

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 25 November 2013
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 25 November 2013

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matters of the Day

Father Alec Reid

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Martin McGuinness has been given leave to make a statement, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24, on the death of Father Alec Reid. Other Members who wish to be called should rise continually in their place to indicate that they wish to speak. All Members shall have three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business is finished.

Mr M McGuinness: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Speaker's office for the opportunity to say a few words about an extraordinary individual who made an incredible contribution to the peace process — someone who was a friend of all of us in the Chamber.

It is a long way from Tipperary to the disadvantaged streets of west Belfast, but, for over 40 years, Father Alec Reid laboured on behalf of the community that he was so much a part of, providing spiritual support and guidance and pastoral support. In the context of conflict in this country, he rose to make one of the most remarkable contributions to the peace process that we have ever seen. In many ways, he was years ahead of many others. He was, in my opinion, Ireland's greatest peacemaker — someone who recognised the importance of dialogue, discussion and inclusiveness and who understood absolutely the need to bring conflict in this country to an end.

In doing so, I think that he gained the enormous respect of everyone. Through his actions, compassion and courage, he clearly showed that he understood absolutely the nature of the conflict and, more importantly, what was required to bring that conflict to an end. His work with our party leader, Gerry Adams, is now legendary and on the public record. The involvement of a former leader of the SDLP

John Hume is also on the public record. Of course, many people have made huge contributions down the years to that process from all the political parties in this Chamber.

We are all indebted to Father Alec Reid Redemptorist priest, who was a man of incredible courage, a visionary and a man who absolutely understood what was required to ensure that the young people of our country lived their lives in a way that allowed them to fulfil their potential. We all need to recognise that we are only here because of him and because of decisions taken by many others. I pay tribute to him today and, on the occasion of his death and his funeral, nothing that we can do to immortalise his contribution to our peace process can be surpassed by the contribution that he made.

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

Mr Douglas: On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I extend our sympathy to the family and friends of Father Alec Reid, who died last Friday. I met Father Reid a few times over the years. I did not know him that well but I found him to be a man of deep faith and incredible integrity who really believed that it was good to talk. The image of Father Reid praying over the bodies of army corporals Derek Wood and David Howes will live forever in our memories. It was a real act of grace and compassion, and the images went right across the world. I certainly recognise Father Alec Reid as a key figure in the Northern Ireland peace process and, undoubtedly, as the Member who spoke previously said, he has left behind a powerful legacy. Did he make mistakes? Of course he did. As someone said yesterday on Radio Ulster, he was a bit tetchy and a bit impatient. At one time, he made remarks that angered many in the unionist community, but as a man of integrity, he apologised. As the Bible states, we all make many mistakes in what we say and what we do. That includes every one of us in this Chamber today. In finishing, I pray that the God of all comfort will be with Father Alec Reid's family and friends today.

Mr Attwood: I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Speaker's office and Mr McGuinness for bringing this matter to the attention of the Chamber this morning. On behalf of myself and the SDLP, I convey our sympathy to the family of Alec Reid, particularly that family that resides up in Clonard monastery. To his fellow priests and his brothers in the order, I offer our sympathy and condolences on his sad occasion. In particular, I refer to Father Gerry Reynolds who, like Father Alec Reid, was tireless and fearless and is deeply holy. He was a great friend of Alec Reid and was his partner in peace.

I remember about 10 or 15 years ago — probably longer now — being up in St Gerard's at a private event where Alec Reid spoke, as he put it, about the place of Christian witness in a situation of violent conflict. For Alec Reid, that was not an academic issue; it was his lived experience.

Although he came to public attention through the Hume/Adams talks and his compassion on the day of the murder of two soldiers in Andersonstown, throughout his service in west Belfast and in Clonard monastery, he brought Christian witness to situations of violent conflict. That is the measure of the man and the measure of his contribution. He was a man who would not give up on the pursuit of peace. Anyone who met him and talked to him, especially in the run-up to the ceasefires, knew that he was not going to be derailed from that pursuit and that eventually he and others would prevail.

Over the weekend, I have been thinking not only of Father Alec Reid but of the late Father Matt Wallace, another giant of a priest in west Belfast. They both served the people not only in the most difficult circumstances but in the most disadvantaged areas. For all those things, they are known, respected and loved.

Mr Nesbitt: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I offer condolences to the family of Father Reid and, in particular, to those in the Clonard monastery family. I begin by acknowledging the huge sense of loss in the community, particularly the community that is nationalist/republican west Belfast. Far from being exclusive to that grouping, there is a sense of loss throughout this island, in Great Britain, in the United States and internationally at having lost someone who imparted a very positive sense of direction in all that he did and said, publicly and privately.

As has been acknowledged, of course, there were times when he made comments that were

more than difficult for the unionist community. Famously, there was one set of comments for which he felt obliged to apologise, and, in fairness, he did so promptly and fully. Indeed, today, we hear that a documentary might be broadcast tonight that will include comments that I imagine that the unionist community will find utterly unacceptable. I hope that that is not the abiding memory of Father Alec Reid. For me and for everyone, I believe that the abiding memory will be of that fateful day in 1988 and the murders of the two corporals in west Belfast, with Father Reid on his knees in the blood of those two men. It was, no doubt, a life-changing experience that led him to knock heads together for peace.

It is noteworthy that, through the many decades of the Troubles, many people were very critical of organised religion. Many said that the Churches did not do enough to end the Troubles and did not like to get involved in controversial issues, roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty. Father Reid did, getting his hands more than dirty in the cause of peace. It is, of course, ironic that his public intervention that day led to an iconic image of the Troubles, and yet his real work was done in private behind the scenes, encouraging and cajoling those who could bring a change to this country, a change that ultimately led to us all being here in the Chamber today. I hope that history will do justice to Father Alec Reid.

Mr Ford: On behalf of my colleagues, I add our sympathy to Father Reid's family and especially to the community in Clonard. Much has been said about Father Alec Reid in the past few days. Indeed, the coverage of his passing is in great contrast to the fact that he was a man who spent much of life out of the public eye, doing that good work behind the scenes, which others spoke of. The way in which he conducted himself made his life and ministry vital to what has become known as the peace process here. Many in west Belfast remember him as a friend and as a priest with a pastoral care who touched individual lives, but we in this place will remember him for the role that he played in the wider community and the efforts that he made for peace.

12.15 pm

It is so often the politicians who receive the plaudits when things go well, but it is those outside the political limelight, people such as Father Alec Reid and some of his colleagues — Father Gerry Reynolds was mentioned earlier — who deserve much of the praise and whose contribution, by its very nature, might never

become fully known. Clearly, Father Reid was one of those people. I remember that, as far back as the early 1990s, he was one of those who took part in confidential talks with political representatives in Germany. Talking with colleagues this morning, I recollected a weekend in November 2001, when some of us were engaged in very high-profile talks in and around this Building to seek the election of a First Minister and deputy First Minister, while others were elsewhere, out of the limelight, involved in quiet conversations about how best to sustain power sharing in the longer term. Sharing in those quiet conversations was Father Alec. We owe a great deal to him for all the work that he did.

Did we all agree on everything that he said? Of course not, but we can agree that he played an absolutely pivotal and courageous role in bringing about the circumstances that allowed politicians to take the steps that led to the peace process and sustained it at critical points.

Father Alec's legacy is probably most evident in the fact that his life and contribution to the community are being marked, not just in Clonard but in so many places, including the Assembly, which his work, and that of others who shared his vision of a peaceful, settled community and put that faith into action, did so much to bring into existence

Mr McCallister: At the outset, I express sympathy on behalf of NI21 to the family and friends of Father Reid, especially, as others quite rightly mentioned, the community at Clonard monastery who knew him best and will definitely miss him most acutely.

We have had tributes to the contribution that Father Reid made from all sides of the House. That tells us that, although some maybe had issues with some of his commentary over the years, today is very much about focusing on the very positive change that he helped to bring about and push people towards. People have talked about the grace and Christian witness that he brought. It is important that we remember the huge contribution that Father Alec Reid made to our peace process over a long number of years and that we continue in that work. The very fact that we are here, discussing this and taking time to reflect on a life of service to so many across our society, marks his incredible achievements and perseverance. He kept the faith, not only in his Christian witness but in politics and there being a different way of bringing real change to Northern Ireland. He kept working with people to make sure that change happened and that we moved away from the horrific images that he

became so widely associated with following the murder of two corporals in 1988 to a place where we can now discuss and reflect in a very meaningful way on a life of service to all.

Explosion: Belfast City Centre

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Jonathan Craig has been given leave to make a statement, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24, on the explosion in Belfast city centre. Other Members who wish to be called should rise continually in their place. All Members called will have three minutes to speak on the subject. I again remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business is finished.

Mr Craig: It is with great sadness and revulsion that I come to the House with this matter. On Sunday, at approximately 9.00 pm, an individual returning to his home was confronted by three masked men. His car was hijacked, a bomb was put in it and he was forced to drive to the entrance of Victoria Square, near Musgrave Street police station. Those are the failed tactics of the past. A bomb with over 60 kg — or, in old English terms, 128 lb — of homemade explosives could have caused death, misery and mayhem in our city centre. Of that, there is no question.

Mr Deputy Speaker, with your indulgence, I will give a clear reaction. On listening to the news this morning, my wife turned to me and said: "Surely not. We cannot go back to that." I tell you that because I believe that she, more than most, has the right to say it. Her father was a businessman in Belfast for 30 years. He carried eight bombs out of his premises. He had a gun put to his head and the trigger pulled. We cannot go back to that. Those are the failed miserable tactics of the past that brought misery and mayhem to the Province. Nothing was moved forward by them, and nothing will be moved forward by them.

We listened with pain to the hurt that was brought out by victims last week. I include myself in that list of victims, and I felt the hurt and pain of last week's debate. The one thing that we, as a society, cannot do is allow that hurt and pain to be visited on the present or, indeed, the future of the Province. I do not want to see anyone going through that again. We need to reject the violence of the past. We need to make a strong appeal to those who may know something about this incident: do not let fear rule your life; take that brave step, and give whatever information you have to the PSNI and the forces of law and order. Let us all

stand behind the forces of law and order on this issue.

I want to pay tribute to the brave tactics of the PSNI and, especially, the bomb squad. While others were running from this incident, they had to go in and diffuse it.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Jonathan Craig for bringing this issue forward. In complete contrast and contradiction to the life's work of Father Alec Reid, who has passed away, we have had this bomb — thankfully, only a part of it went off — brought into the city centre. That reckless act put into danger the lives not only of local people but the many visitors who come to Belfast around the Christmas period. We could have been dealing this afternoon with a substantial number of casualties, if not deaths. I am very thankful that we are not in that position.

This incident comes almost 20 years after the first ceasefires. These people need to know that they have no support in the community whatsoever and that the vast majority of people throughout Ireland — and I mean the vast, vast majority of people throughout Ireland — voted for a political way to move the whole process forward. If their belief is in a united Ireland, there is a democratic way in which to pursue that. My message is very simple: they need to stop and they need to stop now. There is no way that we are going back to those days of conflict.

Mr A Maginness: I join others — Mr Jonathan Craig, in particular — in condemning this incident. Mr Craig has rightly described these as the failed tactics of the past, and I agree entirely with him. These are tactics that failed in the past.

Only politics works. Incidentally, this act involved a constituent of mine, a man who has been terrorised by it.

The fact is that we should be saying to those people who carried out this act, "Yes, you have carried out the failed tactics of the past." Politics works, and nothing else will work to bring about change, peace and stability to our community. We want to unite our community, not divide it, and a bomb would have divided our community, killed or injured people and damaged property.

These people have to wake up to the new realities of our politics, which are the politics of the Assembly and the new dispensation. They

have to get a very strong message from the Assembly that their actions are to be condemned. They will not be condoned, and they will not see any success as a result of those actions. They have attempted to instil fear not only in one constituent of mine but in the whole community. They also seek to damage our economy, particularly as we are coming up to Christmas. That is something that we, as a community and an Assembly, will not tolerate. That is the message that should go out from this place.

