates directive?

Mr Durkan: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency is represented on an intergovernmental group tasked with coordinating a response to the Going for Growth action plan. Agency staff have been working with Moy Park to facilitate solutions to those very issues in the agrifood sector. Our aim is to help the industry hit its growth targets but to do so with good environmental performance. As a competitive advantage, a team has been set up and officials designated to it with the particular mission of assisting with Moy Park's applications as and when they come in. I am aware that a lot will be coming, and we are hopeful of getting them dealt with quickly.

Fuel Laundering

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of the Environment to elaborate on what his Department is doing to tackle fuel laundering, given that the Minister will be aware, through the organised crime areas of his Department, of the damage that is caused to the environment by this practice. (AQT 584/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Givan for his question. Fuel laundering continues to be a problem for my Department, the Department of Justice and the people of the North. Therefore, it is important that my Department, along with others and the PSNI, does all that it can to combat it. I met Ministers Ford and Kennedy recently, and this was one of the issues that reared its ugly head. I also raised fuel laundering with Leo Varadkar during the most recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting in transport format. He opines that they have made massive inroads into tackling fuel laundering over recent months due to the introduction of a new marker. That corroborates opinion that we are getting from London about a new marker that has been introduced there. We hope to see it introduced here in the North by this spring to make life more difficult for the criminals.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that and commend him for his efforts and wanting to make life more difficult for the criminals. To that end, what actions is he taking as Environment Minister to encourage his colleagues that it is time to support the National Crime Agency, which is responsible for seizing the assets of the very people who are engaged in fuel laundering and in causing huge damage to our environment?

Mr Durkan: We remain very focused on making life more difficult for criminals and doing all that we can to make sure that they are brought to

justice. We are speaking about fuel laundering. If Mr Givan had been in the Chamber earlier he would have heard a similar discussion about waste crime and the importance of all Departments and agencies working together with the PSNI and other enforcement and crime prevention agencies to ensure that this becomes a thing of the past.

Conservation: DOE Failure

5. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of the Environment whether the systematic failure in his Department has been identified and, if so, what is being done to address it, given that, in response to a recent question for written answer, the Minister outlined to me that 33 of 54 special areas of conservation were in unfavourable condition and not showing signs of recovery. (AQT 585/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I am trying to remember which question for written answer that was; Mr Agnew sends me a few. It was not a systematic failure by my Department; it was a failure of resources. I suppose that that could be seen as systematic, as resources may not have been allocated in the manner that they should.

I aim to address the issue shortly. I have announced a restructuring of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which I think will come as welcome news to everyone in the Chamber and outside it. It is important that the NIEA does its business better and quicker and ensures environmental protections. However, again, that should not be at the disproportionate expense of, for example, farmers as I said in answer to an earlier question from Mr Allister. It is possible to have a balance between a good environment and a good economy. That is what I strive for and what we should all strive for, and I look forward to working with the Member on that.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answer and for his many answers to my questions for written answer. I do not know whether it is a resource issue, but does the Minister accept that a review of mineral extraction has to be a key part of looking at the problems faced by special areas of conservation? If so, will he indicate when we will see such a review?

Mr Durkan: Mineral extraction is a theme that runs through Mr Agnew's questions for written answer and rightly so. It is a matter of great concern to Mr Agnew and many others. The number of mineral extraction applications that have to be dealt with retrospectively is a cause of great concern to me. They require a lot of

time and resources, and they are difficult to assess and make decisions on. I have not yet determined whether a review of how mineral extraction is dealt with is required, but we are happy to speak to the Member and others about how they think it could be brought forward.

Road Safety Committees

6. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of the Environment how many local road safety committees remain active in the 26 district council areas. (AQT 586/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. Unfortunately, I do not have that detail to hand. However, as a former member of a local road safety committee in the north-west, I am well aware of the value they had and the difficulties they faced under previous Ministers.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. Much good work is still being carried out by the committees that are active. Is there an opportunity to reactivate the system and provide the resource?

Mr Durkan: Earlier, in response to questions from Mr Flanagan and Mr Hazzard, I spoke about the importance of using every tool at our disposal to get road safety messages out.

Through various initiatives, the local committees were certainly a valuable tool, whether through public speaking competitions, quizzes, activities for schools or events for more senior drivers.

2.45 pm

I do not have with me the details to answer your main question as to how many committees are still active. I will get that information for you and, in so doing, will look again at how those committees might be reactivated. Through the committees, a lot of good people gave of their valuable time to do valuable work in the community.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Michael Copeland is not in his place, so we will proceed to question 2. I advise Members that questions 6 and 8 have been withdrawn.

European Investment Bank

2. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any engagement he has had with the European Investment Bank in relation to using its financial resources. (AQO 5351/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank the Member for her question. I am very keen for the European Investment Bank (EIB) to fund projects in Northern Ireland, and I intend to engage with senior officials from the bank in the coming months on the issue.

I met the European Investment Bank and the University of Ulster last year about the relocation of the Jordanstown campus to Belfast city centre. As the Member may be aware, the university has been in intensive negotiations with the European Investment Bank over recent months. I understand that those discussions are progressing positively.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he give us his assessment of the role that the European Investment Bank can play in local investment?

Mr Hamilton: There are huge opportunities for Northern Ireland to avail itself of funding from the European Investment Bank. As I said, the University of Ulster is in ongoing negotiations with the bank. I hope that, in the coming weeks, we will hear that the university has been successful. However, we should not rest on our laurels and take that as the full extent of what we can do with the EIB. The EIB offers projects of the size and scale of the university's relocation from Jordanstown to the centre of Belfast and the opportunity for funding over a longer period, sometimes at a significantly lower rate than projects could get elsewhere on the market. I am keen to explore other possibilities with the EIB and intend to meet its officials again in the next few weeks.

Without having any specific projects in mind, one area in which there could be huge opportunities is for our reformed local government to avail itself of some of those potential EIB borrowings. If we have bigger councils with more powers, such as the power to regenerate town and city centres, there are opportunities for those councils to work with the EIB, either on individual projects or in bundling projects together in order to avail themselves of cheaper finance and, importantly, to get projects and infrastructures on the ground that

will improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely with the Minister that there is huge potential. How does he propose to engender the same obvious enthusiasm that he has for the European Investment Bank with his colleagues in the Executive and other government bodies?

Mr Hamilton: As you can see from my January monitoring statement to the House this morning, there is a willingness, and I referred to the allocation of some £35 million in a two-year loan to the University of Ulster for moving into the Member's constituency. Although the work with the EIB was not contingent on getting that, it sends a clear marker to the EIB that the Executive are serious about working with it to fund potential projects in the future.

We have issues with using EIB funding to build central government capital projects such as roads, schools, and so forth. If we avail ourselves of the funding, it will come off our block grant, and even though it is a lower rate of interest, we would still have to pay the interest so we would be net worse off in the longer term. That is why I think that there is potential for colleges and universities such as the University of Ulster and Queen's University, which are at arm's length from government, and for local government, because such finance does not score on balance sheets in the same way. That is why I am keen to meet the EIB to scope out those potentials for Northern Ireland, of which there are many.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister clarify what the EIB could be used for? You just said that it could not be used for building schools. Are there other areas in education where we can use its funding to help schools?

Mr Hamilton: It could be used for schools, but there would be no benefit in that. We could access that money, but, because of Treasury rules, it would score against us, come off our balance sheet and we would have to pay interest. That is not advisable. This sort of work is in the very early stages. The EIB has been around for a while and is showing some interest in Northern Ireland as a place where it wants to invest. We are in a slightly better position with our capital budget than we were a couple of years ago, but finances are short and things are still tight. At a time when private sector infrastructure and construction work still languishes, it is important that we scope out all opportunities.

It is almost a case of central government issuing a challenge to local government, universities and others in the education sector, the health sector or whatever it may be that as long as they are outside government, we are happy to work with them and facilitate their bringing forward any projects and working with them and the EIB to make them a reality.

In some ways, I see the role of the Department of Finance, and of the Executive as a whole, as facilitators and enablers of projects so that we can reap the benefits from them, as we have, in a way, with the University of Ulster.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister expand a wee bit on how the new council structures could access that funding? Will he issue guidance or provide support on that?

Mr Hamilton: Local government reform is principally the responsibility of the Minister of the Environment, but I appreciate that this is not an area of work that the Department of the Environment focused on historically. I can understand why, at this stage, the Department of the Environment would be keen just to make sure that the RPA happens within the time frame set out for it. However, if the Executive wait until after reform and the 11 new councils are in place, an opportunity will have been lost at least to have a conversation to engage councils in the potential of the EIB and other ventures to bring in outside money to develop local infrastructure.

My understanding is that council borrowing powers are now less restricted as a result of the Local Government Finance Act a number of years ago. I think that the Member was still on the Committee at the time. Obviously, the new councils will have bigger rate bases and more power to spend that bigger rate income. There are huge opportunities, as can be seen, for example, in Scotland, where they have ramped up their infrastructure spend over the past number of years. By and large, that was done not by central government but by councils. Given the Treasury's treatment of that expenditure, I want us to work with local government to enable councils to get into a stronger position where they could work with the EIB, the private sector or others to get investment for infrastructure in their locality that would not only improve their area but have a beneficial impact for the whole of Northern Ireland.

Welfare Reform

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the withholding of block grant finance from HM Treasury contingent on the lack of Executive agreement on welfare reform. (AQO 5352/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 18 November, when he reinforced his intention to impose penalties should the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly not progress the Welfare Reform Bill by January 2014. The UK Government have not yet specified how this departmental expenditure limit budget reduction will be applied. However, as the Member will know from the January monitoring round statement earlier, I have had to make a provision of £15 million for penalties that we will incur this year. The Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill remains stalled at Consideration Stage. We now need to progress it as a matter of urgency to avoid any further fines.

Mr McNarry: I am indebted to the Minister for his answer. I heard what I thought was a meaningful warning about the rolling on of debts or call-ups by the Treasury, which could end up at £200 million if we do not do something about this. I think that it is about time that we did do something about it. However, since April 2007, prices have risen by 18% where the average —

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

Mr McNarry: Pardon?

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

Mr McNarry: Can I repeat, Deputy Speaker, where I was in the middle of a question?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could I have a question shortly, please, or we will move on?

Mr McNarry: I will tell you what, Deputy Speaker: I will sit down. I do not like the way you are doing this.

Mr Deputy Speaker: OK. We will move on, then. I call Mickey Brady.

Banks: Lending

4. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what engagement he has had with banks in relation to their lending practices to small and medium-sized businesses. (AQO 5353/11-15)

12. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what contact he and his departmental officials have had with local banks in the past six months. (AQO 5361/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am not quite sure what happened there. With your permission, Deputy Speaker — I am not sure whether I will get it or not — I will answer questions 4 and 12 together.

I am in the process of meeting the local banks as part of the ongoing series of discussions that I am having with them, along with the Enterprise Minister. Earlier this month, I met separately Bank of Ireland, Barclays, Danske Bank, First Trust, HSBC and Santander. I am due to meet Ulster Bank next month. I discussed a broad range of issues with each of them, including trends in lending, their overall performance, restructuring, and the use of national lending initiatives.

The Enterprise Minister and I have also met bank representatives about the agrifood loan fund initiative. I have spoken to Ulster Bank management on a number of occasions about the interruptions to its service because of IT failures. Over the past six months, my officials and I have also regularly engaged with the senior management of the banks on specific issues at other times and events.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister is aware that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the key to economic growth in our local economy. Does he agree that there remains suspect dealings between the banks and SMEs? Has he any confidence that the banks will not engage in any such activities in 2014? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. We are sometimes very focused on attracting big-name companies into Northern Ireland to create jobs; that is very much part of our economic strategy. However, I agree with him entirely that it will be through the recovery of the small to medium-sized enterprises, which account for such a large section of our economy, that we will really start to see the

recovery creeping back, with an increase in employment and economic growth. You hear entirely different stories about whether the banks are doing a good job or a bad job depending on who you talk to, when you talk to them and what circumstances they are in. It depends very much on the particular circumstances of the customer who goes in and asks for services, and when they do that.

As the Member will be aware, we get some headline lending figures from the British Bankers' Association. From 2010, when we started getting the figures, that showed a downward trend in lending. However, it was interesting and positive that, in the first two quarters of 2013, there was an increase in new lending. That was reflected in an increase in the average loan value over the past three years.

In the engagements that we have with banks, they are repeating what two banks stated in evidence to the Westminster Select Committee a couple of weeks ago. They said that, for them, the issue is now much less about supply of funding and more about demand coming through the door. We could rehearse that there might be a responsibility on the part of the banks as to why people are not coming in and whether there is a fear about coming in. I am aware of some of the concerns that have been expressed by individual businesses about the treatment that they have had from banks. If anybody has any evidence of bad treatment and thinks that my office can help to assist with the banks in any way, I am more than happy to help.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. What discussions has he had locally with Ulster Bank and RBS and with the appropriate Treasury Minister to ascertain what can be done to prevent more companies from being forced out of business by the seizing of assets and calling in of loans?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her very good, timely and pertinent question. As Mr Brady alluded to, this issue has been rumbling on since the start of the crisis. There is evidence, albeit anecdotal, coming forward from various companies of what people might describe as the sharp practice of some banks that were seizing their assets and putting them out of business in order to repair their own balance sheets. I add that that is anecdotal. We get some of that evidence coming through the Department and it is hard for us to assess whether it is true or accurate because we do not have a full view of everything.

Lawrence Tomlinson, whom it so happens I am meeting tomorrow, carried out a review on behalf of the Business Secretary, Vince Cable. Since his report was published and before setting up that meeting, some people have raised concerns about the practice of the banks with them. I have passed that all on to the appropriate people. Of course, there are various inquiries going on following on from Lawrence Tomlinson's report, and I will engage him tomorrow in how we can feed any Northern Ireland evidence into that. As I said to Mr Brady, if individual Members or those outside have evidence of so-called sharp practice, I am more than happy to pass that on anonymously through the appropriate authorities.

3.00 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí cuimsitheacha. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answers. Can he give the House an update on the key themes of any submission or engagement that he has had with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry into banking in the North?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I gave evidence to the inquiry just before Christmas. If the Member wants to listen to me talking for an hour and a half, I am sure that it is available on the Internet. Maybe he just wants a potted history.