Mr Copeland: It does not take a great deal of expertise or courage to manufacture a car bomb — the charge, the accelerant, the detonator and the power supply. It never took a lot of courage or expertise. It does not take a lot of expertise to murder someone. Yet these words are starting to creep in to our vocabulary once again. There is no point in me using the word "condemn". We use it ad nauseam. We must identify those who are responsible, track them down and make them subject to the rule of law. In the absence of that, the public will conclude that these people are, in essence, free to do what they want. There but for the grace of God go we springs to mind about last night. If the device was fertiliser based, it might have been the case that it was not mixed or ground right. It might not have been manufactured right or there might have been a broken wire or a short in the circuit that was designed to set it off. Nothing that we in this place did and nothing that the police or the intelligence-led security services did prevented it from being delivered.

As I said, it does not take much courage; it never did. What does take courage are the actions of those who deal with the aftermath when such devices have been successful. They are the people who say to mothers and their children, "Your father is not coming home". They also say to fathers and their children, "Your mother is not coming home". They might find themselves scarred for life, some even now, after 40 years, from the effects of dealing with the aftermath of bombs. It is neither pretty nor pleasant and it cannot be justified now. In truth, it could never be justified.

The people who carry out these activities plan beneath the surface, they exist beneath the surface and they go back to homes and communities that will know them. The absence of information coming from the population to the police will do nothing to ensure that this does not happen again. There but for the grace of God is not enough.

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

Mr Ford: I thank Jonathan Craig for securing this matter of the day. I join him and others in condemnation not just of those who planted the bomb last night but of those who have engaged in a number of similar activities in recent weeks.

12.30 pm

What happened last night put the lives of people all over Belfast at risk — those in Ardoyne, where the bomb was placed in the vehicle; the driver of the vehicle, who, as Alban Maginness has said, was traumatised by the effects; those who were on the route to the city centre; those who were in and around Victoria Square, whether socialising or living there; and those who had to deal with it, whether police officers or army staff.

I have said before that it appears that some people are more wedded to the struggle than to any possible outcome. They must know that what they are doing can achieve no political outcome. We stand here today as representatives of Northern Ireland and show that democracy is what changes the way that things are managed, not terrorism.

It is clear that a small group of people have carried out a number of activities in recent weeks, including the attempted bombing of Strand Road police station in Derry on Saturday evening, which left another driver traumatised after an attempt to hijack a vehicle in Creggan, as well as other devices, such as pipe bombs and letter bombs, that have been shown. We know that the Police Service stands to defend the community, whether they are those in specialist units, in response units or in neighbourhood units. They are clearly working extremely hard to protect this society. Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting the ordnance engineers and seeing something of the work of the army technical officers (ATOs), some of whom would have been out last night or on Saturday night carrying out their duties to deal with those devices. We owe an awful lot to those army specialists and police officers for what they do.

As a community and as political representatives, we have to ensure that we stand together. We also have to ensure that no unnecessary strain is put on the police and that people are encouraged to give whatever information they have, however little it might be. We have to remember that, unfortunately, there is a difference between information and

intelligence and evidence that stands up in court. That is why it is so vital that anyone who can help in any way should provide that information. We all owe a duty to ensure that we do not create additional difficulties for the police at this particularly sensitive time.

Mr Spratt: As a Member for South Belfast, where this incident took place, I utterly condemn the bomb at Musgrave Street police station and Victoria Square. I also condemn the other incidents that took place over the weekend in the south of the city, not least in Stockmans Lane and Ravenhill Avenue, where many ordinary people had their weekends disrupted and were put out of their homes.

As has been said by others — I thank my colleague Jonathan Craig for raising this matter — Chichester Street and Victoria Street were closed off last evening as a result of this incident. It brought chaos to the people who were going about their normal business in restaurants and business in the south of the city. Indeed, as we read this morning, cars belonging to people from other parts of the Province were trapped in the underground car park at Victoria Square. I utterly condemn all of that and reiterate that this 60 kg bomb could have caused massive injury and, indeed, serious loss of life. None of us wants to go back to the dark days of the past. We have all seen enough of that. We need to move on and to stand together.

I want to support the words of Mr Ford, who, just a few seconds ago, said that it is imperative that the Police Service is given every support at this time. There is no greater need than now for the Police Service of Northern Ireland to be fully and absolutely supported. There should be no question about that. There should also be support for the ATOs who deal with those incidents. Whether they turn out to be a hoax or not, when the ATOs arrive at the scene, the devices have the potential to take life.

I appeal to anyone who has information, no matter how little, to pass it to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Let us get these individuals out of our communities. They are the men and women of yesterday and have nothing to offer anyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister: I join colleagues in utterly condemning this attack. Like other attacks, the sheer recklessness and thoughtlessness of it, the wanton destruction and the potential for loss of life was breathtaking. That anyone would even contemplate that such an attack would achieve anything in our society is also breathtaking. We all have our quarrels in here,

but this is where they should be. For all its faults, this is where the politics should be taking place. The very fact that so many in this House stand united today in utter condemnation of such attacks reinforces the point that the people who carry out, plan or take any part in them have absolutely nothing to offer. No one, but no one, wants to go back to the dark days and be revisited by that.

These acts of terror and the sheer trauma that they bring on the individuals who are most acutely affected by them are horrendous. We have to do all in our power to stop them. So I join with others, including Mr Ford, the Justice Minister, in making sure that anyone who knows anything passes that information on to the police immediately without holding back anything. The smallest details or bits of information will help the police. The police cannot solve all these things on their own: they cannot tackle them without community support. There is no support in any community for what is happening, so we must bear down on and bring the people responsible before the courts and our justice system and hope that they are dealt with severely so that we bring to an end something that no one in this House wants to see and that we are all repulsed by.

Mr Agnew: I express my revulsion and that of the Green Party at the odious act that took place in Belfast city centre. I offer our support to the driver who underwent a horrible ordeal and recognise that others in recent weeks in Derry have also suffered in a similar way. A Derry bus driver and takeaway delivery driver also suffered in such a way.

This issue has also been brought to House because of its wider impact on our community. It has brought back some horrific memories for people, and there is a feeling that we have taken a step back towards a past that we thought we had left behind us.

I speak as a worried father of two young children who really had hoped that this type of attack was behind us. I remember when my mum worked in Belfast city centre, and any time she was late home from work, I worried about the reason for that. I do not want my children ever to experience such a worry.

We have to make sure that in this House we do everything in our power to make democracy work and show that democracy is the only way forward. In particular, we have to make it work for the most deprived communities and make sure that we give no grounds for these acts being justified. Although this type of act can never and should never be justified, we have to

give no possibility of justification for those who carry out such attacks.

We have to be mindful that we have a leadership role and that when we are discussing the role of the PSNI and the courts, we should do so in a responsible manner. Although it is right that we hold those areas of our judiciary to account, we should not criticise to achieve political ends but only where we have real grounds for doing so. We all appear to be in support of the police and their brave actions. I hope that we ensure that we continue to support the police and do not use them as a political football to serve our own ends.

Finally, I add to the calls for anyone with any information to pass it to the PSNI or, indeed, anonymously through Crimestoppers, to ensure that those who carried out this terrible act are brought to justice.

Mr McNarry: Jonathan Craig's personal insight of a factual episode in his family lends serious and massive weight to the matter that he has brought to the House. I did not know about that; I am sure that most of us did not know about it. It just goes to show that you really do not know who and how widespread the victims are. What I do know is that this House must speak up for the future as well as the present, especially for young people who know little of the past that most of us came through in the form of killings and bombings and the panic, chaos and fear that others have spoken about. We have a duty to prevent them from experiencing what we experienced. Mr Spratt spoke of what happened yesterday, as well as other incidents. As he said, we have a duty to ensure that they do not happen.

Can we show the way? Can we demonstrate our repudiation of violence? I believe that we can. Should we not — not just as a gesture but as a body of all 108 of us — walk from this Building together to the city to make a statement of solidarity by the people's elected representatives against these people? In doing that, we can show those people that there is a better way. It is what we are working to do daily. It is a way that prevents wicked men from penetrating our future. In doing that, we will say to the public that we must live in the present and build a future for our children and their children.

Mr McCausland: The attack in the centre of Belfast on Sunday night was an attack on life, property and the economic life of the city centre. It was clearly an attempt by dissident republicans to replicate the old economic war that was formerly carried out by the Provisional

IRA. Clearly, dissident republicans do not have the capacity to mount a sustained campaign over several decades in the way that the Provisionals did. For that, we must be thankful. Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that they can and do cause significant damage to the commercial life of our cities and towns. They have very limited support and, indeed, they have very little to offer. In fact, they have nothing to offer but death, destruction, poverty, unemployment, mayhem and misery. We are all thankful that no one was injured, although the person whose car was hijacked was severely traumatised and terrorised by the incident. The fact is that such incidents are completely wrong. Terrorism was wrong in the past, just as it is wrong today. Moreover, the manner of this particular incident says much about the fanaticism and depravity of those who designed it and carried it out.

The car was hijacked in Ardoyne in north Belfast, and it is true that there are several small groups of dissident republicans who are active in that part of the city. I appeal to anyone with information to make it available as soon as possible. It is imperative that the perpetrators of such violence are identified, apprehended, brought before the courts and made to feel the full force of the law.

I want to make one final point. The car bomb as a method of attack by terrorists was designed by the Provisional IRA many years ago, and dissident republicans believe that they are keeping faith with their republican past. We must not allow anyone to rewrite history in such a way as to suggest that, when such things happened in the past, they were somehow right. The facts, very clearly, are that it was wrong then, it is wrong now and it needs to be brought to a stop.

12.45 pm

Ms Lo: As an MLA for the area, I utterly condemn this worrying incident. I send my sympathies to the person whose car was hijacked, and who must have been severely traumatised, and to all those who were inconvenienced by the evacuation from the apartments, restaurants and cinema in Victoria Square.

Had the device gone off fully, the damage caused could have been substantial, potentially fatal. The culprits have no regard for human life, and they have no place in our society. None of us wants to go back to the bad old days when people were too scared to go to such public places as restaurants and cinemas, for fear of bombings and shootings. I know

what it was like. I came here in 1974, when Belfast city centre was a ghost town after dark.

This incident was a pointless act that succeeded only in causing chaos to the public, damaging our local economy and frightening away our potential foreign investors. We must all send out a strong message today that the perpetrators do not act in our name. They must be stopped and caught. If anyone has any information, I urge them to contact the police. The House is united in its condemnation today of these wicked people, and I call for all of us to work together for a better and shared future for everyone.

Committee Business

Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance

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

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Inquiry into Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland [NIA 141/11-15]; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

It gives me great pleasure, as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, to move the motion calling on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations set out in the Committee's report on its inquiry into careers education, information, advice and guidance in Northern Ireland. I appreciate the Minister being here today to respond, and I am sure that he and his officials will find the report extremely useful. The Committee is looking forward to working in cooperation with the Minister to progress the recommendations. I thank the Business Committee for allowing two hours to discuss this very important Committee inquiry, because it has an overarching effect on the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education (DE).

The Committee agreed to carry out the inquiry because it was evident that there were areas where improvements could be made. During briefings to the Committee, a number of organisations highlighted issues about how advice on career options is offered. The Committee had concerns about the place of careers provision in the wider economic development of Northern Ireland and questioned how it can be that, simultaneously, there can be a large number of young people leaving education with little prospect of employment, alongside claims from industry that Northern Ireland is facing a skills shortage that is jeopardising future economic growth.

The Committee agreed the terms of reference for the inquiry just before summer recess in July 2012. Over the summer months, the Committee wrote to 65 key stakeholders requesting written evidence and received submissions from 41 organisations. Over the 2012-13 session, the Committee heard oral evidence from 28 organisations and made study visits to the University of Ulster and to the South Eastern Regional College in Bangor. In addition to the written and oral evidence, the Committee felt it important to give an opportunity to young people and those directly affected by careers advice to have their say. The Committee issued an online survey to pupils in year 12, to students in colleges and universities and to young people who had left school and were not in education or employment. The Committee was overwhelmed by the response. Across all four groups, it received 8,428 responses, and the Committee is incredibly grateful to those people who took the time to respond.

Given that responsibility for careers lies jointly with the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education, the Committee made all relevant inquiry papers available to the Committee for Education and began its inquiry with a joint briefing from both Departments. Before I go further, on behalf of the Committee, I thank both Departments for their open engagement and thank all the other organisations that provided such a wealth of information and well-reasoned evidence. I pay special tribute to the Employment and Learning Committee staff and the Committee Clerk, whose dedication to the report, from the beginning, ensured the quality of the inquiry.

The Committee was struck by the wide range of organisations involved in the provision of careers education, advice and guidance, from schools, businesses, the Careers Service and other sector skills bodies, many of which are government-funded. Although the Committee did not deal with this as an aspect of the inquiry, it noted that, with such a wide range of organisations providing what can sometimes be conflicting information, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education might wish to consider whether there is duplication of effort or their efforts could be better coordinated.

I must emphasise that there is much to praise about careers education, information, advice and guidance in Northern Ireland. Individual teachers and advisers work tirelessly to advance the horizons, aspirations and prospects of those looking for productive and enriching lives, and schools, colleges and

universities have widened out the options and visions for those who come through their doors beyond passing the next exam to moulding individuals who are work-ready. They also have a focus and confidence for where they see themselves in five and 10 years' time.

The Committee, however, considered that much can be done, and it distilled that to 25 recommendations, which I ask you to call on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to implement.

The Committee found that the evidence points to systemic and specific examples of poor careers provision; inconsistency in careers provision across Northern Ireland; a lack of information, with available information sometimes being difficult to digest; suggestions that schools and colleges, to protect their own enrolments, do not advise students of the full range of options available to them; and a lack of joined-up thinking across the education and employment sectors to have a workforce that is ready for the economy of tomorrow.

The Committee's recommendations fall under a number of main themes that came out of the inquiry. Given the issues raised, the first and most overarching theme is that of a statutory duty. In reviewing the evidence and looking at the experience of other jurisdictions, and having seen that further interventions are needed, the Committee recommends that DEL and DE examine the possible benefits of introducing a statutory mechanism for ensuring a consistency of approach and high standards of careers service across all schools, colleges and universities in Northern Ireland. The Committee feels that if both Departments choose to explore such an avenue, it must be adequately resourced to ensure that it is successful.

The difficulty of successfully introducing a statutory duty that is not adequately resourced is evidenced by the experience of England, where a statutory duty was introduced in 2012 and, in a recent Ofsted evaluation, implementation was found to be far from complete because many of the issues that led to the statutory duty are still evident. The Committee has noted that one area in which a statutory duty does exist is that of the school entitlement framework, which has been a statutory duty from 1 September this year. As Members are aware, that is the duty that puts pupils' needs first and aims to provide access for pupils to a broad and balanced curriculum base that enables them to reach their full potential, no matter which school they attend or where they live.

The Committee felt that that duty was put at risk as an unintended consequence of the current careers provision, as not all subjects and avenues are always addressed by those offering advice. Some evidence suggests that some schools do not always signpost the range of opportunities available in further education colleges, instead promoting their own subject offering in an effort to retain pupil numbers.

The Committee believes that the Department of Education should make careers provision a compulsory curriculum subject and employ a range of good practice to improve the career chances of students. Schools should widen and raise aspirations. Personal portfolios should be used to help students to assess their range of skills and receive direction on the skills, both social and academic, that they need to work on in order to become more attractive to employers. Schools should also promote integrated working through group projects to help students to work with others to solve problems.

The Committee is also aware of the additional barriers to fulfilling careers that are faced by some groups. It recommends that a number of special measures be put in place to help those individuals. We recommend that DEL includes in its ongoing review of economic inactivity the role that the Careers Service should play in signposting the economically inactive to training, education and, ultimately, employment. For those for whom the costs associated with education are a barrier, DEL should ensure that practical financial advice is provided to ensure that the door to further education and higher education is not closed due to cost. For those with learning difficulties, the Committee recommends that DEL develop an integrated network of support to help them to engage in work, whether through grant schemes for employers or mentoring schemes, and that it should investigate best practice in other jurisdictions. For female students, DEL and DE should develop a strategy to identify and address the barriers facing their progression into STEM-based subjects.

I will move on to STEM: science, technology, engineering and mathematics. All agree that, for the future of the economy, more needs to be done to guide young people to those types of subjects and to make them proficient enough to profit from the Assembly's efforts to steer Northern Ireland to a more technology-based economy. The Committee knows that the promotion of STEM is central to DEL and DE. However, evidence that the work that they are doing has borne fruit is not there. For that reason, the Committee recommends that DEL

look at how it measures its success in that endeavour and that DE consider expanding its current approach to provide more career insights and exposure to the world of business and entrepreneurship. The Committee also recommends that schools, colleges and universities be adequately resourced with the right equipment and skills to teach those cutting-edge technologies.

The Committee saw evidence of a historical bias towards the old professions. As a society, we value the career choices of law, medicine and teaching, among others. To counter that, the Committee recommends that DEL and DE develop an action plan for providing information for parents and engaging with them to ensure that the advice and encouragement that they offer their children is informed. This should be assisted by an inclusive and fit-for-purpose careers website, such as Scotland's My World of Work site. As part of that improvement in the provision of information, the Committee recommends that DEL increase its efforts to make labour market information more accessible and develop a more joined-up approach to information sharing between it and other key stakeholders to enable it to collaborate on, analyse and disseminate quality information.

One of the most gratifying aspects of the inquiry was the input from the business sector, whether it was from businesses themselves or via the sector skills councils. The Committee was left in no doubt that there is not only a willingness but an eagerness to help. The business sector knows that, if education and careers advice can be got right, it will profit and so, too, will Northern Ireland. However, the Committee feels that that is, to a large extent, an untapped resource. To that end, the Committee recommends that DEL and DE develop better engagement between schools and businesses; seek to introduce in schools a more consistent approach to promoting, organising and quality assuring work placements for students; and include in their planned careers strategy how engagement in careers-related learning between schools and businesses can be improved. The Committee recommends that DE, with DEL's assistance, review the resources provided to schools for delivering work experience, explores the feasibility of all post-primary schools delivering work experience for their students and evaluates the quality of those placements.

Another theme that runs through the evidence is the need for those who offer careers advice to be adequately qualified and trained. The Committee noted with concern that there is no

longer a qualification for teaching careers in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Committee recommends that DEL works with haste to develop and introduce more qualifications in careers education, information, advice and guidance to Northern Ireland and that DE puts more emphasis on the delivery of careers education, information, advice and guidance to increase the number of experienced and qualified careers staff.

1.00 pm

The Committee also recommends that DE ensures that the four continuous professional development modules that it is developing respond to criticisms that were raised by those who gave evidence to the inquiry, that those modules are implemented as soon as possible and that subject teachers are provided with specific continuous professional development to ensure that they are aware of the realistic opportunities that are available to students in their subject area. The Committee believes that that could be facilitated and enhanced by better partnerships with employers.

In my role as an Ulster Unionist member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, bearing in mind those who often query the usefulness of inquiries or who wait until the recommendations come out, I would like to commend the Minister for having already taken two actions in response to concerns that were raised during the inquiry's evidence sessions. One of the criticisms was that the fact sheets that were available on the DEL information page of the NI Direct website were out of date. I am glad that the Minister launched updated fact sheets on 18 November.

We also heard criticism from a number of major employers that there was no investment in support. I welcome the Minister's announcement this morning that he has invested £366,000 for an additional 120 places on the Department's INTRO graduate management programme.

I welcome the fact that work that was done in the inquiry has already borne fruit. I look forward to working with the Committee and the Minister to ensure that all the recommendations that we brought forward as a cross-party Committee are adopted.

In conclusion, this was a substantial piece of work by the Committee. I look forward to a productive and positive debate with the Department on its content. I commend the Committee's inquiry report to the House.

Mr Hilditch: As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support the report. Although the inquiry's terms of reference were agreed in July 2012, my return to the Committee a few months later allowed me to take part in most of the inquiry.

The inquiry gathered and received a vast amount of evidence and information. I acknowledge the many contributions that we received, including from the various education sectors, the private sector, the business sector, various skills bodies and the voluntary and community sector. From the initiation of the inquiry throughout the evidence and information gathering to bringing the report to its conclusion, I acknowledge the work of the Committee staff under the leadership of the Committee Clerk, Cathie White. I congratulate them because the Committee was overwhelmed with responses from key stakeholders and those who participated in the survey. It was no mean feat to collate and document the information, bring the inquiry to a conclusion and publish the report.

From the outset, we were aware that the inquiry would bridge two Departments and impact on a number of others. That could be problematic in any circumstances, but, hopefully, through this report, the concerns that were raised about the structure and effectiveness of careers education, information, advice and guidance in Northern Ireland can be addressed by all stakeholders.

It was during the inquiry that the Committee's concerns began to be realised. Although it was clear that the Department for Employment and Learning played a supporting role, with advice, guidance and careers information to support the delivery of careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) by the Department of Education in schools, and that the further and higher education institutions were responsible for individual delivery, there is also a wide range, almost a convoluted web, of organisations and agencies involved in CEIAG that, I am concerned, are not always singing from the same hymn sheet. I would draw Members' attention to that section of the report and commend the associated recommendations.

The report contains 25 recommendations. I want first to draw Members' attention to recommendations 3 to 6, which deal primarily with the role of the curriculum and examples of good practice. I believe that those recommendations are sensible and balanced while giving us the flexibility to look to others, particularly the successful Scandinavian

countries, in trying to improve our system. Many good examples of great work were given by a number of contributors, including innovative ideas about introducing primary 7 children to an apprentice-type scheme in school, which is at paragraph 89 of the report, and how personal development portfolios for year 8, 9 and 10 pupils could be integrated into the current curriculum.

I will now turn to issues that Members will clearly recognise from their constituency engagement. Recommendations 7 to 10 talk about overcoming barriers. During the past few years, it has become very evident that there needs to be much more advice and guidance for the very vulnerable in our community. Over the past three or four years in particular, due to changes in circumstances in other areas of government, I have seen a significant increase in the number of people coming through the constituency office who suffer from either a learning disability or some form of mental health issue. Hopefully, through recommendation 8 in particular, the correct mentoring and structures can be put in place so that those people are not lost to the benefit trap. From personal experience, I have no doubt that many of them are readily employable.

Another area that I was personally interested in during the inquiry, in particular when questioning witnesses from the private and business sector, was work experience or, as it turns out, the lack of it. Again, many Members will be aware of local schemes and will have participated with schools in assisting with placements. Work experience should be used in a very meaningful way by introducing students to the work environment. There are currently many flaws in the system, ranging from the limited time that is allowed for work experience to the fact that, in most cases, students must find their own placements. If they are unsuccessful, they could, unfortunately, spend the week with a litter pick and a black bin liner tramping the school grounds. That is the downside.

However, the educationalists gave some good examples, but there were many criticisms, and, according to evidence that those in the private sector gave, much more needs to be done. Much more must also be done in this area with appropriate placements and the allocation of time that is given to work experience. I particularly commend this section of the report and its recommendation to the House.

In closing, and as I stated last week during the debate on higher education, the Assembly and Committees are now producing work that, if

used properly by the Executive, Ministers and across Departments, could help to keep Northern Ireland moving. That is why I fully endorse paragraph 305, which is the concluding paragraph of the report, as it links careers provision to the recommendations that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee made in its report on maximising the creative industries' potential. I support the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion. I thank the Committee staff and the Committee Clerk for all their hard work in putting the report together. I believe that the report's recommendations are extremely important. Careers advice and information is vital for growing the economy as it allows people to take up jobs that are long term and fulfilling. The report, which contains 25 recommendations, looks at the role of careers guidance and at how it can be improved by examining its policies, procedures and practices for the betterment of all individuals and the economy in the North of Ireland.

During the inquiry, the Committee received a number of briefings from organisations that alluded to the skills gap across a range of different sectors. Not only is there a skills gap in practical skills but it is developing right across all areas of employment, including information communication technology, agriculture, retail, hospitality and construction. It is important that we develop education and training facilities that bridge that skills gap, whether that is through more apprenticeships or a change in the way that our schools and colleges react to the skills gaps when they are identified. It has been too easy to maintain the same subjects in higher education colleges that are already flooded with trained personnel, rather than to move to change the curriculum to meet the demand of modern economics. For example, there is an increased demand for STEM qualifications, which is a growth area.

The provision of careers advice and information needs to be integrated and embedded during studying. We need to develop a programme where schools and further education facilities are in harmony with developing industries and prospective investors so that training needs can be identified. In any changing society, there are challenges, but there are also great opportunities.

A paper that was provided to the Committee during its inquiry into careers outlined the mismatch between those leaving school and choosing certain careers and the actual number of jobs that are available in those careers. Our young people need to develop skills that are

relevant to the job opportunities. It has been stated in research papers that young people are not fully aware of the diversity of jobs that are available in the different sectors. Studies have concluded that an information gap exists and that there is a weak understanding of the labour market. There appears to be little awareness of the different routes to success.