I very much welcome the inquiry that it has initiated. It is timely. In fact, it is probably overdue in many respects, and we will all probably agree that there has not been sufficient attention at a national government level on the particular banking problems in Northern Ireland. There has been a belief that the problems that affected banking and lending to small businesses in particular in Great Britain are exactly the same as the problems here, and the Member will be aware that our problems have been very different from those in mainland Britain. They are not entirely different but different in that it has been much more of an issue of risk caused by the property overhang. In that sense, we have, as I said in my evidence, more of an Irish problem than a British problem.

I welcome the engagement. There was a good discussion back and forward about some of the solutions, with some concentration, as you might expect, on RBS and some possible solutions to that situation and, indeed, banking in general. I welcome the fact that Westminster

is focusing on this issue, and I look forward to the report. In fact, there is still more evidence, particularly from our local banks, to feed into that, and I hope that it will help, along with other work such as the joint ministerial task force that Arlene Foster and I are engaged on with Treasury Ministers, business Ministers and our Secretary of State. It adds up to a renewed focus on banking and the need to get lending out into the community, because I am sure that the Member will agree that, as we see signs of recovery creeping into the economy, we need our banks to start functioning properly again and getting much-needed lending out to businesses that are about to grow again and start to employ people so that we can get things moving.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's comments and commitment. The small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our local economy, and we know the difficulties that they have had in recent times. Despite all the good intentions of the Minister —

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

Mr McCarthy: Yes. The problem still exists. Has the Minister explored any possibility with the local credit unions in Northern Ireland to see whether a business credit union could be established to assist and to get over the hump that we are experiencing with banks at the moment?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. The whole issue of credit unions came up in the evidence that I gave to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the back of a question from one of its members. Credit unions have traditionally played a very good role in Northern Ireland. They have a much better penetration into the market here than they do in Great Britain, and I can recall that, a couple of years ago, legislation was changed so that regulation of the credit unions rested not with the relevant Department here, which is DETI, but with the Financial Services Authority, which is now the Financial Conduct Authority. So, there is potential for credit unions to expand their scope, particularly on personal lending. I am not sure whether they want to get into business lending much beyond the small level on which they do it at the minute. I have not had any formal engagement, but I would certainly welcome engagement with them, as I would with anybody who wants to get into the Northern Ireland market to help, whether it be on the personal banking side, people who want to get mortgages, or business lending. I am

willing to meet anybody who wants to get into our market, discuss the issues and encourage them to come into Northern Ireland, because one of the problems over the past couple of years is that there has not been competition in our banking sector in many ways. We are starting to see a bit more of that now, but we need to see new entrants at all different levels. So, I very much welcome any engagement with the credit union movement.

Household Income

5. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why average household income is over £2,000 lower than in Britain. (AQO 5354/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question. Average earnings in Northern Ireland are linked to the general performance and overall structure of the local economy, including factors such as labour productivity and the relative supply and demand of suitably qualified staff.

Although we have made some good progress in recent years, growth in output and employment has, historically, tended to be in relatively lower value-added areas, which typically pay lower wages. It is also important to recognise that the overall UK average is very much influenced by London and the south-east regions, where household incomes are significantly higher than in most other regions.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. How does he propose to address the challenges of income inequality?

Mr Hamilton: This is a problem that Northern Ireland has faced for a number of years. It is not going to be simply or easily resolved by me or by any Executive Minister. In her question, the Member asked about the imbalance between the rest of the United Kingdom, principally Great Britain, and Northern Ireland. That imbalance tends to happen in most economies. So, even if you look south of the border, you will see that disposable household incomes are higher in Dublin than they would be in the west of Ireland, Donegal or somewhere like that. Over the 2007-2011 period, the average disposable household income in Northern Ireland has increased year on year. The issue has been more that, over that period, even though we have been in the middle of a very difficult economic crisis, average disposable household income in London and the south-east has risen

considerably. So, the gap that was already there has increased. It is not easy to address that, but that is where the Executive's economic strategy comes into play. Although it is important for us to get jobs into our economy at a time when fewer jobs are available — I welcome the significant progress that the jobs fund has made, which the economy Minister announced yesterday — we need to continue to attract new businesses into Northern Ireland and to encourage existing businesses to grow through investment in skills and infrastructure. We need to encourage them to move into sectors where the average wage is higher than has traditionally been the case. That is why the Programme for Government targets are not just for new jobs but for new jobs that pay higher wages. That is only way in which we can close the gap. I am not sure that we would ever entirely close the gap, given the natural distortions that there are in economies, but we can certainly attempt and do our best to bridge it.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Has a comparison ever been made between household incomes in Northern Ireland and those in the Republic?

Mr Hamilton: Sometimes it is hard to do direct comparisons between one economy and another. We have much easier comparability within the United Kingdom. As the initial question highlighted, there is a £2,000 a year differential between disposable incomes here and the UK average, which is distorted, as I said, by places such as London, which has an average disposable household income of £20,000. There is no direct read-across and methodology between our figures and anything that the Irish Government produce. However, Eurostat, which is the Europe-wide statistics agency, does an analysis of what it calls purchasing power standards, where it looks not only at wages but at living costs and currency to come up with a fictional currency by which it measures things. That shows that households in Northern Ireland have higher disposable incomes than households in the Republic of Ireland, which I think is interesting. Some of the statistics show that wages in the South are considerably higher than they are in Northern Ireland, but, because of taxation and the cost of living, when you break it down and compare it on a like-for-like basis, you see that people in Northern Ireland have a higher disposable income than their counterparts in the Irish Republic.

Capital Project Delivery

7. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his plans to improve the efficiency and timeliness of capital project delivery. (AQO 5356/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Capital projects are important in helping to support economic growth in Northern Ireland, and such projects must move forward quickly. If there is any indication that current commissioning and delivery systems are not efficient and timely, that causes me concern. However, it should be noted that, although individual projects can be delayed, none of the capital available for the Executive to spend has been returned to Her Majesty's Treasury during this Assembly mandate.

These issues were recently the subject of a strategic review of the commissioning and delivery system for major infrastructure projects in Northern Ireland undertaken by the Strategic Investment Board and my Department's Central Procurement Directorate. The report of that review has been presented to the procurement board, which I chair. The procurement board has set up a subgroup to address the issues raised by the review and to bring forward proposals aimed at improving infrastructure commissioning and delivery. I look forward to receiving the results of that work.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is being done to ensure that industry has confidence that there is a pipeline of future infrastructure projects?

Mr Hamilton: When I engage with the business community, aside from always being asked about rates, the second issue that always comes up is procurement in general terms. Were you to break down all the questions that I get, there is always concern that there is a lack of certainty about what is moving forward in terms of the capital projects that we, as a Government, and our Departments are commissioning. It is sometimes hard to do that with certainty because of funding, but we generally know what money we have and what projects we will earmark it for. From time to time, things fall through the cracks, such as the A5. Nobody foresaw that that was not going to happen. That then created a major issue because money was sitting there but could not be spent, so we had to reallocate it.

The investment strategy for Northern Ireland's delivery tracking system is already in place and is, I think, perfectly capable of addressing the problem of a lack of certainty on the part of the private sector about what we, as a Government, are commissioning. The problem is that the

system has not been universally used by all Departments, and even those who have used it have not updated it as frequently as we would like. So, we have the system in place, and it is my job, working through the procurement board, to encourage all Departments to use that delivery tracking system and update it regularly. I hope that doing that will give the private sector the certainty that it needs to tool up as and when required to deliver the projects that we want them to.

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister outline the steps that can be taken to improve the nature and role of communication between Departments around business cases?

Mr Hamilton: I think that the traditional view has been that officials in my Department sit on business cases and do not progress them. I would not say that we are without blame in every case, but we are unfairly blamed in many cases for holding up business cases. Sometimes, incomplete business cases with important information missing arrive in the Department of Finance, and that would naturally slow things up. Some Departments will sometimes, I think, test the water a wee bit. They will put in something that they know is incomplete, so the Department of Finance will tell them, "These are the two or three areas that you need to give us a bit more detail on". The Departments then go away, and obviously the next iteration of the business case addresses those issues. In some ways, it is a bit of a cat-and-mouse game.

Some analysis was carried out independently, and we are processing business cases in what I consider to be a timely manner. However, I am always keen to improve performance. One of the things that the procurement board subgroup, which is looking at the delivery of infrastructure projects, will look at specifically is business cases. Even though the system is not too bad, I want the subgroup to come back with a series of recommendations, including how we could perhaps improve it in respect of business cases.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the delivery of major capital projects, past and current?

Mr Hamilton: That is one of the Member's usual idiosyncratic, cryptic questions; I am not quite sure whether he is talking about a specific project. Certainly, my predecessor had significant discussions with the current Culture

Minister and previous Ministers about the stadia projects, for example. The current Minister and I have had discussions about that as well, as have our officials. DCAL is not a centre of procurement expertise in itself and tends to use the Central Procurement Directorate for that function. So, there is, probably more at the level of officials, continual contact between my Department and the Department of Culture on capital projects.

Mr Cree: Minister, bearing in mind that capital projects have a long lead-in time, what is your opinion on working up to tender stage other projects, so that, if there is any slippage, there is a reserve pool of projects to fall back on?

Mr Hamilton: We need to look at this area, but we need to do so with our eyes open. I agree with the Member. In the A5 situation, we had to step back, have a discussion about what projects were ready to go and which were not. That meant that we were able to fund some exceptionally good projects with the money that was released from the A5 not moving forward. In better circumstances, you would have had a ready-made list of projects across all Departments that could have moved forward quite quickly and that fitted in with the strategic objectives that the Executive had for Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

There is an issue with progressing things too far. The Member mentioned going to tender stage: that stage is significantly down the line. You are basically ready to go. That incurs some cost and raises expectations in localities. If we take a hospital project or roads project through to that stage, people might expect it to happen very quickly, then the money might not arrive and it could be a further few years before it happens. We need to balance those things with sound and sensible management of a capital budget. Looking at how we can better prioritise as many projects as we can is something that I would like to see coming forward as part of the review.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of the time for oral questions to the Minister. We move on to topical questions.

Equal Pay: NIO/PSNI

1. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on progress on equal pay for NIO and PSNI staff, which, as he will

recall, the Assembly debated last year. (AQT 591/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will also recall that, early in my time in office, I expressed in the House a keenness to re-examine the issue, which I have done. I have received submissions from officials on the issue and pondered those over the last number of months. It has been characterised as an equal pay issue — indeed, the Member did so in his question — for ease, if not necessarily for accuracy. The judgement of the court in respect of the matter, back in March of last year, made it very clear that it was not an equal pay issue and that the members of staff employed in the NIO, the Police Service and so forth were not entitled to access the terms of the equal pay settlement for Northern Ireland Civil Service staff.

After considering the issue, I have come to the clear conclusion that there is no legal way to extend the terms of the equal pay settlement to those members of staff. However, as the Member will appreciate, I still have sympathy for those members of staff in the position that they have found themselves in. I have sympathy for the argument that is put by them, even if it does not have any actual legal standing. I am committed to continuing to explore ways in which the moral argument that they have been putting consistently could in some way be recognised.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. At the Justice Committee, we had briefings from departmental officials, and I think that it is accurate to say that that Department, led by its Minister, has been reluctant on this issue. However, after the Assembly debated the issue and passed a motion on it, the Justice Minister sent a letter to the —

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

Mr Givan: Yes, it is coming. The Justice Minister has corresponded with the Finance Minister indicating that he wants to be helpful. Has the Finance Minister now had any discussions with the Justice Minister to find out if there is any progress that that Department can make in assisting?

Mr Hamilton: The Minister of Justice did indeed. He and my predecessor were in correspondence back and forward, and that carried on into my tenure in office. He corresponded with me in the autumn. At that

time, I was still considering the issue and what could be done. I was still considering that advice and the issue generally. I have subsequently, in recent days, spoken to the Minister of Justice, and he has been quite helpful. He and I have agreed that officials from each of our Departments will commence work on identifying possible solutions to the issue that we can then in turn take to our Executive colleagues.

I made it clear in the autumn, when I first answered a question about this, that I do not want to unduly raise expectations of staff, but I hope that they can see the commitment that I made to look at and reopen the issue. It was an issue that had gone away. I reopened it and took a look at it again. I continue to look at ways in which we can find a satisfactory solution to it, while not unduly raising the expectations of the staff, who have gone through quite a lot over the last number of years that they have already endured.

Finance: Cross-border Mobility

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how focused his Department is on removing financial obstacles to cross-border mobility, and I am specifically thinking of a person who might live in County Tyrone, work in County Monaghan and have tax credit difficulties. (AQT 592/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The issues that the Member raises are characteristic right across different states in Europe — and beyond, I am sure. Members who represent constituencies that are closer to the border than mine will hear about this through their constituency offices a lot more frequently than I and some colleagues do. If people find themselves in the predicament of falling foul of the system in some way because of working in one jurisdiction and living in another and if there is anything that I or my Department can do, my doors are open to offer assistance to anybody who might require it.

Mr McElduff: I welcome what the Minister has said. I have one suggestion, on which I invite his comment: perhaps he can work closely with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on properly resourcing the independent advice network in areas such as Enniskillen, Strabane, Omagh and Newry, where there is a proliferation of such issues.

Mr Hamilton: In the first instance, given that it is the responsibility of my colleague the Enterprise Minister rather than me, I can commit to contacting the Minister, raising the

issues that the Member has raised and ensuring that advice on the best way in which to handle some of the scenarios that the Member outlined is available to advisers, whether they be from Citizens Advice or another independent advice provider.

Education: Budget Allocation

3. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of his statement this morning and the fact that, in education, we need more money per pupil and more money for maintenance and capital, whether the Education Minister is missing out by not taking up his end-year flexibility or efficiency savings plans and whether he is denying other Departments the benefits of more money. (AQT 593/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. It is a conflation of two issues, which I will try to separate. I explicitly mentioned the end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme in my statement. That was started in 2011-12 after the broader EYF scheme that the Executive had disappeared. It started with an opening balance of some £56.7 million, and, under the terms of the scheme, the Department of Education bid for £20.5 million in June monitoring in 2011-12. That bid was agreed. In January of that year, the Department had a reduced requirement of £10.5 million, so the number has been coming down. This year, my information is that there were as many drawdowns from the scheme as there was money being put back into it. The system was put there to allow for sensible management. Anyone who has been on or is still on a board of governors will know that, as with the capital budget that central government operates, schools will sometimes want to commit to expenditure but cannot quite do so. It is a better way in which to manage some expenditure that they might make in their schools. Therefore, it is a good scheme that has worked, and we have not had any issues or problems with it.