Young people pursue educational journeys where they do not find work that is relevant to their qualifications once they leave school. So, how do we encourage young people to go down routes that are not medicine, law and teaching, given that we simply cannot manufacture jobs for all students in those areas?

In a briefing from the National Union of Students and Union of Students in Ireland, one suggested potential change in the delivery of careers advice was the creation of a one-stop shop in which careers advice would be provided in tandem with benefits, local housing and local government services in the same location.

In the evidence delivered to the Committee, it was clear that there needs to be investment in the staff who offer careers advice and guidance. There is also a need for standardisation in both the advice that the service providers give and their qualifications. One young person from the National Union of Students said that the person who advised her on her careers options was her religious education teacher. The point was made that the provision of careers advice and information needs to be professionalised and accurate, as a careers teacher is giving advice to students who are making decisions that will essentially affect them for the rest of their lives.

In a report of evidence from the Schools and Colleges Careers Association here in the North, a number of issues were identified on which teachers could benefit from continuous professional development to support the delivery of careers in schools and colleges; for example, labour market information related to here in the North specifically, upskilling all staff on delivering careers through their subject and a certificate diploma for careers. It was also stated that only some schools employ a careers education coordinator and that very few post-primary schools employ a full-time careers adviser. In fact, in Dungannon in my constituency there are five post-primary schools but we only have one full-time careers adviser.

In conclusion, there are many opportunities within industries, but we do not have the people with the correct skills to fill them, as was highlighted in a recent report. I believe that if

those recommendations are implemented it will allow us to promote the skills needed in order to marry the needs of the economy with the workforce. I commend the report.

Mr Rogers: I rise on behalf of the SDLP to support this issue and to welcome to the Public Gallery the students of Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry, who are at that time in their careers when career choices are very important. I hope that they find something useful in the debate. I also acknowledge the work carried out by the Employment and Learning Committee and staff on this very important issue.

The recommendations arising from the inquiry seek to strengthen, modernise and future-proof the careers education, information and guidance provision in the North. The core message throughout the recommendations is that both the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education should seek to investigate ways of providing consistent careers education, information, advice and guidance services. Those services must help signpost our young people to employment and information about employment.

The recommendation that seeks to encourage young people to get involved in STEM subjects and associated careers is an issue that I am constantly going on about. That will only happen if we adequately meet the needs of the inquiring minds of our young children, so careers education is very important in our primary schools as well. Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely (SMART) targets must accompany that recommendation in any future strategy.

The SDLP strongly believes that careers education services for those with specific learning needs must be broadened, increasing the range of opportunities available to them. Importantly, we must ensure that young people with specific learning needs play as important a role as possible in future employment.

Crucially, the recommendation that careers be added to the curriculum as a compulsory subject future-proofs the spirit of the report. Giving young people a focus on their post-school lives, their opportunities and their ability to plan ahead in terms of required skills for their careers will produce dividends in terms of personal development, business links and, in turn, the economy.

What makes a good careers service? I think it has been alluded to by other people. First, a

highly qualified and motivated careers teacher. We need ongoing professional development for careers teachers. The second point is to create better school/business links, where there are opportunities for teachers to experience the work environment and vice versa. Thirdly, good follow-up support when they go to either further education or higher education. Fourthly, good support from the careers service, and good support for parents as well.

There should be a coordinated approach, especially from the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of trade and industry to ensure that all education providers work closely with the business world to maximise the potential from careers education.

I believe that those recommendations are being brought forward and that work experience must become an integral element of a careers education programme, thus enabling young people to make informed — I emphasise the word "informed" — career choices.

Those best practice models must be used by the Department to successfully integrate those skills and experiences into a wider strategy for careers.

1.15 pm

Equipping young people with access to information and on-line services, such as services in the South of Ireland and Scotland, would enable them to conduct independent research into career paths that they want to follow. It would also provide them with the opportunity to map out any future education at third level.

The branching out of the Department for Employment and Learning, which has a limited input into the provision of services, and its future partnership with the Department of Education in amalgamating services, creating a framework across strategies and ensuring a linked-up service throughout primary and post-primary education for all young people as they leave school and enter the world of work, is a priority. We owe it to young people to provide, via the Careers Service, information, experience and opportunities to grow in a fashion that will be world-leading and beneficial to the wider economy and the individual.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the report. It was my interaction with young people through work experience opportunities that we provide at the Assembly and with the

business sector, as chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust, that led me to believe that careers, education information, advice and guidance in Northern Ireland, although good in parts, was not what it should be. That led me to propose the Committee inquiry in June 2012.

Like other Members, I thank the Committee staff — Cathie, Vincent, Jonathan and Noreen. The inquiry would simply not have been possible without their dedicated work. I thank the young people, schools, colleges, universities, companies and organisations that contributed to the inquiry. The published report contains a significant amount of material, and I hope that all Members and Ministers will give it their close attention.

I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment and Learning followed the inquiry, is here today and is scheduled to undertake a review of careers in 2014. I hope that that is in early 2014. It is a shame that the Minister of Education is not in attendance today. There is no precedent for that, but, given the significance of careers to schools and the central role that schools play, I hope that we see a commitment from the Minister of Education to work closely with the Minister for Employment and Learning in this important area. It is vital that we recognise the hard work of careers professionals, individual teachers and advisers who work tirelessly to help young people and all the community to be work-ready, confident and able to link their learning to employment.

I am glad that the inquiry set out issues to be worked on, most notably the inconsistency of approach across Northern Ireland. That was a key area that motivated me to propose the Committee inquiry after finding that there seemed to be a systemic issue in that, although the Department for Employment and Learning provided a good framework for careers options, schools were under no obligation to use those options, and an inconsistency seemed to have developed.

The Education and Training Inspectorate report of April 2010 found that careers provision was good or better in 91% of voluntary schools, in 76% of maintained schools and in only 62% of controlled schools. The Committee's inquiry also found that only 67% of university students considered themselves to have received formal careers advice at school. We need to address that, and I welcome the fact that a recommendation for a statutory mechanism to ensure a consistently high standard of careers provision across all schools, colleges,

universities and organisations in Northern Ireland has been put forward here today.

The Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education should also consider the Ofsted report evaluating the legal responsibility for securing access to independent and impartial careers guidance. I also welcome the recommendation to place a requirement on schools to inform students at years 10, 11 and 12 about the variety of opportunities for academic and vocational routes. That is a key recommendation in the report. However, as the Committee Chair mentioned, the provision of adequate resources will be absolutely vital in delivering on that statutory responsibility. The Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association made that absolutely clear in the evidence that it submitted to the inquiry.

Some other key recommendations included greater work at years 8, 9 and 10, use of personal development records and reference to good practice in other regions such as Finland, where guidance is a compulsory subject and there are guidelines on the minimum level of service permissible and a web-based service.

In relation to overcoming barriers and financial guidance —

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that there is a real need for improved services for people with a learning disability?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I absolutely agree with the Member. The Committee report states clearly that support for people with learning difficulties through improved access to careers guidance is a key aim.

I highlight the evidence given by Dr Hughes from Warwick University, who made some positive comments. She said that she has been able to point proudly to Northern Ireland, where there is some good practice and innovation. Indeed, she stated that there are not many countries where the Minister for Employment and Learning would sit in on a workshop for careers advisers that looked at labour market intelligence. It should go on record that some strong work has been done in that area.

In its recommendation on enhanced exposure to STEM through business and

entrepreneurship, the Committee report recognised the work of Sentinus, the Northern Ireland Science Park and, indeed, Young Enterprise in advancing that area of work.

I welcome the recommendations for a careers website, improved engagement with parents and, indeed, for increased qualifications for and numbers of careers staff.

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

Mr Lyttle: I think that this is an absolutely essential area for individual and economic development in Northern Ireland. It is also essential that we commend the report to the House and that we work to action its recommendations.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I speak as the Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure (CAL) Committee on the motion proposed by the Chair of the Employment and Learning Committee. I congratulate that Committee on its report and urge Members to read it if they have not had the opportunity to do so. I thank the Employment and Learning Committee for its endorsement of my Committee's recommendations on this issue in its creative industries report. It is very flattering that that endorsement comes at the end of the Employment and Learning Committee report. That is a case, perhaps, of leaving the best till last.

On a serious note, it is important that people on the streets of Northern Ireland see that there is joined-up thinking between Committees. It is reassuring that Mr Swann remembers his time on the CAL Committee. Mr Hilditch has sat on both Committees for quite some time. I would like to highlight the common ground between the two Committees with respect to careers advice.

The report's first recommendation is about providing a consistent approach to careers advice and guidance across the education sector. We all know that that is not the case currently. The Careers Service has to be invited into schools. That means that our children are not all receiving the same advice and that we cannot properly measure the standard of the advice that they receive. Consistency is imperative.

The report's third recommendation is that careers should be a compulsory subject. Again, that echoes recommendation 1 in that all

our children should receive consistent advice, which should be measurable. Mainstreaming careers advice and guidance into the curriculum is a very effective way of doing that. Recommendations 1 and 3 are entirely consistent with the thrust of the recommendations of the CAL Committee's creative industries inquiry.

Recommendation 9 is about providing schemes to ensure that those with learning difficulties are given access to work experience, which is an issue that Mr McCarthy raised. That chimes with the CAL Committee's recommendation that vulnerable young people and adults and those with disabilities and/or special needs be provided with opportunities to develop appropriate skills to engage in, for example, creative enterprises and/or social enterprises.

The Employment and Learning Committee has recommended a number of things around the promotion of careers in the STEM subjects, and I would add the arts to that, turning STEM into STEAM. The CAL Committee believes that arts subjects are inseparable from and underpin the STEM subjects.

Recommendations 15, 16 and 17 discuss the idea of specialist careers advice and guidance portals where information can be easily accessed by young people and their parents. That mirrors the CAL Committee's recommendation for a creative industries portal and its recommendation in its recent child protection investigation for a protection and safeguarding portal. Our young people live their life online these days, and these portals are a good way to provide them with information in a way that they are more likely to engage with. Apart from anything else, it is the easiest way to disseminate and update information as quickly as possible.

The CAL Committee agrees with the idea of engaging with business, as set out in recommendations 18, 19, 20 and 21 of the report, which closely mirror a number of its own recommendations from the creative industries inquiry. It is vital that the careers advice and guidance that we give illustrates vocational and work-based routes to achieving career goals. Professional advice on career pathways should be available to school pupils as early as possible and particularly at points when choosing subjects for GCSEs and A levels and, of course, courses in FE and HE, when those choices are also being made. The further and higher education sectors must build links with industry for student placements and project-based learning to provide the foundation for

young people to understand the skills needed for work generally and for specific careers.

I could elaborate at length on the common ground between the CAL Committee's recommendations from its creative industries inquiry report and —

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

Miss M McIlveen: — the Employment and Learning Committee's recommendations in this report. However, I will bring my comments to a close by supporting the motion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. This inquiry was a learning curve for me, and listening to the wide range of representations that we received and reading the many submissions led me to realise that, whilst a great deal of work is being done by many people, there seems to be a lack of a coordinated approach on this most important issue. We were trying to work out, on the basis of the information supplied, how this fitted into the wider issue of economic development across the North. During the process, we listened to industry, which informed us that it faced serious skills shortages that were jeopardising future growth. We were also concerned that thousands of young people were leaving school with no prospect of employment and were not getting the advice that they needed to make an informed decision on careers. It seemed that, for many, the system did not work.

During the many study visits, the Committee visited universities and colleges to learn at first hand what good careers advice was on offer, and many individuals and organisations came to our Committee. I thank them for their presentations, which gave me an insight into the world of careers advice. I realised that, whilst we focus on the problems in careers education, information, advice and guidance, many teachers and advisers step up to the mark and offer tireless work and advice. However, time and again, we heard from a wide range of organisations involved in the delivery of CEIAG, many of which were being resourced by government, and they offered conflicting information. There were also many concerns raised at Committee about the disjointed approach to careers advice. In many ways, we are failing our young people.

We are continuously informed about the thousands of young people who leave school

without qualifications and have little prospect of getting a job. That is an indictment of a system that resources many organisations to deliver a service and has no way of checking the outcomes of their interventions. I also believe that some of the organisations that are resourced to deliver careers advice to schools do it by postcode. Young people in areas of deprivation across our divide are left behind and can be found in the large number of people who fit into the NEETs category. Time and again, people spoke of the need for CEIAG to tie into the labour market intelligence. In fact, the CBI said that there was evidence that suggested that careers advice and guidance was not delivering results. It pointed to an education and skills survey carried out in 2012 that found that only 4% of responding employers thought that the present careers advice was good enough, with 72% saying that the advice must improve. The CBI also advocated a unified approach across DEL's Careers Service and school, FE and HE careers offices to ensure that young people receive high-quality and impartial advice that will ultimately deliver successful job outcomes.

1.30 pm

During one presentation, a scientist said that the best time to encourage people on a career choice is at primary school. He spoke of the enthusiasm of young children when he delivered his presentation in schools but went on to say that, after his visits, teachers would guide young ears to other life choices. The CCEA pointed out that intervention should happen as early as possible. Although it is not specified in the curriculum, it is important that children learn about the world of work. The need to teach STEM subjects at an early age seems to me to be logical, but there seems to be a lack of specialist teachers to deliver those subjects. A number of people went further and said that, in many schools, senior management, head teachers and boards of governors direct schools on the importance or otherwise of careers advice. The GEMS submission stated that CEIAG should be introduced at primary years 6 and 7, with taster days, field trips and employer visits as a way to introduce primary schools to the world of work.

NISCA spoke about barriers to CEIAG staff accessing training and continuous professional development. It went on to say that experienced and qualified careers teachers have been made redundant and are being replaced with teachers with no qualifications and little or no training in the job. Paragraph 54 states that only some schools employ a CEIAG

coordinator and that very few post-primary schools employ a full-time —

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

Mr F McCann: — careers adviser. As my colleague said, there are only two full-time careers teachers in Belfast. I support the recommendations, and I believe that a more coordinated and joined-up approach to careers is needed.

Mr Ross: As has been indicated, the report is of great interest not only to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Education Committee but to the CAL Committee, the ETI Committee and Members from other Committees across the House. Of course, the report is valid and useful only if the recommendations are implemented, which is what we want to happen. We want Ministers to get their heads together and implement the recommendations to make a real difference.

In many ways, today's debate dovetails pretty well with the event that we held at the Assembly last week, when the universities got together in a showcase event in the Long Gallery and highlighted the work that they are involved in and the impact that it has in terms of work with local businesses, which will then compete internationally in an evolving jobs market. Interestingly, we heard last week from the universities and others that the majority of young people currently going through education will be employed in jobs that have not yet been invented. It is hard to get our heads around that, but it highlights the fact that the jobs market is changing and we need to ensure that young people are equipped for that market.

We have heard Members talk about the importance of STEM subjects and ICT, and that was reinforced in Brussels a fortnight ago at the European Employment Forum. There will be a massive shortfall in graduates in ICT skills right across Europe in years to come. We have to pay close attention to that in Northern Ireland to ensure that, if there is an opportunity to get young people trained in those ICT skills, we could capitalise on that in our economy in the future.

Mr McCann talked about the number of NEETs across Northern Ireland, and all of us are concerned about that. However, the juxtaposition is that, for young people, there have never been more opportunities to get jobs in big companies in Northern Ireland. Over the past decade, we have been able to attract

multinational companies, including the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the New York Stock Exchange and Citigroup. Even this morning, BT announced an additional 165 jobs. The graduate opportunities that we did not previously have in Northern Ireland are now coming here. We should be optimistic about that, and, hopefully, young people will be equally optimistic, particularly when our Ministers are working hard overseas to attract —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will, of course.

Mr F McCann: In one presentation, a major company said that, although it provides 50 apprenticeships a year, it received 1,300 applications. When it broke the figures down, it found that it could bring through only just over 100, which tells us that there is a serious problem. A lot of it rests with the NEET category.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Ross: Not for one second would I say that there is not a problem; I absolutely acknowledge that. However, I also want to be positive about the fact that we have more opportunities for young people now, and, if we continue to go along our current path of attracting those big companies to Northern Ireland, those opportunities will exist in the future. As I said in the debate last week, if the Executive manage to convince Treasury to devolve corporation tax powers and we are able to lower the rate, those big graduate jobs will come to Northern Ireland. We need to make sure that we are prepared for that.

The careers guidance that young people get has been talked about before. During the inquiry, many of us thought back to our experience — some of us did not have to think back quite as far as others. Many of us made the point that careers guidance, particularly in some grammar schools, tended to be about getting a university prospectus, reading it for half an hour a week and deciding on a university and course. The emphasis was very much on qualifications as opposed to careers. I think that there was universal agreement that the focus needs to shift to making sure that young people think seriously about what they want to do, what qualifications they need and what subjects they need to study to give them the option to do that when older.

Members have talked about the fascination with producing teachers, lawyers and doctors. Many parents in Northern Ireland genuinely believe that, if their children get the qualifications for those positions, they will be fine. Of course, as we have seen and as has been mentioned on the Floor of the House many times, we have an abundance of young, qualified teachers who just cannot get work. It is the same for young lawyers: they are qualified and ready to go, but the jobs are not there. The job market is shifting, and we need to ensure that young people and, indeed, parents get and understand the message that they have to bear that in mind.

I turn now to some of the specific recommendations in the report. I hope that all Members, even if not contributing to the debate today, will take the time to read through at least the recommendations, which I think are useful for some of the work that we do here. The report talks very much about collaboration between Departments. The message of collaboration is so important in all that we do, particularly on the economy.

Recommendation 3 is to make careers a compulsory subject. We heard companies and people from industry talk about the importance of that, not just for getting young people to study for the right qualifications but for developing the soft skills that are often required in our economy. That is very important.

Recommendation 19 fits in with what Mr McCann said about apprenticeships. I think that the Minister deserves some credit for the work that he and his Department are doing to make apprenticeships more useful to young people. The recommendation is very important and relates to building on the engagement between schools and businesses and getting a more consistent approach to promoting and organising work placements for students.

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

Mr Ross: That is absolutely key. I hope not only that business welcomes the report but that Ministers will take the actions that are recommended.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the chance to speak on the report, especially from the point of view of the Education Committee. It is great to see Departments and, particularly, Committees working together. I hope that we will see more of that in the future, particularly if we take the

point made earlier that we should avoid duplicating the work of Departments.

I congratulate the Committee. I had not realised that there were 8,400 responses. I know that we saw many, so "Well done" on pulling it all together and coming up with such very good and thorough recommendations. However, as others said, we need to see actions, targets and timelines in the recommendations. It falls on the Ministers to come up with targets and timelines so that we can see that this really will happen and the report does not end up just sitting on the shelf.

We have been through many of the recommendations today, and I will not go into them in great detail. However, on my visits to schools, with my education hat on, I have not seen a great deal of really good, thorough, consistent advice on careers. In my day — someone pointed at me earlier, and I probably am the oldest in here, although there might be one or two older — there were jobs all over the place for everybody, and you did not really have to think about it. However, so much is changing, and I am intrigued by the point that some of the jobs for those who are learning today have not even been created.

The world is global. Technology is global. We must remember that. We do not want to limit the horizons of our students in Northern Ireland. We should look at this from a global point of view. It is not just Northern Ireland. It is not just Scotland and Ireland and the UK. It is Europe. It is the whole world, and we have to find our place there.

In the late 1980s, I worked at Short Brothers. When you went to the Paris air show or the Farnborough air show, you saw that every company had banks of televisions showing how great their company was, what the work was and what they did. Add to that the podcasts that companies do today, and we should take up the idea of a portal. We should be trying to build a large web bank — a portal, if we want to call it that — where you can explore every angle of a skill or a subject to work out what you want to do so that the choice is not just lawyer or doctor. If you are good at art, you should be able to look at all the things that you could decorate. You should look at all the different types of architecture. You should look at all the different types of design and be able to explore, on your computer, the films and podcasts of what companies do. If it is aerospace, you will get down to looking at the design of the inside of an aircraft or the design of the leaflets that are put out to sell the aircraft. A student should be able to explore on the web — at home, or

anywhere else — where he wants to go. It could be an enormous database. We should put resources into that while remembering that it needs to be worldwide.

We must also not forget the soft skills. They have been mentioned once but with none of the detail. Someone leaving school should be well disposed and generous-minded. They should be well rounded as an individual but ready to go out into the world. They should come out of school having learnt the proper morals and values of life. There are a lot of other skills that go with it. They should know how to behave in a crisis, when things go wrong in a business or at home and how to help other people. They should know how to be trustworthy and how to take criticism rationally. They should have a conscience. They should have a sense of humour. They should have moral and physical courage and, of course, good manners. All of that needs to be worked into the skills that we are trying to encourage our children to have.

We must, at all times, ensure that we have a good link with business. There is only one page on the CBI recommendations on what it wants to see in students. They want people to be good at problem solving and self-management and to turn up on time. All that needs to be worked into careers. There is so much that we, as an Assembly, can do, and that is what we should concentrate on. It is a very good report, but there is much to be done. I support the motion.

Mr B McCrea: I rise as an independent, but I started this report as Chair of the Committee. I am really interested to see its conclusions. There is no need to rehash many of the points that have been made — it is probably the way of these things that everybody stands up and says what a very good report it is — so I will offer a number of observations that may form the basis of further work.

The first, which a number of Members have mentioned, is that employers tell us quite often that there are not enough skilled people out there for them. We also have young people saying that they cannot get a job. So, there is obviously some imbalance in the market that needs to be rectified. You could probably split the market into those who have skills that are in short supply and those who have no skills and for whom we need to do more.

When I look at the skills section of the market, what worries me is that we produce an awful lot of graduates with degrees that are not directly applicable to getting a job. It is entirely up to people what degree they take — it is a free

world — but there is a mismatch between their skills and those that employers are looking for. Universities and further education colleges have a clear responsibility. They are independent bodies. They say that they respond to demand, but they respond to the demand from students. They need to make sure that they respond to the demand from industry to encourage the right numbers into the right degrees.

1.45 pm

If you look at people such as transmission engineers, who are fairly specialised, you see that we also have a problem. Everybody here talks about the need to spend up to £1 billion on redoing our grid; yet, the truth of the matter is that we have no transmission engineers. Even if we had, they would be headhunted and taken to other parts of Europe where there are also problems with transmission. That shows part of the problem that we, as a society, have in getting sufficient resources for our industry and ensuring that they stay in Northern Ireland.

I will move to those who are less fortunate in their skills. In another place, we have been hearing that 25% of people in Northern Ireland live on less than a living wage, which is the highest percentage in the United Kingdom. That seems to pose a problem. Part of the decision-making on that is whether young people in those areas are actually work-ready. Many of them do not understand the tribulations of the world of work. It is not enough to give them work experience where they go in and make the tea or sit around and look at things; we need more intensive mentoring. We really need to give help and succour on a more one-to-one basis to the people who need it.

Now that I am on skills, I will say that there seems to be an issue — I think that Mr Ross brought this up — about the propensity to chase qualifications rather than the skills that people are prepared to pay you for. So, people want to get a 2:1; they do not care what that 2:1 is in, it is just about getting a 2:1. It is as though a piece of paper will somehow give them the rationale for being employed. That is not actually the case. We need to get people more interested in obtaining the skills that the labour market will pay them for.

I will come now to parents. I know that this has been talked about in the report and in the recommendations. I think that it is not understood in many sections of our community — I see that the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has left; I swapped Committees with Mr Swann, so I have seen

both sides as well — that the creative industries are one of our big growth industries, yet nobody actually knows how to get into them. We also have an issue regarding IT professionals. People keep saying that, if we could solve that problem, we could solve everything. So, there is something about how we convince parents that this is where the creative industries are.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way to Mr Ross.

Mr Ross: I listened to what the Member said about the need for things such as mentoring, and I absolutely agree with him. Does he agree that what we want to see and encourage is people becoming role models for young people in some of the industries that we maybe do not know enough about? A positive role model image will encourage young people to get into those areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I absolutely agree with Mr Ross. In fact, those were some of the points that I was going to close with. I am with him 100% that we need role models and to find ways to get information to people. With regard to areas that we might look at in the future, we did not include in the recommendations, as far as I can see, business and entrepreneurial activity. That will be a factor in the future.