The Member asked whether the Minister of Education is availing himself of it properly; it is more a matter of whether schools are availing themselves of it properly. Perhaps schools do not want to commit to certain types of expenditure because of other problems that they are having at the minute. It is perhaps worth some of my officials pursuing further whether the scheme needs to be tidied up or looked at.

On the Minister of Education's failure to participate in the savings delivery plan process, it is disappointing that that did not start at the beginning of this Budget period. I cannot speak — I certainly would not even dare to try — for the Minister of Education for a host of reasons.

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

Mr Hamilton: Whether he is administering his budget properly or not, his lack of participation fails to give the Member and other colleagues the proper insight into what he is spending his money on.

Mr Kinahan: If I may, I will stay with education. We have had announcements on shared education campuses. Is the money that is being planned from OFMDFM, or is this a solo run of funding from within the Education Department? Where do we sit on that?

Mr Hamilton: The Member may recall that, as part of the economic pact between the Executive and the Prime Minister in June of last year, we were allowed to draw down additional reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing of, I think, £100 million over the next two years, as long as that was specifically for shared education and shared housing projects. Only one has been able to go forward so far: the Lisanelly project. I understand that there are other projects being worked up, particularly in housing. What I understand — again, I would not wish to speak for him — is that the Minister of Education's call for schemes to come forward is in order to take up the funding that is available from Treasury, which we asked for. It would be unfortunate if we did not have schemes for that funding after having asked Treasury for it in the first place.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Raymond McCartney is not in his place.

Clinical Negligence: Cost

6. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he accepts that up to £20 million of the £30 million allocated to the Health Department this morning could go on clinical negligence, and, in the context of the £30 million, does the Minister accept that, rather than reducing pressures, clinical negligence is increasing pressure on front line services. (AQT 596/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Clinical negligence is an unfortunate reality. Over the past number of

years, quite a number of cases have built up and developed. They are starting to crystallise because of actions being taken by the courts. That then puts pressure on the Health Minister's budget.

The money allocated to the Minister through the January monitoring round is principally for front line services, such as the stuff that I outlined to the Member this morning — in fact, he raised it with me — including pressures faced by A&E and those caused by winter and elective surgery. Indeed, they go right into the care side of the budget.

I will make the point that the Health Minister faces pressures regarding clinical negligence. They have been well outlined in the past, and he is having to mop up those problems as they crystallise. The point I will make to the Member, which, perhaps, he missed earlier, is that, if the Minister spends some of his allocation on clinical negligence, although this is not as desirable as it might be to bring forward additional care, support, operations or whatever it might be, and does not pay those sums and settle them this year, an opportunity cost will arise elsewhere in the system from not having done so. Therefore the effect is the same: it will still hit front line services whether he pays the money or not out of the allocation that he has received.

Mr McKinney: Given the vast sums involved, what will the Minister and the Health Department do together to tackle clinical negligence and its implications?

Mr Hamilton: Dealing with clinical negligence is principally a matter for the Health Minister. Much as I might like to interfere in the Department of the Environment's business, I am sure that the Member's party colleague the Environment Minister would object, and I cannot tell the Health Minister how he should deal with clinical negligence. I imagine that he does not want to see any clinical negligence cases and wants to ensure that the highest standards of health, care and support are given. I am happy to work and have exhibited a willingness to work with my colleague in the Health Department to ensure that the pressures that materialise and impact negatively on his budget, from whatever source they come, are dealt with in-year as well as we can.

Economic Growth

7. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact on

economic growth of static wage levels and rising household costs. (AQT 597/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: We are starting to see some positive movement in the economy. I think the Member would agree that, particularly over the past few months and even into the first few weeks of this year, with the odd exception, we have seen positive news on the economic front. I was pleasantly surprised to see the Danske Bank consumer confidence survey showing its highest levels on record. That is a positive sign that the economy is moving forward. I think that we will see uneven economic growth: we will see good news and bad news.

As I have expressed publicly, the last place we will start to experience recovery will be in people's confidence and in their pockets. One of the ways in which many businesses, in particular, and indeed even the public sector have tried to address the pressures that we have been under has been to look at wage levels and try to keep them under control. Obviously, we hope that they will rise as the economy improves. Indeed I noted that the Chancellor said last week that he is in favour of an above-inflation increase in the minimum wage. The Member might suggest that the minimum wage is too low anyway. However, at least it is heading in a positive direction. It will hopefully follow from economic growth that wages will rise. We all accept that there is continuing pressure from household overheads, and, again, we may not see a lot of positivity in that area even if the economy is growing.

3.30 pm

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. A recent report states that the average disposable income in households in Britain is approximately £168; in the North, it is £57. Does the Minister agree that the introduction of a living wage not only would help households to keep their heads above water but would add and inject stimulus into the local economy in areas such as retail?

Mr Hamilton: If the Low Pay Commission recommends to the Chancellor that the minimum wage should go up, it could go some way to address some of the issues that the Member raised.

Earlier, I answered a question from the Member's colleague on a similar topic. Everybody wants incomes to go up because that is a good thing, particularly when there are pressures elsewhere. However, we have to balance wanting the private sector to increase

wages at the lower end with the fact that we are in the infancy of economic recovery. I do not want anything to be done that dissuades firms from employing people, because that is what we need most. We need people who have been out of work and have gone onto the unemployment register and those who are coming off welfare and onto the unemployment register to get back into work. If wages go up too high, that might be reason enough for many firms not to take on the people whom we want them to start employing again.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of questions to Ministers today. I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry to blindside you. During Question Time, an issue arose between the Deputy Speaker and Mr McNarry. There was an exchange of words when Mr McNarry was called to ask his supplementary question. It would be inappropriate for me to ask anything about that exchange of words. However, as a result, Mr McNarry did not ask his supplementary question. The Deputy Speaker then moved on to the next question. The original question had already been asked and answered so other Members were denied the opportunity to ask any supplementary questions on an important issue. I ask you to look at the issue and to give a ruling.

I understand that, in the past, when a Member asked a question at Question Time and did not ask a supplementary question, perhaps because he or she felt that the question had been adequately answered, opportunity was still given to Members of other parties to ask supplementary questions. I am asking you to rule on the issue of the denial of other Members in circumstances in which a Member does not ask a supplementary question.

Mr Speaker: I have not been following proceedings because I have been at meetings. Let me look at Hansard and come back to the Member or to the House.

Private Members' Business

Rural Dwellers: Planning Policy

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward revised legislation, which would adequately meet the needs of this and future generations of rural dwellers, given that rural planning policy PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside restricts the majority of non-farming rural dwellers from applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside. — [Mr McElduff.]

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "revised" and insert:

"planning policy as part of the single planning policy statement, inclusive of PPS 21, which would adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of farming and non-farming rural dwellers, applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside."

I am glad to move the amendment. The SDLP wants vibrant and sustainable rural communities, with successive generations choosing and being able to live and work in the countryside. Alongside employment opportunities, good schools and access to local healthcare, planning policy — in particular, PPS 21 — has an important role to play in delivering a vibrant and sustainable rural community. The SDLP proposes this amendment because it takes account of the context and actions of previous responsible Ministers and of recent public announcements by the current Environment Minister, Mr Mark H Durkan. It presents a more realistic road map to achieving outcomes by addressing the needs of all rural dwellers, farmers and non-farmers alike. I welcome Sinn Féin's support for our amendment, and I hope that other parties will do the same.

The issue has been subject to much debate, controversy and change, from the highly restrictive PPS 14 imposed by direct rule Ministers to a ministerial subcommittee established under previous Minister Sammy Wilson in 2008, which led to draft PPS 21. The main difficulty yet to be resolved is the definition of a non-farming rural dweller or, to be more precise, finding a definition that will not lead to

inconsistency in interpretation, application and enforcement and is not open to legal challenge under section 75.

That said, when it comes to planning policy, the SDLP has not been found wanting in trying to meet the needs of farming and non-farming rural dwellers. Last year, former Minister Alex Attwood undertook a review of the policy's operation in response to concerns that PPS 21 was not being applied consistently across area planning offices or was being applied more strictly than it should have been. As part of the review, he took expert opinion from those who previously formed the independent working group established by the then Minister, Sammy Wilson. The review, which Minister Attwood announced to the House in July last year, identified policy areas where additional flexibility was necessary in relation to, for example, dwellings on farms; replacement dwellings; the conversion and reuse of existing buildings; new dwellings in existing clusters; and development within gap sites. He then instructed that action be taken to address those issues, including a comprehensive staff training programme, an ongoing peer review of how rural applications are being dealt with and the publication of a rural design guide.

Since that review, statistics have demonstrated that more flexibility is being applied, and approvals under PPS 21 are up. In the second quarter of 2013-14, there was an approval rate of 89.6% for single dwellings in the countryside. That is up from 87.1% for the same period in the previous year. In the same quarter of 2013-14, the approval rate for replacement dwellings was 95.9%, up from 93.9% in the equivalent period last year.

Since taking up office, Minister Durkan has made it clear from his words and his actions that he is determined to deliver an improved planning system that is fast, fair and fit for purpose. Earlier this month, he outlined a comprehensive and very well-received reform of the planning system, which will include a shorter and simplified policy. At present, there are 20 separate planning policy publications. They will be reduced to one single strategic planning policy statement (SPPS). Consultation on the issue should be released later this month. Also included will be intense pre-application discussions and widespread community involvement in discussions, thus ensuring that planning decisions can be taken much more quickly. There will also be prompt refusal of substandard planning applications. That will unclog much of the time spent on trying to upgrade such applications. Also, there will be action to ensure faster responses from

consultees. That will include backlog blitzes to clear outstanding consultations in the NIEA. There will also be new arrangements for future consultations in the NIEA, such as a planning control team, a single point of contact for consultations, new protocols for processing applications and much greater access to planning case officers.

Where there are areas for improvement to create the right balance between communities, business and the environment, Minister Durkan has made it clear that he will not shy away from change. He assured the Environment Committee of that when he was before us recently, and he has been clear about his determination to bring forward not only a concise version of current planning policies as part of a single planning policy statement, but a more concise and much improved comprehensive planning policy. This is the most appropriate channel via which to review and, where needed, reform planning policy, including PPS 21. I urge Members across the House to respond to the Minister's call to respond to the consultation that is to be issued in the coming weeks.

Statistics show a high approval rate for new single dwellings and replacement dwellings in the countryside. However, there are individual cases — I know of many — where families feel let down by what they see as an inconsistent and/or overly restrictive application of PPS 21. The planning system needs to recognise that feeling. Policy must be devised and applied in a way that strikes the right balance between supporting and sustaining rural communities and avoiding excessive urban sprawl in the countryside. In the Environment Ministry, the SDLP has not been found wanting when it comes to that and, as our amendment shows, is committed to doing what it can to ensure that the right balance is struck and that we have a vibrant and sustainable rural community.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as a member of the Environment Committee. I oppose the motion as proposed by Sinn Féin, but support the SDLP amendment. That is on the basis of the need to ensure that our countryside is protected and the fact that we already have an adequate policy in place. That was brought to the House in 2010 by previous Environment Minister Edwin Poots. I remind the House that PPS 21 was a result of much work and consultation, and it was agreed by the then Executive parties, which included Sinn Féin.

Prior to PPS 21, we had in place what can only be termed a fairly draconian policy, namely

PPS 14. That policy was introduced under direct rule by the former NI Minister Lord Rooker. Members will be aware that that created difficulties for rural dwellers, particularly farmers and those who live off the land. Farmers were restricted in building homes, and that hampered their efforts to provide for younger family members, for whom the aim was to keep working and active in the rural community. In already tough times for farming, that was an additional pressure that, quite frankly, they could have done without. Furthermore, PPS 14 restricted the building not only of family homes but new barns or sheds. Again, that made life even more difficult for the farming community. Thankfully, PPS 21 fixed that problem and permitted farmers to build on former sites or sites deemed not to blight the landscape and character of the countryside. It was a local Minister who resolved those issues and brought fairness and common sense to the fore, ending a restrictive and careless direct rule policy. That should be remembered when people accuse local politics of failing to deliver.

PPS 21 sought and secured a balance, protecting the countryside and the welfare of farmers. I do not want to see a policy adopted that has the potential to undo those benefits and to take us back to the possibility of a free-for-all, as happened previously. PPS 21 also provides for rural dwellers who are not farmers by permitting development in existing small housing clusters, which, of course, could mean the development of social housing, for example, or, indeed, catering for those who work on farmlands. It also permits the development of houses on former non-residential sites, such as factories or other industrial buildings. Development is also permitted should there be a business need, such as the need to house occupants connected to non-agriculture business in the countryside.

I represent a largely rural constituency and I am convinced that it is our duty to protect the countryside from what has been termed bungalow blight. I fear that any relaxation of the current policy will open the door to adverse development, which will cause more harm than good.

I am aware that the previous Minister of the Environment, Alex Attwood, undertook a review and evaluation of the policy and its outworkings. Recently, the current Minister announced that planning policies are to be streamlined into a single strategic policy statement. I believe that that is good stewardship. It demonstrates a willingness to protect heritage, as well as a willingness to continue to look for ways to improve and develop rural landscapes.

In conclusion, I oppose the motion as it stands and support the amendment. The current policy offers a good balance. The work done by Ministers should be developed to ensure that opportunity is provided for those who add economic and social benefits to our rural communities, while protecting the landscapes that are such a treasured part of our environment.

3.45 pm

Mr Elliott: I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate about the more flexible PPS 21. I hope that the spirit of what we are discussing and debating here today is a more flexible PPS 21, as opposed to opening up the countryside to building in every field and gap that we find. I speak in that vein. I am sure that those who wind up on the motion and the amendment will indicate that that is what we are debating today. I am very supportive of some more flexibility and practical allowances for people to build in the countryside, but I do not support a wide-ranging open policy. That is key.