Coming to the point that Mr Ross raised about how to get information across to people and what influences decision-making, you probably have parents, peers, teachers and TV at the moment. We talked about how we can encourage parents to know more. There is an issue, in that our teachers tend not to know about things in IT and can recommend only what they know about. You get to an issue such as television, and I wonder whether maybe we, as a society or as an Executive, need to start to communicate where our growth sectors are. That, at least, gets the message out. I am struck by the fact that there is an overabundance of lawyers and probably teachers and that we perhaps need to let people know that that is the case.

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

Mr B McCrea: I will conclude by congratulating the Committee for all its hard work, and I hope that the Minister will take note of its recommendations.

Mr Douglas: I support the motion. As the Member said, there is an abundance of schoolteachers and others. I am sure that the Member will agree that there is also an overabundance of politicians in Stormont.

I thank the Minister for attending today. I also thank a number of people, including Cathie from the Employment and Learning Committee and her team. For me, this has been a good experience in what has been my first inquiry. It has been good, because it has been a good model. We visited a number of universities and businesses and spoke to a range of people. It is good to see so many young people in the Public Gallery. When I was their age, careers advice for me was about my father saying, "Get a job. Get into the shipyard". I had two ambitions in life: to play for Linfield and to play for Northern Ireland. I still have those ambitions.

I want to quote from the recommendations. The first thing, to start off in a very positive manner, is to say that there is much to praise the careers education, information, advice and guidance project for. There are also individual teachers, advisers and parents who work tirelessly to promote and foster the aspirations and prospects of many of our young people. Many of those young people are looking to their next exams and want that advice or steer in life.

As was said earlier, if you went around the Chamber today, I am sure you would find that most people have probably changed their career along the way. The way that things are changing in the global economy, I think that it will also be like that in the future; you will not just set out in one area. It is important that we get that education and that passport for life.

We can carry out inquiries and reviews and talk about all the things that need to be done. However, as my colleague Alastair Ross said — he did not say it in these terms — doing it is doing it. There is a need for action. For me, that action is about the areas where concerns have been raised by the 8,000 people who came to us: things like poor careers provision, inconsistency in careers provision across Northern Ireland, a lack of information and the information that is available being difficult to digest. Surely in this day and age of communication, when we have so many new models of communication, that should not be at the top of our agenda. Yet it is in some of our recommendations. The suggestion is that schools and colleges, to protect their enrolments, do not advise students of the full range of available options. There certainly is a lack of a coordinated approach.

I attended the recent European Employment Forum. The Minister was also there, and I want to pay tribute to him for an excellent speech and his questions and answers. It showed clearly that careers advice and employment for young people is the biggest problem facing Europe. In Northern Ireland, I think that nearly one in four young people between 18 and 24 find it hard to get a job. In Spain and Greece, I think that it is over 50%. We need that action. It is not just about talk: doing it is doing it. It was also clear from the forum that Northern Ireland is well ahead of the pack. We have to celebrate what we are doing as an Assembly and in DEL. If we are to alleviate the situation —

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

Mr Douglas: — we need action. One of the actions is about apprenticeships. The Minister came to the Committee recently and talked about apprenticeships, and I support them. I support the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. I welcome the fact that the debate is taking place and that the Committee undertook such a lengthy and detailed inquiry. I was particularly impressed by the responses that came in from young people who were in the process of going through careers advice or had recently done so. Getting almost 8,500 responses to a survey is testament to the efforts that were put in by the Committee staff, and I thank them sincerely for all their efforts. I would also like to put on record the Committee's thanks to those who provided evidence: the 41 organisations that provided written evidence and the 28 people who gave us oral evidence.

This started on 4 July 2012, when Basil was in the Chair, and I do not think any of us thought that it would have gone on so long and that it would be nearly Christmas 2013 by the time we got a report published, printed and up for debate, but this is where we are.

A lot of useful time was spent hearing what people thought about careers. One of the things that most members did during the inquiry was reflect their or their children's experience of careers advice. My experience of careers advice was very mixed. As many reflected, you were handed a prospectus and told to go into a room for half an hour to find the university course that you wanted to do, as opposed to exploring possible career options and where

there were opportunities for employment in the labour market. That is the one thing that needs to change in the provision of careers advice and guidance: it needs to be more tailored than simply saying, "Here is a prospectus. Where are you going to university?"

One of the points that Basil McCrea raised was about the opportunities in the creative industries sector. When he was the Chair of the Committee, he led its members on a visit to the South West College in Enniskillen to see some of the things going on there in terms of the creative industries and media. The opportunities in that sector are immense, but one of the problems that we face is that too many of the programmes that we watch are not made here. There are significant opportunities for improvements there if we can get the right skills into our young people. How regional colleges work with schools, particularly grammar schools, is important. There are students from a grammar school from my constituency in the Gallery, and I welcome them here for this important debate.

I am hopeful that the large number of recommendations in the report for both the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education will be accepted in good faith and that the Departments will see that there is a logical rationale for each of them and will embrace and deliver them.

Throughout the 18-month inquiry, we were presented with an awful lot of problems that exist in the provision of careers guidance and advice. This report will not solve them all, but, hopefully, it has helped to raise awareness of the problems that exist and presents solutions for them.

Too many people, when they receive careers advice, are not encouraged to follow a path that would lead to employment. My concern is that far too many schools simply worry about getting good A-level or GCSE grades for a student and getting them on to the next place, whether that is university or somewhere that delivers post-16 education. Not enough consideration is given to the potential implications of careers advice to a young person's chance of finding work. That is the change needed in our culture. We need to start from a very young age. That does not just apply within our schools; it applies to wider society.

One of the other opportunities that exists is around greater information for schools and for young people in the North about some of the courses that are provided in the South. Too many issues remain in terms of portability, but

there is a fantastic array of courses on offer in the South that many people in the North do not know anything about. The fact that there is such a glaring difference between how UCAS and the Central Applications Office (CAO) operate is very frustrating, and that is an issue that needs to be resolved.

In an around the whole issue of careers advice and getting experience, one of the things that could be sorted out is where young people get work experience. An awful lot of schools offer three days or a week of work experience, but an awful lot more could be done to get young people into sectors that enthuse them and that there are opportunities in. When I was in sixth year, I went to a local accountancy firm. That was useful for me, because it made me realise that I never wanted to be an accountant. If somebody can get something useful like that from work experience, that is very good.

I also put on record to the Minister my disappointment that my last-minute recommendation was not accepted. I am sure he got wind of what my last-minute recommendation was: namely, that his Department should be abolished. Unfortunately, everybody thought I was joking. The Minister knows where I stand on that. The sooner I can come off the Employment and Learning Committee, the better.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. As Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm, I suggest that we take our ease for a few moments. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mervyn Storey.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we move to Question Time, I want to inform the House that a valid petition of concern was presented today in relation to the motion on the transfer of broadcasting powers and the amendment to the motion. Under Standing Order 28, the votes cannot be held until at least one day after the petition has been presented. The votes, therefore, will be scheduled as the first item of business tomorrow morning. I remind Members that both votes will be on a cross-community basis.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

Lough Neagh Working Group

1. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what are the reasons for the delay in publishing the findings of the Lough Neagh working group. (AQO 5074/11-15)

4. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the inter-departmental working group created to consider the future ownership of Lough Neagh. (AQO 5077/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 4 together. The interdepartmental working group was tasked with producing a report on the potential for bringing Lough Neagh into public ownership. In December last year, I shared the report with ministerial colleagues whose officials had contributed to it through membership of the working group. Since then, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has been considering the value of additional research to complement the findings of the report. Members will recall that, during the Assembly debate, many issues other than public ownership were raised. I intend to meet Minister Ní Chuilín shortly to discuss the findings of that work and assess the next steps, including putting recommendations to the Executive as soon as possible.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister tell me why she has had this on her lap for a year now? When will she publish the findings of the report? Is it the case that she does not like what is in the report? Is that the reason why it is still on her lap?

Mrs O'Neill: It is fair to say that my sole focus throughout all this work has been on unlocking the potential of Lough Neagh. I did that work on the back of the debate that we had in the House. I established a working group, which got together and looked at all the potential issues. Further to that, the Department of

Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) also started some work, which will enhance my Department's work. It engaged consultants to look at the potential of the lough. The two pieces of work will complement each other.

I have read with interest the Member's comments in the media, and I think that there is a certain wee bit of paranoia there. As I have said, my sole focus is on unlocking the potential of the lough, and many issues are being discussed as part of moving that forward. You will be aware from the debate that we talked about the need for navigation control and an overarching management structure. We have the fisheries; we have the tourism potential. There are so many issues, and it is important that we get it right. I recently received the DCAL report, and I am working my way through that. I intend to meet Minister Ní Chuilín and then bring our report to the Executive as soon as possible.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am told that, last year, there was a meeting about tourism, looking at fishing at Lough Neagh, which came back with a report that there are no fish. Maybe we should be concentrating on getting the fish back. Will she put all her efforts into using the partnerships that she has built up so that we have the fish, we have fishing, and we can bring money in through tourism?

Mrs O'Neill: There is massive tourism potential for the lough. That is why this is an exciting piece of work and it is a good time to be taking it forward. As I have said, there are many competing interests on the lough, as you will be very aware. Fishing is one of them. We need to continue to support the fishing industry to be able to fish on the lough. We have an amazing natural resource, and I think that there is a need for an overarching management strategy to look at all those competing interests and make sure that we grow the potential of the lough in a very balanced way.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. When does the Minister envisage the report being shared with the Executive?

Mrs O'Neill: Now that I have received the DCAL report and I can marry the two pieces of work, I anticipate that I will bring a finalised report for the Executive to consider in the early part of next year. There are so many competing interests and different Departments with responsibilities for different areas on the lough, so we need to have an Executive

discussion on the way forward. It will be early 2014.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The Minister will be aware of the concerns around the water quality of the lough and a recent report from Queen's University about the deteriorating nature of food for particular migrant birds. So, there is particular pressure to get this right. Can the Minister tell us what action she has taken to improve the water quality? I know that it is a Department of the Environment (DOE) responsibility, but what is she doing on the rivers management side of it, considering what the report is suggesting at this stage?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said earlier, there are so many competing interests on the lough. That is why it is important that we have the management structure in place that can marry all the different responsibilities of the Departments. As you said, DOE has responsibility for the water quality. The piece of work that I have been engaged in has been looking at the whole picture and trying to bring forward recommendations, which, as I said, I will bring to the Executive in the early part of next year. In moving forward and looking at any sort of strategy for the lough, water quality is a key area that we need to be concerned with.

As we move forward and look at plans for the future, I am happy to work with all the Departments. I think that we need to bring all this together, and now is an opportune time to do it with this piece of work. It is important that we do not rush it and that we look at all the factors. That is certainly what I have done over the past number of months.

Farmers: Literacy

2. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any efforts she is making to tackle the issue of literacy amongst farmers in dealing with her Department. (AQO 5075/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware that the level of literacy or learning can cause some members of the rural community to encounter difficulties when completing various departmental forms. Many of my Department's interactions with its customers involve the completion of such forms for the various schemes and grants that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) administers. While staff in local offices can help to explain those requirements and the information needed, they

are unable to provide a level of assistance that would amount to filling out a form on a customer's behalf.

A farmer who requests more specific help with completing an application form is advised by staff that they can appoint an agent, for example, a relative, friend or neighbour to fulfil a range of functions on their behalf. That can include the filling out of application forms, provided that the Department has been notified of that arrangement. Staff will also advise that organisations such as the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), NIAPA and the Agricultural Consultants Association can provide assistance. There is a cost implication for farmers availing themselves of those services, through membership fees or when employing an authorised agent or form filler who charges for that service.

Ms Fearon: I thank the Minister for her answer. She referred to a number of options that are available to farmers. Is there anything else that can be offered if they do not want to go down that route? Do you think there is a role for the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL)?

Mrs O'Neill: I asked my officials to identify an organisation that could provide more direct support for those who decide not to avail themselves of the options that I outlined. Given its remit, the Rural Support charity is well placed to deal with instances where rural dwellers are experiencing anxiety and difficulties when they are completing their forms. That organisation receives annual DARD funding through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation programme. My Department provides literature on its services in the local office network. Should farmers require assistance with form-filling, but do not want to appoint an agent, avail themselves of support from some of the farming unions, or even use a form filler, staff in the local offices will advise that Rural Support can also provide assistance to those with learning or literacy issues. Appropriate guidance for staff will be put in place to ensure that literacy issues are handled with the utmost sensitivity.

Yes, I have contacted DEL, and it has agreed that I will signpost its essential skills programme across the local office network. That will include the provision of leaflets and general promotion at front office reception areas. I have also asked my officials to investigate whether more could be done to address underlying literacy issues and numeracy rates amongst the rural community. That will be taken forward as

part of the wider Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation framework.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for her answers so far. What IT training is available for farmers who want to do their application for the single farm payment online? Is there particular help for the farmer union groups or the young farmers' groups?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, we want to be in a position where more and more people are submitting their applications online. That is something that I very much encourage. For those who do not have access to a computer, we have entered into pilot projects with local libraries so that people have access to a computer and the internet. Farmers can also call into DARD Direct offices where staff will take them through the process. A computer is available there also.

There are a number of priorities, particularly in trying to get more people online. We have to make sure that the services are available and that people are trained up. A number of courses are being taken forward, such as the BT Connected Communities project. So, there is a range of areas moving forward. As I said, my priority is to try to encourage as many people as possible to apply online, because it will speed up payments in the whole system. From doing that, there is something to be gained for everybody.

Mrs Overend: My question is quite similar to that asked by my colleague. Will the Minister outline whether literacy is taken into account with online applications, and does that need to be improved on?

Mrs O'Neill: When I was asked to talk to departmental officials, I was concerned about potential problems, and literacy and numeracy issues in rural communities may not be readily identifiable. I asked officials to go away and take a fresh look at the support that we provide, because I want to make sure that we are open, accessible and do not present barriers to anybody being able to apply online or to avail themselves of any of our services. I am very pleased that Rural Support will be getting involved in physically helping people with their applications, which can be stressful. When it comes to filling out a single farm payment application, it is a person's income support. It is essential and can stress you out very much if you feel incapable of dealing with it. So I am delighted that Rural Support will be working with DARD, and I hope that that will enhance the service that we provide.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister referred to her conversation with DEL. Will she outline whether she has had any conversations with the Department of Education to ensure that young farmers do not come out of the system with literacy problems? We talk about joined-up government, so could she use that to ensure that organisations, and information and help in the education sector, are promoted more fully in farming?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely and totally agree with that, and I have had discussions with the Education Minister, John O'Dowd, on what we can do. I also visited schools, particularly in rural areas, where there is a lot of focus on farming issues. That work has been great, so I am and always will be happy to work across Departments to make sure that the most effective services are in place. That includes working with the Education Department and the Employment and Learning Department, because I believe that we need to address issues around literacy seriously to give people the confidence and support to avail themselves of the services that they need.

Renewables: Funding

3. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the small-scale renewable generation projects that have been successful in qualifying for funding under farm diversification through axis 3 of the rural development programme. (AQO 5076/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: So far, axis 3 of the rural development programme has offered grant assistance to 62 farm businesses to the value of £2.6 million under measure 3.1 of farm diversification to install renewable technologies. Seventy-six farm businesses received just over £274,000 for the completion of feasibility studies. Funding awarded by the joint council committees (JCCs) across the North is for the introduction of small-scale renewable generation projects for farmers to diversify to become energy producers. The projects funded will supplement farm incomes, and, as an added benefit, the energy created in the process is reducing the carbon footprint.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. She knows that I have been in contact with her Department on numerous occasions about this issue. How does she propose to help applicants who have been successful in axis 3 in receiving their money but are unable to get a conditional letter of offer from NIE to get connected to the grid, so a

conditional letter of offer is not sufficient for the release of axis 3 money? Will she provide some flexibility to allow that money to be released?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is right in that he has been corresponding with me on the issue. He is aware that it is the responsibility of individuals to obtain their grid connection. NIE is now providing customers with a connection offer that is conditional on work that is required to provide for the export of the proposed generation into the distribution network. Officials have been informed by NIE that upgrading the line in the areas that are most affected may be some way off at this time. It is a matter for the JCCs as to whether they wish to accept that as a conditional letter of offer.

It is fair to say that JCCs are under pressure as they come to the end of the programme, so when they make a decision on whether to accept an application, they have to take the time frame into account to make sure that they are spending out on that measure. There is no barrier to JCCs accepting it. They can accept a conditional letter of offer if they believe that the project will be completed within the timescale.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that this is a growing problem for many farmers who have planning permission to build either one turbine or an anaerobic digester? What can she do, in conjunction with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and EirGrid, to try to resolve this situation?

2.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that the Commission specified that a farm business that is diversifying into the sale of renewable energy could be supported only if it sells off 100% of the energy and does not use it to supplement its income or offset its running costs. That is an EU requirement, so there is no room for movement.

Looking towards the new rural development programme, however, I think that there will be the potential to change things, albeit that we still have to work under the Commission's rules. The new programme will be an opportunity to take another, fresh look at that. We are looking at that as we analyse the responses to the rural development programme consultation, which closed recently.

Mr Elliott: I assume that a number of the small-scale renewable energy projects are wind turbines. Does she support their development?

Mrs O'Neill: Projects have to be taken on a case-by-case basis. The Member will be aware that I am exploring the potential for wind farm development on Forest Service land. In moving forward, we need to be very careful that we are always mindful of some very good practical examples of how the wider community can benefit from a wind turbine in the area. I take a case-by-case approach. I am exploring the potential of Forest Service land to provide income for the Executive. As I said, I am very much a supporter of there being added benefits for local communities built into that.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has already been answered.

Going for Growth

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when her Department will outline a timetable for an implementation plan relating to the outcomes of the agrifood strategy report: Going for Growth. (AQO 5078/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Going for Growth was developed by the Agri-Food Strategy Board as part of the Executive's Programme for Government. The report identifies opportunities for sustainable growth and targets increased employment, sales and exports.

The report contains over 100 recommendations, with responsibility falling to many Departments and associated agencies, as well as the industry itself. We are in the final stages of consideration of these wide-ranging recommendations to identify the best way to take them forward. As part of that process, we have been considering actions to deliver the aims and objectives of Going for Growth, timescales for delivery and potential funding sources.

The Agri-Food Strategy Board has continued to meet in recent months and is working with other industry bodies, my officials and those of my Executive colleagues to push forward the industry-led recommendations from the report. We hope to be in a position to announce the way forward in response to the board's report in the very near future.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she would forgive me for suggesting that, very often, good reports end up as dust collectors. Can she assure me that this report will not become a dust collector? Is she satisfied that she has the finance available to implement it?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that I am absolutely committed to ensuring that we see the recommendations through. The report is a fantastic piece of work, which was done through Government and industry partnership, and I very much want it to come to fruition. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I are working our way through it, and we hope to be able to bring a report to the Executive this side of Christmas, which will outline our way forward. Recently, last week or the week before, we had confirmation of our rural development funding from Europe. That is a tool that I will use to help to deliver on a number of the recommendations, and it helps to enable us to put together a better picture of the financial approach. One of the report's asks is for a £400 million investment from the Executive. That will leverage in £1.3 billion from industry, which is a massive gain, so we do not want to miss out on that opportunity. We will continue to work with the industry. As I have always said, these things are doable.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. The Minister has touched on finances. Will she outline how this will be funded?

Mrs O'Neill: As I have just said, one of the report's asks is for £400 million of investment from the Executive, which will leverage in £1.3 billion from industry. That would be an amazing achievement. Recently, we have had confirmation of the rural development programme funding. We are working our way through the recommendations and how we might take them forward. As I said, the rural development programme will be an essential tool in driving that forward. I have taken the opportunity to shape the rural development programme along the lines of some of the key asks in the report. As I said, that is the tool that we will use. We have some decisions to make on the way forward. I welcome the fact that, in the recent Executive reallocation of capital moneys, we were able to secure some of that funding, which will be used for Going for Growth. We are working our way through all that at the moment and I hope to have a report with the Executive in the next number of weeks.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware that there is a shortage of food technologists and so on. What is she doing in her Department or with other Departments to ensure that there are more food biologists etc to carry out the agrifood strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: The work of the Agri-Food Strategy Board had 10 subsectors, and

workforce planning was one of the key areas that it examined, looking to where there might be a skills gap in the future. We are actively working with DEL to take that forward. The Member will be aware that our agriculture colleges are oversubscribed, for everything from farming and food right through the whole range of courses. That is the beauty of the agrifood industry, because employment in the industry is very wide-ranging. There is everything from on-farm jobs through to food packaging; it is all there. Obviously, we need a workforce that is able to meet the industry's challenges. That is a key part of the strategy moving forward.

Farming: Winter Weather

6. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given the severe weather conditions in two of the past four winters, what preparations have been made to assist farming communities this winter. (AQO 5079/11-15)

Farming: Fodder Supply

7. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how winter feed planning will ensure that another fodder crisis does not develop over the coming months. (AQO 5080/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 7 together. Following the severe snow and the prolonged period of unfavourable weather in the spring of 2013, I established the fodder task force, comprising representatives of, and stakeholders in, the agrifood industry. The task force identified issues that could, potentially, face the livestock industry in the forthcoming winter and produced an action plan to mitigate problems that could arise. I met task force representatives for an update recently, and although they do not intend to meet as a group until midwinter they will get together in the interim if a situation develops and new actions are required.

There are many things that farmers can do to prepare for winter, and DARD has been very active in providing support, advice and training. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) embarked on a comprehensive programme of workshops, advisory events, publications and face-to-face advice during the summer and that work will continue throughout the winter. To date, 2,800 farmers have attended CAFRE open days and 3,900 attendees have received training on

livestock management topics including fodder assessment and stocktake, grassland management, increasing production efficiency and soil and sward improvement. CAFRE, along with the main banks, is currently holding a series of meetings with farmers at various locations to provide advice and guidance on farm business cash flow.

I am pleased to report that with the support of CAFRE and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), and with the improved weather in the summer this year, fodder yields have increased significantly. Fodder stocks on most farms have recovered to levels that are in balance with projected requirements, with some showing a surplus. The availability of fodder for purchase, better fodder budgeting and utilisation leaves livestock farmers well prepared going into this winter.

Mr Campbell: Does the Minister not agree that it would be more appropriate if the task force were to meet in preparation for a possible severe winter? In relation to what can be done, would she not agree that farming communities are looking to see decisive action as soon as any weather takes a turn for the worse so that there are no further arguments subsequent to the bad weather about who should pick up the bill?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that I was very proactive last year in responding to the needs of the communities that were badly hit by the severe snow. The task force is content that it has met and addressed some of the key areas that it was looking at, particularly around cash flow for farmers and even farmers' mental health and well-being, because it is a very difficult situation for them all to be in. Thankfully, we are in a better position now, given that there has been a lot of work done in preparation and planning, and in discussions with farmers, for the incoming winter. When I met the representatives of the task force recently, they said that they would come together, if need be, but they believe that all the work that is ongoing and everything that they have done to date is sufficient to prepare for the winter ahead.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ceist uimhir a seacht. Question number 7.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member's question was grouped with question 6. I am just calling the Member —

Mr McElduff: I am very grateful for the Ceann Comhairle's clarification. When the Minister

met the UFU and NIAPA, what were the key issues raised by the unions, variously? I thank the Minister for being proactive, particularly when she met farmers in the Glenelly area.

Mrs O'Neill: Some of the key areas were to do with the severe weather that left farmers in such a bad financial situation. The impact of the snow meant that their livelihoods were decimated.

Mental health was very much a focus of the task force, and I thought that that was great. We had not just the UFU but NIAPA, the grain trade, the Meat Exporters Association, the food and drink association and the banks. All the key players were working together and were looking at all the challenges, particularly those on how we can be better prepared for winter.

Given that we had good weather over the summer, I am delighted to say that we are in a better position with stocks this year. That has done a lot to help growth and recovery. Most farmers will now have a similar stock of fodder to previous years, and we will continue to monitor that at CAFRE. A whole range of issues was discussed, and the group was very wide ranging, which meant that all views were considered.

Mr Swann: Will the Minister join me in condemning the scurrilous accusations and comments that are being made in the north Antrim press that some farmers are actually hoping for another bad winter because the compensation that they received was an easy way to make money?