I also have difficulties with the policy in PPS 21 around on-farm dwellings. There are huge difficulties around that. I heard Mr Wilson indicate in an intervention earlier that there were difficulties with the residential clause and problems with the banks lending. That is also the case with on-farm dwellings. Individuals must share lane ways with other dwellings. That also causes a problem. There are cases in which there are much better enclosed and integrated sites that may be 100 metres away from the farmyard, but they are not allowed to build there specifically because they must be clustered with the farmyard. Maybe they build beside a slurry tank or in the middle of a farmyard. A wee bit more practical common sense can be applied in most of those cases. Obviously, there would be a much better outcome not only for the Planning Service but for the entire community, as well as the developer.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that there is a lot of inconsistency in the Planning Service? People born and reared in the countryside who want to live there are being denied permission to build on a suitable site, and yet, recently, in my constituency, two applications for planning permission were granted on a plateau in an area of outstanding natural beauty overlooking Strangford lough. How can it be right that the person in the rural community cannot get

planning permission and yet somebody comes along and gets two?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Elliott has an added minute. I must say to Members who have the Floor and give the Floor that they should be very conscious that interventions should be very short. They should not be statements. I watch Members continually, especially Members who have the Floor, giving the Floor, and then Members abuse the time.

Mr Elliott: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Speaker. I try to be generous and allow people to intervene, but I would appreciate it if they would be much shorter and use brevity. Getting back to the issue, I am pleased, Mr McCarthy, that there are planners in your area who show some flexibility, but maybe in the wrong direction. I think that that is what you were trying to say.

Back to the issue of rural dwellers. There needs to be a level of flexibility, but where does it stop? We need to have a policy in place that is reasonable and will not be abused. That is one aspect that I see, particularly from some people who will just use the opportunity to get a building site for sale or to allow people with no connection with the area at all to come and live in the area. Again, whether we should be stopping those applications or not is a completely different argument. The debate here today is about whether we facilitate the rural dweller and people who want to live in the countryside, particularly, as I heard Mr McElduff say earlier, those people who were born and bred in the area and have a connection to it. Again, I assume that that would come under a rigorous close look from the European Union's courts when they assessed it. Again —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: OK.

Mr Wilson: At the very start of his contribution, the Member said that he wanted to see some more flexibility. So far, he has talked about flexibility with siting etc. Does his flexibility extend to the point that he would like a separate category for non-farm rural developments?

Mr Elliott: I was just coming to that, Mr Wilson. Yes, I would like to see a separate section, but it could not be widespread and open to abuse. Whatever it is, it must have very strict criteria. The key to it is that there is not a widespread free-for-all position that could be abused.

I know that in the current PPS 21 criteria you can, for example, build close to crossroads or to community centres. In some extreme circumstances, you can build if a medical condition means that you must live close to a family member. However, the number of approvals for those applications is very small. Mr Eastwood quoted some figures for the number of applications that have been approved in recent times. However, it is easy to approve if the vast number of applications have been withdrawn and you are left with only a small number that are easy to approve. So, I do not think that those figures tell the whole story, which is the number that have been approved altogether in each category. Clearly, I want to see some flexibility, but it must not be abused or open to abuse.

Ms Lo: As the Environment Committee has not looked into the issues on PPS 21, I will speak only as the Alliance spokesperson on the environment and not as the Chair of the Committee.

It is our belief that PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside provides opportunities for non-farming rural dwellers to build there. It provides for numerous aspects, such as replacement dwellings, the conversion and reuse of dwellings and non-residential buildings, and development in designated dispersed rural communities.

PPS 14 was introduced in March 2006 in response to years of overdevelopment of the countryside. PPS 21 replaced that policy to allow greater flexibility, and the motion calls for an even further relaxation of the policy. It is worth referencing the previous Environment Minister's written ministerial statement to the House in July last year that dealt with his review into the operation of PPS 21. In it, he suggested that the policy was not only working effectively but that it allowed continued flexibility in meeting the needs of non-farming rural dwellers.

In answer to a question for written answer dated 25 October 2013, Minister Durkan provided other figures. I know that Mr Eastwood mentioned some of those figures, but I will repeat what I have in full. He said that, in the first quarter of 2013-14, the approval rate for new single dwellings in the countryside was 90.1%, which was an increase from 88.8% in the first quarter of the previous year. He said that the approval rate for replacement dwellings was 93.3%, which was up from 92% in the previous year. I take what Mr Elliott said into account, but that is still a very high approval percentage.

Looking at the figures, I do not think that anyone could really say that planning approvals are not forthcoming. Furthermore, there is an appeals mechanism to challenge any planning decisions if applicants believe that planning policies have not been followed.

According to the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC), the level of development that has taken place in the countryside is not sustainable and the development pressure in the countryside remains high. We must not use the current economic climate to justify inappropriate development. PPS 21 is in place to provide measures to avoid that, and I fear that any further relaxation of that policy will be detrimental.

Overdevelopment of the countryside has a significantly negative impact on our environment. As legislators, it is our responsibility to ensure that the environment and local communities' capacity to absorb the impacts of the development need should be a prime factor in determining planning permissions.

In environmental concerns, overdevelopment in the open countryside leads to the loss and fragmentation of agricultural land and wildlife habitat. It lessens the resilience of biodiversity and agriculture. That poses a significant risk as climate change impacts increase. Socially, the continuation of development in the countryside often has a negative impact on towns as hubs of social functioning. With increasing fuel prices, transport costs will increase for rural residents, and the expenditure in delivering social services to isolated dwellings can be a concern as funding for those services decreases.

Dwellings built in the countryside are frequently not connected to adequate waste treatment facilities. A report from the CNCC has estimated that 60% of septic tank discharges reach surface water and that 14% of phosphate pollution in Lough Neagh comes from septic tanks, so overdeveloped areas of countryside may now require waste treatment facilities to meet the requirements of EU legislation.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Wilson: As one who lives in a very beautiful part of the countryside, and who enjoys the scenery and the value of the countryside, I am very concerned about this debate. We have already seen the destruction of large parts of our countryside by the relentless march of the

towering steel triffids that people call windmills and which are supported by the last Member who spoke, who seems to be so concerned about the destruction of the countryside by homes. To add to that, a further liberalisation of the policy —

Ms Lo: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way, yes.

Ms Lo: Certainly, I have not made any decision on wind farms. In fact, the Committee is carrying out an inquiry, at my instigation, into wind farms in our countryside.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Wilson: And I have heard the Member waxing eloquent about renewable energy in these Chambers, and, indeed, she is great friends with the wee Green man who normally sits in the corner, and you cannot —
[Interruption.]

Mr Flanagan: Was that an adjective or a noun?

Mr Speaker: Order. In the past, I have said to the House that Members should be called by their proper names.

A Member: The wee Green man from North Down.

Mr Wilson: The wee Green man from North Down, yes. *[Laughter.]* You cannot have renewable energy without these towering steel structures across the countryside. This motion would add further to the destruction. If we are going to have a balanced policy about development in the countryside, we have to be very careful.

I want to make two points about this. The first is that I do not believe that a policy that explicitly deals with "non-farming rural dwellers" is workable, and, indeed, the review group made that quite clear. When it reported, it said:

"The Group therefore considered that perhaps the focus on 'non-farming' as a starting point is a false one and using this as the basis for any new policy is open to inconsistency of interpretation, approach, application and enforcement. The result would be an unworkable policy context in terms of an ambiguous planning policy."

When the group talked about revision, it really said that, if we are going to have additional places in the countryside, they ought to be around non-nucleated settlements rather than simply a policy that says that, if you happen to live in the countryside and you are a non-farm dweller and you have a bit of land around your house, which is what the proposer was suggesting, stick a few restrictions on to it. As I pointed out, that would probably would mean that only rich people could have a house, because banks will not lend if there are restrictions on the planning permission. That is not a workable policy.

4.00 pm

The second point that I want to make is this: it is not a necessary policy. If one looks at what we have under PPS 21 already, with provision for replacement dwellings, conversions, dwellings within existing ribbons, social and affordable housing schemes, dispersed rural communities and dwellings to meet compelling domestic circumstances, one sees that there are already vast opportunities for people from a non-farming background to live in the countryside.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for giving way. I invite him to enumerate how many dispersed rural communities exist in, for example, a county such as Tyrone. Is it merely one? I further ask the Member whether he is not really at heart a city slicker who has gone to live in the country as a lifestyle option?
[Interruption.]

Mr Wilson: I have been called many a thing but I have never been called a city slicker. I am as rustic and rural as the Member who just intervened.

Let us look at it, and let us not concentrate on just dispersed rural settlements. Mr Elliott asked an important question about the numbers of applications that have been allowed. Let us look not at the percentage that were permitted but at the numbers. If we take single dwellings, conversions, replacement dwellings and others such as dispersed rural settlements, we see that, in 2010, in rural areas, 3,335 permissions were granted.

Do not forget that the vast majority of people live in urban areas. How many successful applications were there for properties in urban areas in that year? There were 2,980. There were more permissions for properties to be built in the countryside than in urban areas. That was not a one-off. In 2011-12, there were

3,299 successful applications in rural areas and 1,825 in urban areas.

When it comes to whether building opportunities are being afforded to people who wish to live in rural areas, given the number of successful applications, of course sites are being made available.

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

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will bring my remarks to a close, Mr Speaker. For those two reasons, this is not a policy that the Assembly ought to be pursuing if we want to protect the countryside while at the same time giving people the opportunity to live there.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this subject. The introduction of PPS 21 has greatly hindered non-farming rural dwellers' potential to build on their own land. Being from a rural area and having attended numerous planning meetings, I have heard at first hand the difficulties and frustrations that this has caused. Although I accept that there must be some form of regulation to prevent overdevelopment and protect our countryside, there needs to be a degree of flexibility built into the current provision. That is essential if we are to maintain our vibrant rural communities.

The introduction of the single policy statement presents an opportunity to take a fresh look at this long-running issue and explore the possible options to accommodate the non-farming rural dweller; for example, extending the policy to include the redevelopment of rural brownfield sites with a single dwelling. At present, policy CTY 4 allows for the conversion of suitable buildings. However, historical buildings also lend themselves easily to conversion.

The redevelopment of brownfield sites, including historically developed sites that currently have no buildings, could provide a great opportunity for old sites to be brought back into use to meet modern needs. There could also be increased flexibility around the footprint and curtilage of a site where walls of existing buildings remain to allow what could be a replacement building to have real potential. Another possibility could be to remove the criteria-based approach to the clustering policy CTY 2(a) and allow greater opportunity for planners to consolidate and round off existing clusters of development. I am aware of a number of applications that complied with the broad purpose of the policy but failed to be

granted permission owing to the prescription of the criteria.

PPS 21 as it stands is simply too restrictive. Even in the provision for farm families — I take Tom Elliott's point — it creates unnecessary difficulties, particularly around the visual linkage test that is applied to farm dwellings. In my constituency, that has led to unsuitable sites being presented as the only option open to an applicant. It includes sites that are unsuitable because a mortgage cannot be obtained owing to the site's proximity to the farm dwelling, which is not always realised until the building has begun, and that are unsuitable as they would limit the expansion of the farm cluster.

No one wants a bungalow blight in our countryside or the speculative development that we saw in the past. However, we have to find a balance between the old and the new for farming and non-farming rural dwellers if we are to retain a strong and vibrant rural community. Provision needs to be made to allow realistic opportunities for those who live in the countryside to be able to remain there.

Mr I McCrea: This issue is always topical. The Member who spoke previously represents the same constituency as I do. I am well aware of the difficulties that exist there with the various planning applications, given that two thirds of the constituency is rural.

The matter presents me with some difficulty because, on the one hand, I would like to see a bit more of a relaxation take place, but, on the other, I understand the difficulties that that may bring, including for infrastructure such as sewerage, water, electricity and rural broadband, which is a bugbear of Mr McElduff's. Sometimes the negatives outweigh the positives.

Back in 2006, Mr McGlone and I attended planning meetings at Cookstown District Council and were informed that draft PPS 14 was to be introduced. No doubt he, like me, had been contacted by many constituents. Unfortunately, all the planning applications had to be in by 16 March. He, like me, was involved in many of those and in many of the difficulties and legal challenges that arose from them. From living in and representing a rural constituency, I know full well the difficulties that that policy brought. Around that time, I got the support of my colleagues who held the Minister of the Environment portfolio when they were looking at new and improved policies. Although the policies give people more opportunities to get planning approval, there are still difficulties. I can think of rural businesses that are in

contact with me on many occasions about trying to get planning permission.

There is always an onus on the agents and architects of the people who are applying. Although many of them are true and honest and tell people when they apply that it will be very difficult to get planning approval, there are others who will submit a planning application regardless of the likely outcome, because they know that they are getting paid anyway. Some architects still have to get grips with that and be honest with their clients when the plans are presented to them.

I accept the amendment. It makes more sense to give the Minister a bit of scope to bring forward some changes to the proposal. It is a difficult issue that I am well aware of in my constituency, but we cannot go to an open-ended policy of providing houses anywhere where people want them. We have to find some mechanism for ensuring that people can live in the countryside while ensuring that the countryside is safeguarded.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an chomhalta a mhol an rún seo. I welcome the motion and commend the proposers.

I am delighted to speak here as a Fermanagh-based MLA who was a member of Fermanagh District Council for about 18 months. During that time, not too many planning applications were made, because people knew that they were not going to be successful and so did not bother wasting £651 putting in a planning application that would be turned down causing a failed application to remain on the site, potentially jeopardising future planning applications.

So I did not deal with a whole pile of rural-based planning applications because people were pragmatic enough to know that they would not be successful. However, a few came in, some based on very good sites and some based on terrible sites, and, all the while, councillors such as, I presume, Mr McCrea, would back all their constituents to the hilt whether they were on good sites or not. I am sure that he will argue about PPS 21 and how bad it is in Cookstown in about three weeks time; that is the responsibility of all of us as councillors.

In everything that I have read, there is unanimous agreement that PPS 14 was an absolute failure and failed to meet the needs of rural dwellers. It demonstrates one of the deeply negative impacts of British-based

Ministers who flew in here for a day or two at a time and left again. They did not understand the unique needs of the people here, and that is why there was so much hope when Sammy Wilson took over as Environment Minister that he would bring in a policy that would be much better suited to meet the needs of the people here. When draft PPS 21 was brought forward by a DUP Environment Minister, there was broad welcome for it. Some people said that it did not go far enough, and some thought that it was a good job to sort out PPS 14 in any way and then go back and have another thrashing out of PPS 21. Six years later, we are still trying to deal with the issue of rural-based non-farmers.

The policy of many people, particularly those in the British establishment — and I am disappointed to see some people in here labour the same position — is to move everyone into the town or city centre. Bog everybody into the town and that will solve all our problems. If everybody lived in the town, there would be no problems with lifting bins, with broadband or with footpaths, and you could move everybody into a town and then designate the whole rural area as a national park in one place —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: You could wreck the whole other part of the country with fracking and just leave the rest of it for people to tramp through day and night. I will give way to the Green man in the corner. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Agnew: I appreciate the Member giving way. Does he not accept that there is somewhere between the unfettered planning in rural areas at the minute and the moving-everyone-into-the-town attitude that he caricatures? With planned zoning of rural areas, we could have a regulated and constructive system without it going as far as he has just outlined.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have short interventions. I also say to the Member, as I said to Mr Wilson: let us call Members by their proper name.

Mr Flanagan: Mr Speaker, I was referring to him using a noun, not an adjective. I want to put that on the record.

If Mr Agnew talks about rural planning being unfettered, he does not understand the reality of the situation in rural areas, and I am very disappointed at that. I would be delighted to

take him through some of the problems that we face in rural communities.

The policy of moving everybody into the town will not sort it out. There was agreement to bring forward a revised policy under the guise of PPS 21, and it failed to take account of the needs of rural-based non-farming families. That is still accepted. Mr Wilson says that we cannot have a policy that deals solely with one section of the community, and that is fine, but they have not been dealt with in any of the planning policies to date, and that needs to be sorted out. I agree with some Members that —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will, yes. Go on ahead.

4.15 pm

Mr Wilson: I will give the Member the figures. There have been over 3,000 successful applications for single dwellings in the countryside in each of the past two years. Surely that gives opportunities, because some of those sites will be sold to people who wish to live in the countryside to take the opportunity to live there.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an added minute.

Mr Flanagan: It is interesting that Mr Wilson raises that point because those houses are not being bought by the sons and daughters of the people who owned land nearby. I do not know whether they have been built speculatively, but the speculators are not coming to me to look for support for planning applications, so I know nothing about those things. It is the people who were born and bred on the land who cannot get planning permission, and that is where the problem lies. It is not about facilitating people who want to buy a site to build a house and then sell it on at a huge profit. That is not what this is about.

There is a huge difficulty in rural communities in supporting members of rural-based community organisations or people who are employed in the locality to get people to live in the local area. We need to sort the problem out. Were this policy to be addressed so that there could be greater opportunities for rural-based construction, it would have a significant impact on the construction industry, which has been devastated in rural communities such as Fermanagh and Tyrone and is on its knees, as we have all heard about 45 times, because of the collapse of the construction industry. There

is not a young person left in Fermanagh because they have all emigrated. If we sort the problem out, it could help to get some of them back.

The review of PPS 21 was inadequate. In my final 15 seconds, I want to make the point that people born and bred in the country cannot get a house built, but there is a planning application on the books for somebody to build 15 holiday homes and a private airstrip in Letterbreen —

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

Mr Flanagan: — but somebody else cannot build a single bungalow. Where is the fairness?

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus mo bhuíochas le moltóirí an rúin seo chomh maith. I thank the proposer of the motion.

Like many Members with a particular interest in the debate, I am from, live in and represent a rural constituency. I know the difficulties faced by farming and non-farming rural dwellers when seeking planning permission and, indeed, in obtaining planning permission to build in the countryside.

I want to put on record my appreciation of those planning officers who genuinely look for solutions in the midst of policy. Many of them genuinely seek solutions; I have dealt with them in offices such as in Ballymena, Omagh and Belfast.

I have supported many constituents — Mr McCrea mentioned it earlier — in their attempts to secure planning permission in the face of what they see as a tangle of bureaucratic red tape and rigid and uncompromising restrictions on where and what they can build. I am talking about people with an attachment to the land, who are from the area and usually from the farm or property for which they are trying to get planning permission.

I welcome the motion and the debate on what the Minister of the Environment can do to improve the situation and adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of rural dwellers.

I listened very carefully as Mr Wilson gave the figures for development in the countryside as opposed to that in some of our urban areas. For many rural dwellers — again, I am talking about genuine people from and of the land who wish to build on land on which their families

may have lived for generations — this is the rural option for an affordable home. They do not have to pay the £20,000, £30,000 or £40,000 — it used to be over £100,000 — in site costs that others who are lucky to have the money can avail themselves of.

As our amendment makes clear, I disagree with the motion in that it calls for revised legislation, which is unnecessary. A revised planning policy as part of a single planning policy statement inclusive of PPS 21 would be sufficient to address the problem. Such an approach would adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of farming and non-farming rural dwellers who apply for planning permission in the countryside and would enable those rural dwellers to obtain planning permission for rural sites.

For many people, the current PPS, which refers to the need for a farm dwelling to be visually linked to existing farm buildings, is not enough.

The astute and learned planners to my right will know that we need to look at the location, site and design aspects so that, as Mr Elliott said, a much better site can be located on the farm, not in proximity to slurry, as one person described it. That really is an issue that has to be addressed.

On the issue of farm dwellings, I know from dealing with planners that two Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) decisions, which were made in, I think, November or December last year, defined "farm activity" and "farm business" in a much more rigid fashion. That, in itself, is making the existing PPS 21 much more difficult to interpret, and, consequently, it is much more difficult for genuine farm dwellers and people from farming stock to get planning permission.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes.

Mr Allister: On that point of "active farmer", we all know that, in many cases, the DARD box is ticked if you have a single farm payment number, whether or not you have animals — a person may be retired. However, given the change coming under CAP reform, with its more vigorous definition of "active farming", does the Member agree that that, of necessity, will end up being reflected in the planning policy definition of "active farmer"? Will that not make a significant difference?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McGlone: Thank you, and I thank the Member for his intervention. That, along with the PAC decisions, will make it very restrictive for people with a genuine cause and genuine concern to get planning permission. In fact, that has been raised with me already by one of my party's councillors in Magherafelt.

A balance has to be found between the need to sustain rural communities, farming and non-farming, and having an unfettered free-for-all in the countryside. Planning policy is where that balance is struck. It is important that, in setting that balance, the Minister is conscious of the vital and unique resource that is our countryside. I take on board entirely Mr Wilson's point: I have stood on sites where planning permission had been refused for a small bungalow on a hill, yet planning permission is granted to wind farms. A proposal for one in my constituency is due to come up shortly. These massive metal structures are put on the ridge of an area of outstanding natural beauty. There, too, a balance has to be struck between environmental tourism and other economic concerns. That definitely must be looked at. Rural communities are the caretakers of an exceptional and distinctive —

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

Mr McGlone: — mix of the natural and built environment, and I ask the Minister to take into account the need for social and economic development to sustain such rural communities —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr McGlone: — with new development and through employment opportunities.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. Few in the House and even fewer living or wishing to live in our countryside would dare say that PPS 21 was not an improvement on the previous draft PPS 14. That policy came in for heavy criticism, and rightly so. It could have been written only by a direct rule Minister, and I hope that no one in the Assembly would ever have dared to put their name to it. It was, quite simply, an overindulgence in restrictions and paid little heed to economic or local community factors, so I was glad when it was unceremoniously scrapped.

Nevertheless, when it was announced that it was being withdrawn and replaced by PPS 21, the then Environment Minister, Sammy Wilson, claimed that the new planning policy statement offered a range of opportunities for development in the countryside that had not existed under its predecessor. Almost all those opportunities, it was claimed, would, importantly, benefit non-farming rural dwellers as well as farmers. However, unfortunately, there were still problems, none more so than for the people who might have grown up in the countryside but did not come from a direct farming background.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that there is no restriction on how sites are used, does she accept that the number of successful applications, whether or not the people involved were farm dwellers, allowed sites to become available for people to purchase if they wished to live in the countryside?

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his intervention. He has somewhat floored me: I was waiting for an attack. *[Laughter.]* People who were raised in a rural area often find themselves with no choice but to look towards our towns and villages when establishing a new home for themselves. It is now virtually impossible for those people to get planning permission for a new dwelling in the countryside, except for a few small exceptions. Although I am vehemently opposed to any notion of a building free-for-all, we need a sensible balance.

Restrictions on non-farming dwellers may well keep more of our countryside looking green, but they also mean that schools, churches and local communities are often starved of what they need most — new, often younger families in the area. Indeed, a slowly ageing population will spell crisis for the fragile vitality of our rural communities. Schools in those rural areas, whether literally surrounded by green fields or located in the middle of their local village, face a distinct disadvantage as planning policies, as well as the provision of services and jobs, become increasingly centred around areas of population. A five-minute look at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics on the proximity of services will prove my point. Mr Wilson was very good on the statistics earlier.

The area planning process across our schools estate should have provided an opportunity for rural schools to consider how best to move forward in the coming years. Instead, it has

spread fear and apprehension in the rural community. I hold the Department of Education squarely responsible for that. That is why my party has called for major strategic changes. The damaging impact on school enrolments is just one example of what happens when planning policies that are in need of reform are counterproductively enforced without the required flexibility. As I have said, our countryside must be protected, not least for the generations to come, but it should not be considered as entirely beyond reach for non-farming dwellers. Indeed, the Executive, through the rural White Paper action plan, have an obligation to put in place a fair yet effective rural planning process. Although that paper is too narrow in ambition, I at least credit it for recognising the obligations that the Assembly and Executive have to provide for strong and resilient communities. That must include accommodating non-farming dwellers.

The current preparation of a single strategic planning policy statement, as the amendment states, presents us with an opportunity to rectify many of the problems currently facing the planning system in Northern Ireland. We do not need a free-for-all planning system; we need one that protects the countryside and allows flexibility for non-farming dwellers.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): I begin by thanking the proposer of the motion. I am grateful to Members for their contributions to the debate. I am also grateful to my colleague Colum Eastwood for the tabled amendment, which, I believe, sets out a more realistic road map for addressing the needs of all rural dwellers — farmers and non-farm dwellers alike.

As Members will be aware, the issue of how non-farming rural dwellers are considered in rural planning policy is a long-standing area of interest and debate. In fact, the issue was raised as far back as October 2007, when my Department assumed responsibility for rural planning from the Department for Regional Development. We remember — many Members referred to it today — PPS 14, which was an overly restrictive rural planning policy imposed by direct rule Ministers. Everyone has agreed that it was failing rural communities and needed to be revised. A ministerial subcommittee was established to do just that.

The outcome of the subcommittee's review was draft PPS 21, which was published for public consultation on 25 November 2008. The draft policy represented a significant relaxation of the unnecessarily restrictive PPS 14. Following the publication of draft PPS 21, the then

Environment Minister, Sammy Wilson, established an independent working group to explore policy options for non-farming rural dwellers, with a particular focus on kinship as a way of providing such a policy. The group considered a wide range of statistical and other information, including the planning policy context in other jurisdictions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

4.30 pm

The group took the view that a fundamental question arose about how to distinguish between the farming community and the non-farming community. At that time, the group concluded that it was difficult to define exactly what a non-farming rural dweller was. It considered that adopting the term as the basis for a new policy would be open to inconsistency of interpretation, approach, application and enforcement. In short, it concluded that planning applications for single houses should not be determined on the basis of rural kinship, connection or occupation. Those tasked with applying such a policy would be open to the ongoing challenge of definition and assessment, resulting in appeal and/or judicial review. Furthermore, the Department considered that policies that rely on kinship or residency were unlikely to constitute the proper discharge of its equality or good relations obligations under section 75. This is because they would favour people of the race, religion or political opinion most prevalent in an area and significantly disadvantage others. In light of the difficulties identified by the working group, the finalised policy, published in June 2010 and endorsed by the then Executive, did not include a policy based on the category of non-farming rural dweller.

Because of the decision not to include a specific policy on non-farming rural dwellers, the Executive subcommittee made every effort to ensure that the range of PPS 21 policies provided sufficient opportunities for all sections of the rural community, not just those from a farming background. With this objective in mind, PPS 21 sets out a range of policies that provide many development opportunities for non-farming rural dwellers: new dwellings within an existing cluster or ribbon of development; social and affordable housing developments; the conversion and reuse of non-residential buildings as dwellings; development within designated dispersed rural communities; replacement dwellings; and a dwelling to meet personal and domestic circumstances. Any farm dwelling approved under policy CTY 10 may be occupied by non-farmers and may be sold off without restriction.

I believe that, taken together, these policy provisions already provide significant opportunities for people from a non-farming background to continue to live in the countryside so that rural communities can be sustained and can thrive. In fact, Members should note that, in the period from the publication of the final policy in June 2010 until September 2013, the Department approved a total of 7,082 planning applications for new single dwellings in the countryside. It is important to remember that these opportunities are in addition to replacement dwellings and to the significant existing housing stock across rural Northern Ireland, which is available to meet the housing needs of people from rural areas. Fundamentally, PPS 21 strikes a fine balance between allowing necessary rural development to sustain rural communities and avoiding excessive urban sprawl in the countryside.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. He mentioned that 7,082 new single dwellings had been approved: can he give a figure for how many applications have been received, so that we can get a sense of proportion?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the intervention. That is a useful and interesting question. I have not got the detail at hand, but I will certainly get back to the Member in writing on that question.

Mr Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Will he accept that the percentage of applications that are successful is very high, at well over 80%?

Mr Durkan: Yes, statistics on percentages of success were given earlier by my colleague Colum Eastwood and by Ms Lo, Chair of the Committee. I have not got a percentage for those three years, but we heard percentages for last year and the first two quarters of this year, all of which were over 80%.

It is important that we avoid excessive — any — urban sprawl in the countryside. The way that PPS 21 achieves that is through focusing development on existing clusters of rural development, such as existing farm groups. I believe that, broadly speaking, the policy has done a fair enough job of balancing the competing priorities. I am not saying that it is perfect or that it has been problem-free; obviously, it has not. However, where concerns

have been raised about aspects of its operation, the Department has sought to look into and address them. I hope that Members can recognise that. My predecessor's rolling review of the operation of the policy is a good example. The review took place in response to valid concerns that the policy was being applied inconsistently across area planning offices or, in some cases, was being applied more strictly than it should have been. The review identified policy areas where additional flexibility was necessary, such as for dwellings on farms, replacement dwellings, conversion and reuse of existing buildings, new dwellings in existing clusters and developments in gap sites. To address those issues, a number of actions were taken through the review. They included a comprehensive staff training programme, an ongoing peer review of the way that rural applications are dealt with and the publication of a rural design guide.

The report of the review concluded that PPS 21 was working much more effectively and enjoyed widespread support and that the need for a fundamental review of the policy did not arise. I am satisfied that, as a result of the review and the measures that have been taken, the policy continues to be applied with greater consistency and more appropriate flexibility to ensure that it meets all rural dwellers' needs. The most recently published statistics support that view.

Members will be aware that I have instructed officials to prepare a draft strategic planning policy statement that will consolidate the provisions of the existing suite of PPSs, including PPS 21, into a single policy document that is simpler, shorter and more strategic in focus. My intention is that the draft SPPS should be published for public consultation later this month. I propose to use that consultation as a further opportunity to listen to and to take into account the views of Members and the public on the full range of issues associated with rural planning policy.

I will turn to some other issues that Members raised today. I will not get to them all, but I will certainly respond to Members in writing on those that I do not address. Mr McElduff raised the issue of a lack of dispersed rural communities. When planning powers transfer to councils as part of the reform of local government in 2015, councils will be required to prepare local development plans that will designate dispersed local communities where appropriate. Mr McElduff also raised the question of greater flexibility in non-nucleated settlements. PPS 21 already allows a degree of flexibility by allowing dwellings in non-

nucleated clusters, such as crossroads. The need for flexibility in the application of the policy was highlighted and emphasised in the recent operational review. Nevertheless, the issue can be examined further through the consultation on the SPPS.

Mr Elliott and Mr Wilson raised the problem of banks refusing to lend because of an occupancy condition. My predecessor liaised with the Council of Mortgage Lenders on that matter. He sought to address lenders' concerns by making it clear that, in the event of a repossession and following an application by a lender to discharge the condition, it would be removed, thereby allowing the lender to dispose of the property. That has provided the certainty that lenders sought, and I am not aware that it continues to be that much of a problem. However, if any Member has evidence that it continues to be an issue, I will certainly look closely at it. I have written to specific lenders on a case-by-case basis on the issue and have resolved matters satisfactorily.

Mr Wilson also told us that he enjoys the countryside. I thought that I had successfully erased that image from my memory. Mr Elliott asked about withdrawn applications. I do not have that detail with me. However, under the suite of improvements to the planning system that I announced a couple of weeks ago, we will see enhanced pre-application discussions, much better access to planners and, therefore, better applications and fewer withdrawals or less need for people to withdraw.

The motion calls on me to

"bring forward revised legislation that would adequately meet the needs of this and future generations of rural dwellers, given that rural planning policy PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside restricts the majority of non-farming rural dwellers from applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside."

I hope that I have demonstrated today that the current policy is not failing to meet the needs of rural dwellers and that non-farming rural dwellers are, in fact, catered for through the policy. I therefore oppose the unamended motion. I am open to the views of Members and the public on the matter —

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Flanagan: Does the Minister not agree with his party colleagues who, immediately before the last Assembly elections, said that PPS 21 needed to be changed to facilitate non-farming rural families?

Mr Durkan: I outlined the rolling review of PPS 21 commissioned and ordered by my predecessor and the enhanced flexibilities that have been applied to the policy since. That is evidenced in statistics that have been used today. Many Members in the Chamber have been in to see me with constituents on specific issues. They know that I will explore options in a positive manner and, where possible and practicable, find solutions for applicants.

As I have indicated, I will use the consultation on the SPPS to facilitate any improvements to the policy. Therefore, I support the amendment, which calls for the published SPPS to adequately meet the needs of farming and non-farming rural dwellers. I commend the amendment to the Chamber.

Mr A Maginness: I thank everybody who indicated their support for the amendment, and I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. It was a good-humoured debate and exceptionally constructive, and there was a commonality throughout.

Mr McElduff started proceedings by proposing the motion and indicated that he was concerned about the needs of the rural community and the need for young people, in particular, to be accommodated. Indeed, that was reflected throughout all the contributions. The SDLP's view is that there is a need to ensure that the countryside is sustainable and vibrant and that there is an acknowledgement of the need for a fit-for-purpose planning policy for non-farming rural dwellers. The policy must also address and prevent any adverse environmental impact — a point emphasised by Ms Lo — and it must allow for economic development in rural areas. Therefore, I think that there was commonality throughout.

4.45 pm

What I noted from the various contributions was a marginal degree of difference. Mr Elliott, for example, said that there must not be a free-for-all. Those views were reflected by other colleagues in the Chamber. The one word that came across was "balance", the need for balance in planning policy for rural areas. Of course, during the nightmare of pre-devolution direct rule, Lord Rooker insisted on bringing in PPS 14, which really paralysed development in

the countryside. That was rejected by everyone. Nobody really contributed to that point, except, to some extent — maybe from a sedentary position — Mr Agnew. He regards PPS 21 as something rather calamitous for the countryside. I think that, in the main, people regard PPS 21 as an advance. It provides a degree of flexibility and balance that is necessary in dealing with the countryside.

Like Mrs Cameron, I hold the view that we must protect our countryside. It is very important that we do that and are rigorous in so doing. We cannot allow a free-for-all, and I think that the Minister, as he said in his conclusion, is of that view. He feels that PPS 21 has done a fair enough job hitherto but is not perfect. Concerns have been expressed, and he and the Department have taken those on board. There are areas where inconsistency is a problem, but it is now working much better. There will be no fundamental review, but the Minister plans to develop a sense of flexibility in planning policy. He believes that the strategic plan that will be developed should provide a solution to the problems that Mr McElduff quite properly brought to the attention of the House.

I am grateful to Mr McElduff and his colleagues in Sinn Féin and to colleagues in the DUP for indicating their support for the amendment. I think that Ulster Unionist Party colleagues will act in a similar vein. I encourage our friends in the Alliance Party to do likewise, because I think that the Minister's approach is moderate, balanced and proper. I hope that you can support it and will not divide the House on the issue. I think that there is enough consensus to make this work well.

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

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin seo agus an leasaithe. I speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. I thank those who contributed to the debate for their informed contributions and thoughts. I want to read this into the record before commenting on some Members' comments.

Development in our countryside has long been a somewhat thorny issue. In this debate, there has been a wide range of often competing notions and opinions on where and how the appropriate balance should be struck between, on the one hand, the obvious and implicit need

to protect our countryside from inappropriate development and, on the other hand, the equally important need to provide adequate development opportunities in order to sustain our rural communities.

As a society, we derive much benefit from our rural spaces. It goes without saying that we as a people have a responsibility to manage that space in a fashion that preserves its integrity for the benefit of our wildlife and environment and for the enjoyment and use of our future generations.

On that basis, it is not only proper but essential that there are constraints in place to control avoidable or unnecessary development in the countryside.

Although farming interests account for a good portion of our rural communities, it is important not to underestimate the degree to which those communities also comprise non-farming rural dwellers. A great many families who live in the open countryside are not connected to the farming industry, and that has thrown up something of a difficulty for our current planning policy. As it stands, the criteria regulating development in PPS 21 are largely in practice extremely difficult for the majority of non-farming rural dwellers to make use of. Opportunities under the current policy to develop on small landholdings to facilitate the creation of a new home are rare. Although mechanisms such as replacement dwellings, the reuse of existing buildings, gap sites and new buildings in cluster sites provide opportunities, I do not agree with the assessment made by the former Minister that provisions under PPS 21 provide significant and sufficient opportunity for non-farming rural dwellers to live in the countryside. I hear regularly of the difficulties faced by young families when trying to establish a property foothold in rural areas.

Awareness and responsibility are key themes that will and must always underpin our planning regime. Future development in the countryside must be managed in a manner that respects and protects that environment but that is also sympathetic to the needs and requirements of our rural communities. In particular, there is an onus on policymakers to ensure that our planning policy provides sufficient and suitable mechanisms through which those needs and requirements can be facilitated, where necessary.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Wilson: On the question of sufficiency, given that the figures show that, last year, the approvals for dwellings in rural areas were almost twice as high as approvals for dwellings in urban areas, how many successful applications have there got to be? How loose must the policy be to meet the Member's demand for sufficiency? What does he mean by sufficiency?

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for the intervention. I was going to pick up on the points that you raise. Mr Wilson, it is grand that, as you expressed, over 3,300 houses have been allowed. They have been passed under certain criteria. Therefore, if it is a case of us needing need to look at the criteria again, as you are saying — *[Interruption.]* If you are saying that there are too many, what I am saying, and why we brought the motion to the House today, is that there is still a gap in the policy. I will go on with my comments, and I will perhaps make my comments on what you brought up more clear later.

Mr Speaker: Let us have remarks through the Chair.

Mr Boylan: I want to put this on record, Mr Speaker, and then I will return to doing so: I understand the point that you are trying to make, Mr Wilson.

A great number of our population live in the countryside and have a strong affinity with it. For many, their rural surroundings encapsulate their sense of identity. That sense of identity has, over countless generations, created a very strong sense of community and belonging in many of our rural hinterlands. The strength, diversity and vibrancy of those communities are of great benefit to the region and a constituent part of our identity on the island. It is vital that those communities be allowed to survive and flourish. The current policy is having a detrimental effect on the sustainability of many of our rural communities. Children who have grown up in townlands and parishes, and who have a close affinity with and sense of belonging to those areas and communities, are struggling under the current policy to obtain the necessary permission to set up homes there.

I will pick up on some of the points that have been raised. I commend my colleague Barry McElduff because he set the tone for the debate. In opening the debate, he mentioned two things: meeting the needs of the rural community and maintaining rural communities.

That is what the motion is about. This has been going on since day one, even in Mr Wilson's time as Minister. This has been going on for six or seven years, and there is still a gap. I will pick up on Mr Wilson's point specifically, because he argues the number of houses. I will put it this way: the question on what we are concerned about has to be asked. Are we concerned about a bungalow in every field? Is that the question? If that is the question that needs to be asked, I say this: although the majority of people who live in the countryside are from a non-farming background, the majority of the land owned is in the agricultural sector. As the policy sits at the minute, for farming, it is one newbuild house every 10 years. That is the reality.

Mr Wilson talked about the number of buildings. If there are sufficient criteria to meet the needs of the non-farming community — and I take it that if I gave percentages, it would be the bigger percentage — why would we be so concerned about only a narrow group of people not being there? You can argue it both ways; that is what I am saying. There is a narrow group of people with smallholdings who can apply. Mr Flanagan brought it up in his contribution; he said that there was no facility for those people to apply. He also told me about the actual numbers that have been passed due to personal and domestic circumstances. How many? I go back to your original question. I take your point about there being so many newbuilds, but I have to ask about the criteria for the newbuilds. There are a lot of replacements that should have been used long ago. The policy, for some reason or other, focused on abandonment, but now we have brought the replacement element in. I agree with all that. I am trying to make a case for the people who are still coming to us and saying that there is a slight gap in the policy. I ask the Minister to look at that.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Regardless of who those newbuild permissions are given to, does the Member accept that the policy, because of the flexibility contained in it now, allows every one of those permissions, if the owners so desire, to go on to the market? That means that anyone who wishes to live in the countryside will have an opportunity to purchase a site to build a house.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member. The purpose of this request to the Minister is not to go back to selling sites. That is not what this is about. It

is about creating another criterion. We have tried the issue of occupancy. You got the issue answered about mortgage lenders. We want the issue of kinship, connection, or whatever it may take, to be explored again. Those people should be given an opportunity. That is why we have brought the motion.

We can go on the stats that the Minister has brought, but my experience, and what I hear from people in smallholdings who cannot apply, is that they do not have a building, or anything else on the land, that they can replace. They do not have a small shed to reuse, nor are they in the areas mentioned by the Minister for clustering or to be a focal point and all that.

I ask for support for our motion. I ask the Minister to take on board the suggestions that we have brought forward, including the suggestion from my colleague Ian Milne about brownfield sites. I ask the Minister to reconsider it. The review was not carried out correctly.

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

Mr Boylan: I will now, Mr Speaker.

The review was not correct. It left out non-farming rural dwellers who have not applied, so it cannot be a full test of what is going on in the countryside. Go raibh míle maith agat.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward revised planning policy as part of the single planning policy statement, inclusive of PPS 21, which would adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of farming and non-farming rural dwellers, applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Addiction Treatment Unit: Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, Omagh

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately up to five minutes.

Mr Hussey: I begin by paying tribute to the staff who work in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh. I suppose that I should declare an interest: my late father was a psychiatric nurse there. The hospital has a well-earned reputation for the service it delivers to patients from Tyrone, Fermanagh and County Londonderry.

5.00 pm

Health issues are one of the common denominators in politics. It is a leveller, and one thing that West Tyrone MLAs can agree on without dissent — I hope. I am sure that some of my colleagues will also touch on the fact that, when it comes to cuts in the health service, Omagh always seems to be the place where the axe falls. Diverting slightly from the subject, when the Lagan Valley and Downe hospitals came into the spotlight, I had to bite my lip. We went through that same feeling of abandonment when our hospital, the Tyrone County Hospital, was downgraded. Despite our well-organised and coordinated campaign, our pleas fell on deaf ears. Let us hope that today's debate has a different outcome.

On 17 October, I asked the Minister for his assessment of the future of the addiction treatment unit (ATU) at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh. Naturally, the Minister did not provide an answer at the time other than to refer me to the:

"consultation on Inpatient Based Addiction Treatment Services, which outlines proposals for a re-configuration of all the Tier 4 addiction services currently delivered by the ... Trusts".

He also stated:

"The Consultation highlights that the present service configuration is characterised by variation in structure, role and function. It therefore sets out proposals for a more standardised, and evidence-based, regional model."

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I intend to submit the Hansard record of this debate to the consultation, which has been extended until this Friday, 24 January.

I have concerns that someone, somewhere has looked at the issue and, for purely financial reasons, has decided that the simple solution is to centralise. It is as if they have said, "Let us find the hospital that can provide the service and centralise the service there". The proposals suggest that the tier 4 service should be provided at Holywell Hospital in Antrim, which has 10 beds, and the Downshire Hospital, which has 14 beds — a total of 24 beds. I really feel that that is insufficient and that, by following those suggestions, we will end up with a very poor service that cannot reflect the needs of our society.

The consultation document suggests that we in the Western Trust area do not have access to tier 4 beds and that future patients will be referred to Holywell Hospital. In the document, we read:

"Alcohol and Drug misuse are major public health issues that impact on society at a variety of levels. It is estimated that approximately £680 million is spent annually in Northern Ireland to address alcohol misuse, including costs to healthcare, policing, probation and prison services, social services and as a result of work absenteeism ...

Drug Misuse also impacts upon society and although overall usage is low in comparison to alcohol misuse, the need to reduce drug related harm is also a key public health priority. The advent of so called 'legal highs' and the increasing sale of prescribed medication over the internet also present real challenges to society."

I will go slightly off script to mention legal highs. My colleagues will be well aware of the problems that we have with those in Omagh and of the shop in Old Market Place that sells them despite the consequences. I have raised the issue with the Justice and Health Ministers, and we must keep the pressure on to stop the scourge growing any further. In many cases, their use is the beginning of a drug habit. Our local press covered the demonstrations that

were held outside the shop that sells products such as Magic Dragon and highlighted the concerns of parents and local residents.

I now return to the matter at hand. In the consultation document, we are advised:

"Three-quarters of the adult population drink alcohol ... the proportion classified as problem drinkers [is] 1 in 10 and those drinking at harmful levels [is] 1 in 20; the latter equating to 47,000 individuals."

It also advises:

"There were 252 alcohol related deaths in 2011".

In relation to drug misuse, the consultation document states:

"surveys show that over a quarter of the population (16-64yrs) has used drugs."

It also states:

"The rate of referral for drug treatment trebled between 2001-2012."

It further suggests that, over the past five years, the number of drug-related deaths was around 30. I believe that the figures illustrate a need for the retention of addiction treatment units in all parts of Northern Ireland.

If Mr McElduff does not raise the issue of rural proofing during his contribution to the debate, I will be more than surprised. Tyrone and Fermanagh are rural counties, and any indices or surveys that are conducted will indicate the availability of transport for people in those counties. People need to be able to get to facilities, and I am afraid that the Antrim and Downpatrick suggestions do not offer any positive support for people in my constituency of West Tyrone.

Do you mind if I sit down, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Not at all. Please do.

Mr Hussey: Drug abuse is a common factor throughout the United Kingdom, and we would be foolish in the extreme to believe that it will reduce in the coming years. For that reason, I firmly believe that we need to retain and strengthen the provision of treatment centres in the Province and in the rural west.

I mentioned the work of the local press, and again I refer to the 'Tyrone Constitution' and the

'Ulster Herald'. The headline in the 'Tyrone Constitution' ran:

"Please don't close the doors ... it's our lifeline' urges Omagh addiction and treatment service user."

On the same day, Thursday 9 January 2014, the headline in the 'Ulster Herald' was:

"Addiction Treatment Unit saved my life."

I will quote from the articles to demonstrate the depth of feeling on the issue. A service user of the addiction treatment unit in Omagh said that it had saved her life. I will not name the individual, but she was willing to be named in the local press. She said that she had hit "rock bottom" when she first attended the unit in 1999. Having witnessed the positive impact that the ATU has had on so many lives over its 40-year existence, she said that there would be "devastating consequences" if it were allowed to close. She said:

"I hit my rock bottom and went to my first AA meeting in July 1999. Within a week, I was in the ATU undergoing a six-week programme. I had to go into the unit to get better. The ATU saved my life and has had such a positive impact on countless people and their families over the years. I still regularly attend the weekly meetings, which are really well attended. It is a great support network for so many and will be really badly missed if it is allowed to go".

I will go slightly off script for a moment to pay tribute to Ramona House, which provides a great service to those with drink-related problems. I and many of my colleagues have been encouraged to visit the facility and meet the residents. I can only congratulate the staff and residents on what they do and how they and former residents help to hold a lot of people together during very trying times. I am sure that many of my colleagues in all constituencies will concur that we regularly have to help individuals and families with drink-related problems.

In the 'Tyrone Constitution,' we read the following comment:

"My opinion is that instead of closing addiction and treatment services we should be expanding them because there is a great influx of teenagers coming into addiction services and we need to be ready for them."

I repeat:

"there is a great influx of teenagers coming into addiction services and we need to be ready for them."

That chilling comment should be enough for us all to sit up, pay attention and take action. I continue the quotation:

"Right at this moment as you're reading this some parent is holding a baby that might just need the addiction treatment unit in years to come".

If that does not send a chill down your spine, nothing will. We have to have a reality check and accept that the scourge of drug taking and addiction to alcohol will not go away. We have to ensure that, should it become an epidemic, we as a society can cope and provide support.

The staff at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh are professionals. Their ability to deliver a service is outstanding. We in West Tyrone have become cynics because it appears that, should a service need to be downgraded or removed, Omagh always appears on the radar. We have had promises and assurances, but we have seen all those possibilities crumble to dust. The threat to remove other mental health services still hangs over Omagh, the suggestion being that they be removed to the new South West Acute Hospital. That is despite promises and assurances given by many Health Ministers. We now have a situation in which, in planning for the future, we can ensure that there is a service in the west and that it is based in Omagh. That is my hope for the future of the addictions treatment unit.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Buchanan, and the Member has up to five minutes.

Mr Buchanan: I hope that the Speaker will be a wee bit lenient —

Mr Speaker: Order. As Members know, I do not set the time limits for debates in the House; they are set by the Business Committee. The Member knows that I give some leniency to Members.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me say, first, that the House is no stranger to debates on health-related matters in the Omagh and Fermanagh area.

The people of Omagh and Fermanagh are bitterly disappointed that, yet again, the consultation on inpatient-based addiction treatment services proposes to remove vital health services from Omagh, leaving not only

the Omagh district but the entire western region bereft of inpatient addiction treatment services. This runs contrary to the very ethos of Transforming Your Care (TYC) and its predecessor, Developing Better Services, both of which advocate local patient-centred services. Over the past five years, admissions to the addiction treatment unit in Omagh have been significantly higher than admissions to the Northlands Centre. Omagh admissions range from 54 to 63 a year compared with 30 to 41 patients a year at Northlands.

When we look at the geographical spread of patients who used such services in the past five years, we see that the majority came from the Omagh District Council area, followed by patients from the Fermanagh and Strabane districts. Those statistics prove that the service must be retained in a central location such as Omagh. Asking patients to travel from rural parts of County Fermanagh and County Tyrone to avail themselves of inpatient treatments at Antrim or Downpatrick or, indeed, rehabilitation in Londonderry simply will not work and will have an adverse impact on people from the rural south-west, rather than providing a better service, as is suggested in the consultation document.

The recommendation that tier 4 inpatient services should be located at only Antrim and Downpatrick, with rehabilitation at Northlands, Londonderry, and Carlisle House in Belfast, because that will provide equal access to services across all trust areas is utter folly and will cause additional stress and anxiety to patients and their families. Although tier 3 is to be enhanced and further developed in the community, that cannot happen at the expense of tier 4 inpatient services. Many service users have testified that removal from their home environment to a secure facility was the only way that they were able to deal with their addiction problems.

Alcohol addiction is prevalent in rural areas, and it is especially difficult to get rural people, first, to accept that they have a problem and, secondly, to ask for help. Whether that is because of pride or embarrassment, those difficulties will be further exacerbated if people have to consider availing themselves of services that are not locally based, causing isolation from their family support network.

The correlation between substance abuse and mental health problems cannot be overemphasised, and they cannot be taken in isolation. That is why the inpatient addiction treatment service in Omagh should not be considered in isolation from inpatient acute

mental health services, which is a matter still awaiting a decision. I make it clear that the Western Health and Social Care Trust, the local council and other health-related agencies are strongly of the opinion that Omagh is the correct location for the acute mental health facility, as part of the second phase of the new enhanced hospital. Indeed, that was a promise and a commitment given to the people of Omagh by direct rule Minister Mr Shaun Woodward. There is no doubt that the facility would be further enhanced by the development of a full 24/7 addiction treatment service for the entire west of Northern Ireland, centrally located in the Western Trust area.

The current detoxification and rehabilitation service at Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital is delivered by a skilled and experienced consultant-led team. That model of care can be developed and built on in the second phase of the acute mental health facility in Omagh. Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital has been a stalwart NHS facility for well over 100 years in delivering services. It can and will continue to deliver the services required by the people of the area and beyond if it is properly resourced. That would also help to remove the stigma of this being the Cinderella service in the Department of Health. Minister, I urge you to give serious consideration to the retention and further development of the addiction treatment unit at Omagh and to the second phase of the new hospital being the acute mental health facility.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister for being here to listen to the debate. I thank Ross Hussey for securing the debate. I tabled a similar request, but, understandably, at that time, the Minister was not available to come to the House. It is appropriate that we discuss the issue when the Minister is available.

As previous contributors have said, we are dealing with a consultation on a very specialist service. It is my understanding that there are two main elements to this. The first is all about detoxification and stabilisation, for which there is currently no specific provision in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. The proposal is for two regional centres, with 12 beds each. People from the Western Health and Social Care Trust area would have to go to Holywell Hospital in County Antrim for that service.

With others, I attended the public meeting on Wednesday 13 November in the Tyrone County Hospital postgraduate centre. People who were present were alarmed at the fact that the

consultation document was so prescriptive in making specific reference to Holywell in that instance. It did not appear like a consultation document; it appeared like something that was done and dusted.

5.15 pm

People have said to me that there are dangers in this, because detox can be a very serious medical condition and life-threatening if not handled properly. People emphasise the difficulty of getting an ambulance to Holywell from an area west of the Bann where ambulance cover is scant.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Member for giving way and apologise to the Member who brought the topic to the House for not being here at the beginning of the debate.

Does the Member agree with me that for those attending the addictions treatment unit in Omagh, particularly those with complex needs who come from the rural areas that we represent, like Killen, Ardstraw, Aghyaran and Killeter, and are heavily dependent on transport and, in particular, community transport — we do not have the public transport infrastructure there — the stress that this causes to their families, having to avail themselves of services outside the locality, outside the Omagh area, further compounds the situation and impacts on those using the service? The further away the service, the less likely an individual is to use it and benefit from it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I said to the House much earlier that interventions should be very short and should not be statements. It eats into the time of the Member who has given the Floor very graciously. We need to be careful. You are almost at the point of making a statement. The Member has an added minute.

Mr McElduff: I support Michaela Boyle in the point that she made. I will not now make my point about the public transport deficit. Michaela made it adequately, and I am happy that she did so.

Only two inpatient treatment units are proposed for the whole region: one in Derry and one in Carlisle House. These services are to be delivered by the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector has its role to play, of course. Places like Northlands have excellent reputations and have helped very many people. I was glad to hear Mr Hussey praise the work of Ramona House in Omagh. However, one thing that is absolutely crucial in any treatment

programme is the support and input of family members. Input of family members may involve night-time meetings; that is where you get the good outcomes and results. Families will not be able to make inputs to the treatment programmes if they are so distant from them.

A lot of the points have already been made by Ross and Tom. I will not duplicate those points, but I will say this: we do not want the diminution of services in any community, but we believe that the rurality of Tyrone and Fermanagh speaks for itself and amounts to a special case. Yes, we are dubious about health decisions, because, very often, they work against us on grounds of population. However, I point to the fact that, even 30 years ago, there was a campaign seeking the upgrade of the unit in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital under the banner of combating the disease of alcoholism. I was reading about that in the 'Ulster Herald' this week. At that time, it was direct rule Minister of Health Chris Patten who was being lobbied. He played along with it and upgraded the service, and his career went even better after that. So, I say to the Minister that his career could take another upward trajectory if he behaves like Chris Patten on the matter.

Mr Eastwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I take this opportunity to apologise to you, the House and Mrs Cameron for leaving after I proposed the amendment in the previous debate? I was diving to try to get to chair an all-party group and was not thinking. I have been reminded of my responsibilities. I now have to dive to get up the stairs so I have one other question: do the same rules apply now and mean I have to wait after making a point of order?

Mr Speaker: First of all, I must say I appreciate the Member's coming to the House and apologising. It is very important that Members, especially when moving an amendment to a motion, stay in the House at least to hear another two contributions. I know that Members can be busy — I understand that — but we all have to be careful that we are not seen to treat the House and other Members with contempt. I want to say, however, that I congratulate the Member for coming to the House and apologising.

Mr Byrne: I commend Mr Hussey for securing the debate, and I thank the Minister for being here.

I welcome the opportunity to once again support the fight for the retention of health services in the Omagh area. The area has

historically witnessed the disintegration of maternity services, elective surgery, acute medical services, gynaecology and a tier 1 accident and emergency department, all of which are vital veins of localised healthcare provision and, therefore, a concern in our part of the world. The counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh have a hospital in the west — the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital — which provides tier 4 residential care treatment for addiction. That service supplies the three counties of Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh and has developed into a widely respected service that has been greatly appreciated by those who have used it. A high level of expertise has been built up over many years.

I am aware of and, indeed, accept the need for reform of our health service. However, we in this party believe that the 'Transforming Your Care' document is not the format for this type of change. The proposed closure of the addictions unit in Omagh is a fitting example of the inconsistencies that the implementation of the TYC document can produce. The Health and Social Care Board's (HSCB) proposals could result in the closures of the ATUs in Omagh and Armagh in favour of two centralised services in north Antrim and Downpatrick. That effectively means that any person from Tyrone or Fermanagh who is caught up in the grip of addiction will need to travel to Holywell in Antrim to receive treatment.

Issues such as travel and the removal of the service affect local people, and they are concerned about them. The geographical barrier is significant, and I struggle to comprehend how having two services in the east and the removal of all Health and Social Care (HSC) addiction services from the west is strategically sound. Moreover, I wonder whether that model will properly care for those who are suffering in the west. The closure of the ATU in Omagh would also mean the cessation of over 30 years of local expertise and good practice in a specialist inpatient setting. The assertion made by the Health and Social Care Board is that most care for people with addictions can be provided by tier 3 services, those that the community and voluntary sectors provide. The levels of proficiency that the ATU in Omagh has succeeded in producing, however, cannot seamlessly be reproduced in a community setting. Many patients need an intensive therapy treatment course in an in-bed facility, often during a seven-to-nine-day residential stay. My fear is that distorted financial undercurrents are underpinning the proposal to discontinue the ATU in Omagh.

As the House is aware, the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh is scheduled for completion at the end of 2015. As Mr Buchanan said, phase 2 of that project has plans for a new centre for mental health on site that will house an addictions unit. The question becomes whether a new regional model for addictions treatment will jeopardise the centre, a development site that this and previous Ministers have promised the people of Omagh.

In summary, the people of Omagh and, indeed, of my constituency of West Tyrone must not be deprived once more by financially predicated decisions taken by the Minister or the board. The decision, although convenient for those east of the Bann, will end a long tradition of quality addiction treatment in Omagh and, sadly, will become the latest in the long list of healthcare injustices experienced in our constituency. Let us not remove from Omagh an ATU service that has proven itself as a specialist facility with a very good reputation over many years. I ask the Minister to give sensitive treatment and understanding to the plight of the people who need this type of service and to remember that professionals have made a lot of effort over the years to build up a specialist care service.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I welcome the Adjournment debate this afternoon and congratulate Mr Hussey on bringing it to the Floor. I particularly want to welcome the fact that the consultation period has been extended to 24 January. It had originally been scheduled to close on 10 January. Indeed, I anticipate that the Hansard report of today's debate will form part of that consultation exercise.

I want to reiterate some of the comments made today, particularly around the rurality of Tyrone and Fermanagh. As one who sits on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I am acutely aware of the rurality of both counties and the importance of having services near to hand. Having the service in Antrim would be very prohibitive, particularly if we want families to be involved in the treatment process. There are very strong feelings in both counties about the matter.

I do not want to see any cuts to alcohol services because that would impact across the health service. In conclusion, I say to the Minister that, if he is of a mind not only to retain the unit but to look at the possibility of expanding it, there is physical accommodation on site in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital for that and that may not be the case at other potential sites.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Hussey for securing this important debate. The matter is critical to very many people in Fermanagh and Tyrone. Most people put Tyrone first, but I will put Fermanagh first, if you do not mind.

We are here to talk about the addiction treatment unit in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital or the T&F, as most of us in Fermanagh and Tyrone call it. That is the name by which we all know it. The ATU provides inpatient hospital treatment for those with alcohol and drug problems. First, I would like to commend the staff and service users and their families for all the positive messages that they have sent to us, as local representatives, about the importance of retaining the service into the future. I commend all those involved in the campaign and the staff for their continuing good work. It is important that the service is retained, and it is good to see that we have cross-party support for retaining it in Omagh.

The unit treats between 50 and 60 service users every year, many of whom say that the inpatient service was essential to their treatment. The residential facility is vital, as it enables users to remove themselves from their usual environment, where alcohol is freely available and drugs may also be accessible. The unit is also used several nights a week for wider community benefit through the provision of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and other support groups, which are often chaired by the addiction nurse specialist based in the unit. If the unit were to be relocated to Antrim, as is proposed, many people who currently benefit from those meetings will not make the trip. That will have a very detrimental impact on people who are trying to recover from alcohol and drug addiction but do not need the inpatient facility. Also, it will have a very detrimental impact on inpatients, as visitors will be discouraged from attending because access will be much more difficult if they have to travel from somewhere in Fermanagh or Tyrone to the far regions of Antrim or Down.

The unit comprises a consultant-led team with on-site medical support. It has served the community very well for over 30 years. I have spoken to former staff members and service users and their families who are very committed to retaining the service. They speak very highly of it, and, as Mr Hussey outlined, they say that it has made a huge difference in their lives. It is very important that the service is retained. The service is very well established, it works and it enjoys the overwhelming support of the local community, which trusts the staff and the service.

Finally, I encourage the Minister and the Health and Social Care Board to support rural dwellers and to retain this much-needed service where it is needed and not force people to travel outside their local area to obtain much-needed help at a difficult time in their life. I also encourage local people who may be affected by the proposed change to respond to the consultation and let policymakers know their views on it.

Mr McKinney: I, too, thank Mr Hussey for bringing the issue to the Floor and the Minister for being here to hear the issues raised. It is important, as Mr Flanagan said, to recognise that there is cross-party support for what Mr Hussey is proposing and focusing on.

In line with the Transforming Your Care strategy, the board has proposed that tier 3 services take precedence over tier 4 services. It has also proposed that the detoxification stabilisation phase of tier 4 care should be undertaken in the HSC sector and that rehabilitation provision should be located mainly in the private sector.

5.30 pm

We need to look at the practicalities of such a strategic decision, not just for Omagh but for the whole of the North. First, it is important that we look at the backdrop. The fact is that the number of people who suffer from alcohol or drugs misuse has increased significantly in the past 10 or more years. It is estimated that just under 50,000 people here are drinking at harmful levels and the rate of referral for drug treatment has trebled in the past more than a decade. For alcohol misuse alone, the average number of hospital admissions each year stands at 12,000.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Yes.

Mr Hussey: Does the Member agree with me that, based on such figures and on the increasing availability of drugs, it seems common sense that the unit will be needed more and not less? Therefore, the need for this unit in Omagh is actually extended because of that.

Mr McKinney: Yes, and that is the very point. I mean what we are —

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the intervention. What we are looking at here is not a diminishing problem with specialised services in one area; we are dealing with an increased problem, and not increased in one centre of population but increased right across the North. The figures that I talked about underscore that.

Against that picture, the current provision for detox and stabilisation is 42 HSC beds for patients who require such treatment. The board's proposal to discontinue the services in Omagh and at St Luke's Hospital and centralise them, as we have been discussing, will see the reduction in beds to 24 — little more than half. So, we are getting the bed provision halved and the problem increasing exponentially. It is not unreasonable to suggest that if the numbers of individuals who misuse drugs and alcohol are rising, the decision to reduce the number of beds available to just over half is at least inconsistent with the facts.

The SDLP believes that the public should have access to localised, quality healthcare that is free at the point of delivery. The board may feel that the location of those centralised tier 4 services will deliver greater consistency of addiction treatment, but the closure of Omagh will also have another effect; it will end a level of expertise and inpatient proficiency that has been fostered for over 30 years. It is a matter of succession planning. Can the board guarantee that the unique tier 4 inpatient services in Omagh, whereby highly trained staff and consultants work in tandem, will be replicated locally through the work of the private and voluntary sectors? We do not think so, and the message that, I think, I am getting from across the Benches is that other parties agree.

Furthermore, financial restrictions due to hefty budget cuts will certainly not ease any transition of addiction services into the community. At the moment, alcohol misuse costs hundreds of millions of pounds; in fact, I think that its net effect costs £680 million. Surely, the logic is that money follows need. If the Department wants addiction services to transfer into the community, funding should follow. The Department's paltry less than £1 million to aid the transfer certainly does not convince us any more.

Will the decision to remove a confident, competent addiction treatment unit from Omagh erode the level of care available? I will let that question hang. We think that that will be the case if we end an effective service and put extensive pressure on underfunded, less experienced, community-based services.

The board's consultation document on the future of tier 4 rehabilitation services states that it is the intention that those services should be primarily undertaken within the private sector. One of the proposed functions of the regional restructuring of addiction services is that money saved in the closure of the two ATUs can be reinvested in tier 3, which is the community treatment. Is it not reasonable that we should know the exact financial impact of all rehabilitative care being carried out privately? How much money will be left for community care once the rehabilitation function goes elsewhere?

Another consideration that my colleague Mr Byrne and other Members have touched on is the planned phase 2 of the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh. Phase 1 is due for completion late in 2015, and phase 2 is a new mental health centre, within which an addiction unit is planned. It is of considerable concern that that development is not mentioned in the consultation document on the new regional framework for addiction treatment.

In conclusion, the proposals outlined in the consultation document lack a certain strategic depth. The removal of services from Omagh would spell an end to a unique and effective service and leave the west with no tier 4 services at all.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank Members for the opportunity to speak on this today, for raising an important issue and, hopefully, for helping to raise awareness of the harm caused by substance misuse and the support that is available for people across Northern Ireland.

Many Members who spoke highlighted the tragic consequences of substance misuse. Recent reports of potentially drug-related deaths bring home the tragic fact that around 100 people die each year from drug misuse. Alcohol is even more harmful, with 300 people dying from alcohol-related illness. It will therefore be no surprise to anyone in the Chamber that substance misuse is one of the main public health challenges that we face. It not only impacts on families, children, business and communities but it costs us around £1 billion a year.

My Department leads on the cross-departmental strategy, known as the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, to prevent and address the harm substance misuse causes. The strategy was updated in 2012, and our primary approach is to prevent misuse and harm. However, the strategy also

recognises that some people will require additional support, and it therefore puts in place a range of early intervention and treatment services.

Before getting into that detail, I want to recognise the good work carried out by treatment services across Northern Ireland. They make a positive impact on the lives of some of our most vulnerable people. It is a difficult job, which takes expertise, skill and compassion, and it does not get much reward or recognition, so I put on record my appreciation of the work undertaken by staff in all areas.

Locally, addiction services are structured on a four-tier service model, from tier 1, which is the provision of information and advice, screening and referral, to tier 4, which is the provision of specialist inpatient or residential treatment. Today's discussion is primarily focused on tier 4; however, it is important that we consider the entire system. Tier 4 should be for only the most complex and difficult cases. The majority of patients can and should be supported in the local community at tier 3. We therefore need to ensure that the appropriate level of resources and capacity is available at tier 3 to support that work. It is central to the "shift left" agenda under Transforming Your Care.

There is no variation in current tier 4 provision. Some units operate on a four-day model while others do so on a seven-day model. Some focus on detoxification while others centre on rehabilitation. Indeed, some trusts have very limited access to specialist tier 4 beds. I do not believe that where you live should determine the service that you receive. Therefore, the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs committed the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency to developing a regional commissioning framework for alcohol and drug services. The consultation on tier 4 services, which was launched in October 2013, is part of that overarching commissioning framework. Given the variation that exists, the board concluded that the current regional position for tier 4 does not fully reflect National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance and, therefore, does not provide the best outcomes.

There are around 700 admissions a year to trust-based tier 4 treatment beds. However, it is likely that a significant proportion of those cases could be managed more effectively within community-based tier 3 settings. There are 42 beds across HSC. However, as two of the units operate only four nights a week, current provision, taking into account occupancy rates,

is equivalent to 28 beds across the sector. Of those 28 beds, 18 are for detoxification and 10 are for rehabilitation. In addition, some trusts have contracts in place with independent sector providers for rehabilitation services.

Taking account of NICE guidance, best practice, input from services, and so on, the consultation on tier 4 proposes that, in the future, the HSCB will commission 24 dedicated beds in the HSC. The majority of those will be used for detoxification, with the capacity to use two beds for rehabilitation for those most vulnerable. The provision of 24 beds will provide capacity for around 500 admissions a year.

The consultation sets out three options for how those beds could be provided: a single regional unit with a 24-bed facility that would be sited at a central location; two subregional units with facilities with 12 beds each, or variants such as 10 beds and 14 beds; or a local trust model, with the provision of 24 beds across three, four or five sites. Appraising the options for quality and safety, environment, accessibility, implementation, strategic fit and value for money, the consultation recommends putting in place two subregional units.

The deadline for responding to the consultation has been extended to 24 January. During the consultation, a number of local events have been held, including in Tyrone County Hospital, to inform the process. Following the consultation's close, it will be for the HSCB to analyse the responses and make final proposals.

It should be noted that the consultation is on the service model and not on the future location of services. However, based on initial discussions with the trusts, the consultation sets out a potential reconfiguration of services based on a network arrangement with 10 beds in Holywell Hospital and 14 beds in the Downshire Hospital. The main benefit of this regional arrangement would be that the wider population would have access to dedicated tier 4 detoxification beds. This could mean the discontinuation of services in the Western Trust unit, which is at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, and at the Southern Trust unit, which is at St Luke's Hospital. However, as I stated, the consultation is not on the location of services and no decision has been taken on this issue. If there is agreement, following the consultation, that the two-unit model is the best way forward, the HSCB will formally ask all trusts whether they wish to provide these services. It will be for all trusts to consider their capability and capacity to deliver these services

in a safe and effective way and to put forward bids as appropriate. Ultimately, the HSCB will need to consider the location of any future services to ensure that they are accessible.

The consultation focuses on the services provided by the trusts. However, it also proposes that, in the future, the majority of tier 4 rehabilitation care would be undertaken in the independent sector, although HSC would retain some capacity to provide inpatient rehabilitation care for the very complex cases. HSCB has stated that it will monitor demand for tier 4 rehabilitation care and will work with the independent sector to increase provision as required. The board is also proposing to establish a regional network with the community and voluntary sector to oversee the development, implementation and monitoring of tier 4 services regionally. I believe that this partnership approach is to be welcomed.

As I stated at the outset, these services are a vital part of our approach to preventing and addressing the harm caused by substance misuse. However, we need to re-orientate services to ensure that we improve capacity at tiers 1 to 3. This will help to prevent some people from getting to the crisis point where they require inpatient services. Although the proposed reforms seek to improve the consistency and effectiveness of tier 4 services, they also seek to build capacity. Although I acknowledge concerns about local services, this is not about taking money from addictions services. The board has committed that any savings from service redesigns will be reinvested in addiction services and particularly into tier 3. This is in line with Transforming Your Care and is about providing patients with the right service at the right time as close to home as possible. It is also about ensuring that we have effective services in place for the people who have the highest level of need. It is also in line with the approach undertaken in other specialist services, such as cancer treatment and paediatrics, where we have moved from a local model to a highly specialised service that achieves much better outcomes for patients.

I finish by reaffirming that this is not a done deal. Everyone with a view still has a chance to respond to the consultation, which closes on Friday. I encourage them to do so.

Adjourned at 5.44 pm.



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