Mrs O'Neill: I have not seen the report, but I absolutely condemn that. I went out and visited people and saw their distress at first hand. I do not think that anybody would wish that upon themselves just to get a few pounds from the Department.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Has she met any other Departments to discuss the weather conditions, given that it is predicted that we are to have the coldest winter since 1947?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we have taken forward a whole range of issues. The task force is a very wide-ranging group and includes Rural Support, which is the charity that gives support to people, and departmental officials. It reflects all interests, including those that look at financial issues with the banks. So, all the key players are around the table discussing and planning for the winter ahead. I am very mindful that

there are claims of a bad winter ahead, but we are certainly in a better position with the fodder situation. The task force will remain in place and will meet as and when required. A number of key areas of work were put in train, and they are ongoing. However, as I said, the task force is very willing to come together at any stage if it feels that it is necessary.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has already received an answer.

Poultry Litter

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her efforts to identify sustainable alternatives for dealing with poultry litter. (AQO 5081/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I commissioned my officials and researchers from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to conduct a review of options for the management and disposal of poultry litter. That review was published in April 2012. To progress its recommendations, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I launched a small business research initiative (SBRI) competition. The aim of the SBRI is to identify sustainable ways to better utilise poultry litter. Thirty-nine applications were received under the competition, and they were assessed by independent assessors contracted by the Technology Strategy Board. In May 2013, contracts were awarded to eight companies covering nine projects for phase 1, which is the proof of concept/feasibility stage. The phase 1 contracts are for six months and conclude this month.

The SBRI project is being managed on behalf of DARD and DETI by a project management team in the Strategic Investment Board. The project team has held regular meetings with the phase 1 project contractors. The team has also engaged positively with the poultry sector to discuss its views on the implementation of the technology options that are developing through the SBRI. The project team will carefully consider the final reports from the nine SBRI contracts that are due to be received at the end of this month. A decision will then be made on whether the most promising projects require further government assistance. My goal and that of the poultry industry is to have long-term sustainable and viable options to deal with poultry litter.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that Moy Park has been hugely successful in delivering additional jobs directly in the industry and in value-added jobs? Does she also agree that,

as such, it seems that the potential that exists for expanding further is being limited by her Department's relatively late involvement in addressing that issue?

Mrs O'Neill: I accept that Moy Park is a major employer and that it provides quite a lot of employment. That is something that we want to grow. I talked earlier about the agrifood strategy board, which looks at growing businesses, increasing our job creation and growing our export market. We do not want any business to be disadvantaged in its ability to grow. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I have been very mindful of the timetable that we are working towards, given that we have the ruling from Europe. We are very much working through that. It has been a process, and quite a number of technologies have come forward as potential ways of dealing with the poultry litter. I am quite pleased with those. We have now narrowed it down to nine, and we will be narrowing it down even further.

So, I think that the work that we have done has been appropriate and adequate to address the problem. It is an industry problem, but obviously government want to try to work with the industry to resolve the issue, which is why we have brought forward the SBRI project.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That concludes oral questions to the Minister. We now move to topical questions.

Agrifood Sector: Young People

1. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many young people have entered the agrifood sector in the past couple of years. (AQT 401/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have those figures on me but I am happy to provide them to the Member. It is safe to say that the fact that our agriculture colleges are oversubscribed is fantastic and shows that young people now see a future in farming and food, whereas a number of years ago, it was very much seen as a sunset industry. The fact that we have record numbers of young people wanting to get into farming and food is very positive for the future.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. What work does she do with other Departments, such as DETI and DEL, to provide grant assistance or whatever to encourage people not only to get involved in the

business but to have employment after they go to the college?

Mrs O'Neill: There is quite a range of areas of support available, even from my Department. Look at the rural development programme and the amount of businesses that avail themselves of support through that avenue. We also have processing marketing grants to help people expand. There is quite a range of supports that are open to everybody, but, obviously, it is good that we have so many young people who want to stay in the industry and see a future in the industry. I want to encourage that to grow. The agrifood strategy report, which I talked about earlier, is a joint piece of work between me and DETI. Alongside that, in the report, there are a number of recommendations that are applicable to DEL, so we are working together in partnership to promote young people coming forward in the industry and trying to create the conditions, or assist the industry to create the conditions, that allow people to see a future in farming and food.

Rivers Agency: Transfer of Functions

2. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why she objected to the transfer of Rivers Agency functions to the Department for Regional Development, which would, particularly in urban areas, have led to a more unified approach to flooding. (AQT 402/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that he is referring to the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) report. There were quite a number of recommendations, all of which have been taken forward, but I do not believe that you just need to pick things out willy-nilly and transfer them to other Departments without having a proper strategic discussion. The Executive will be looking at all the Departments, and I am very happy for Rivers Agency to be considered as part of that bigger discussion, but I do not think that just picking out the Rivers Agency and putting it into DRD, is the solution to all the problems.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the bulk of Rivers Agency work is now in the urban situation? If she is convinced that it would lead to a more efficient resolution of flooding problems, will she support the transfer?

Mrs O'Neill: I am absolutely open to taking a look at it in the round, as I said, as part of the wider Executive discussion around all the

Departments and where things should comfortably sit. I am very happy to take a look at it, but, as I said, the PEDU report set out a number of recommendations, all of which have been taken forward or are being worked through. I do not believe that this one is a stand-alone issue, but I am very happy to take a look at it in the round.

Renewables: Farm Businesses

3. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what work can be done to assist farm businesses that are experiencing difficulties in connecting renewable energy projects to the grid. (AQT 403/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: We dealt with that issue earlier in Question Time. As I said, one of the biggest problems is that, when it comes to giving grant aid support, Europe has clearly set down that you have to be selling off 100%. You cannot be using it to offset your own costs. There is a particular problem with that, and it is something that I think we seriously need to address. There are opportunities to address it in the new rural development programme and how we take it forward. However, we are still going to be bound by European Commission decisions. It is a clear problem that people cannot get a connection to the grid. They can get the grant support and get everything in place, but they cannot get a connection to the grid. You have to have your own single connection — a separate connection to the grid and your own supply — and that is creating all sorts of problems. There is a range of problems that need to be identified. We have an opportunity possibly to look at that in the new programme.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she give a commitment to farmers today that her Department will help them to look for cheaper energy suppliers?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. I am always happy to assist the farming community in whatever we can do to move forward in the most effective and efficient manner. This is a particular issue around renewable energy. It is something that we all want to see more of, but there are barriers to the farmers being able to take it forward because of European Commission rules. That is something that we need to seriously address and that I am engaged with the Commission on.

Rural White Paper

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an assessment of the impact of the rural White Paper, especially on improving the lives of rural people. (AQT 404/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The rural White Paper was a really significant piece of work that was taken forward in the previous term under Michelle Gildernew. A lot of progress has been made in taking forward all the actions that have been identified in that document. However, I want to take a fresh look at it because I do not want it to be just a tick-box exercise for Departments to say that they have delivered what they previously promised. I very much want it to be a living, working document, so I asked officials to look at that again and to explore the opportunities for legislating for rural-proofing. I am also keen to look again at the idea of a rural champion because there will be a key role for a rural champion in moving forward.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. Could she maybe elaborate a wee bit on what a rural champion would do and what that idea entails?

Mrs O'Neill: There was discussion about this in the previous term. I see it as a body that could be inside or outside government, although preferably on the outside, that would champion rural issues and look to address gaps in information around statistics and much-needed research on rural communities. The champion could provide research and information that would assist in challenging all Departments in their delivery for rural communities. It is in the early concept stage. It was discussed before but not taken forward at the time. I want to explore the idea of a rural champion again because it could have a key role and be a major win for rural communities.

Crime: Rural Areas

5. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she agrees that rural crime is a very worrying and escalating problem and to outline the new initiatives she has taken to tackle this trend. (AQT 405/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with the Member. We saw quite a number of cases highlighted recently, particularly of cattle theft. I regularly engage with the PSNI, the Chief Constable and the

Department of Justice on how we can work together. The levels of rural crime, including agriculture-related crime, are concerning. I met the Minister of Justice on 14 October, and we talked about the rural crime unit that has just been established. Danny Gray from the Department's veterinary service enforcement branch has been appointed to sit on that rural crime steering unit, which is progress. We also look at working with the PSNI and the guards. We need a collective approach to this issue.

Good initiatives, such as freeze branding, have been taken forward. Another area that I want to look at is a requirement when providing grant support for small items of farm machinery, for example, for them to be made easily identifiable if stolen. We are looking at a number of initiatives. We need to work closely with the veterinary service enforcement branch, the PSNI, the gardaí and the Department of Justice — all those who have a role in tackling rural crime.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for her answer. She said that one initiative that was taken forward was freeze branding. To what extent has that been used in the drive against rural crime?

Mrs O'Neill: We thought that we would see more of an uptake of that initiative. The PSNI is concerned about why that has not been the case and think that it might be due to a number of factors, for example people being busy because of the weather or just managing their farms and getting on with day-to-day business and not having time to focus on that area. The PSNI plans to go out again and get more people involved because it is a positive initiative if we can get more people to take it up, given that cattle theft is quite high. There have been a number of cases in the Member's constituency over the past year.

Crime: Rural Areas

6. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, further to her answer to the previous question in which she said that she had met with the PSNI, whether the PSNI is taking any particular initiatives to ensure that rural crime decreases. (AQT 406/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The PSNI has taken forward quite a few local initiatives, particularly in rural areas. It is also involved with the gardaí in combating crime, particularly in border areas. That is key when it comes to cattle theft. If we are serious about tackling that, we have to have a joined-up

approach. I am committed to making sure that our veterinary service enforcement team works with the guards and PSNI and that we roll-out all the schemes that exist for the benefit of rural communities, particularly Farm Watch. A lot of work is ongoing. We need to keep on with that and keep challenging and trying to eradicate the crime that exists out there.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. She mentioned that her officials, the PSNI and an Garda Síochána meet regularly. Is she confident that that is happening regularly enough and that they have particular initiatives to ensure that we tackle rural crime?

Mrs O'Neill: It is fair to say that there is a significant level of engagement. Quite a number of successful investigations have been taken forward. That shows that it is working. Obviously, we need to do more, but I think that that shows that it is working, particularly in smuggling incidents, where we see people trying to move from one jurisdiction to the other. Very progressive work is ongoing, and we need to keep driving forward with that.

Rural Development Programme

7. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an assessment of how the rural development programme has performed, given that it is in its final stages. (AQT 407/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I think that it has been very successful. When I am out and about, it gives me great pleasure to see the projects that have benefited from the programme, from tourism initiatives to community facilities, right through to business diversification. I do not have the facts and figures with me, but I am very happy to provide them to the Member. In my opinion, it has been very successful. Are there lessons to be learned for the future programme? Absolutely. We are actively doing that now as we work our way through the consultation responses that we received.

There are issues around simplification. There are a number of areas where we can improve things and make sure that applications, particularly those for grant aid, are relevant to the level of funding that is being requested. So, although there are a number of areas where we can improve things, I think that the programme has been successful.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer. I agree with her about the success in getting the money on the ground. However, I am glad that she came to the criticism of her Department. Will she outline what her Department will do in the future, given that it took it almost 18 months to get some of that money on the ground?

Mrs O'Neill: If the Member is referring to what we will do to plan for the new programme, that is what we are working through now. As I said, the consultation is closed, and we are working our way through the responses. We will then decide on the way forward. I hope to do that in the early part of next year. The focus needs to be on animation. We need to work up the areas to make sure that they are good to go when the new programme kicks in. We do not want to see any delays. Officials are working on that as we speak to make sure that we can hit the ground running and start spending as soon as the new programme starts.

Rural Cohesion

8. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what work she is doing to break down barriers between people from different backgrounds in rural areas. (AQT 408/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can write to the Member with more detail, but a number of projects have been given funding through the rural development programme. One of the projects that we funded recently was a church-based forum. I cannot remember the title of the project, but we provided funding for an organisation to bring people from different churches together to discuss rural issues and other issues that are relevant to them. We have been involved in a number of projects like that.

I am very happy to look at all those things, particularly through my tackling poverty and social isolation framework, which looks at the issues in rural communities, how we can bring people together and how we can work effectively for them. One of the successes of that programme was the grant scheme that we brought forward. That allowed groups from local areas to apply for what they thought was needed in their area. It was not that the Department was saying, "This is the pot of money, and this is how it should be spent". It was very much a bottom-up approach, with people coming forward to say what they thought was needed. Quite a range of projects have been funded in that way.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her response. I am encouraged that work is ongoing. Does she accept that there are often hidden interfaces in rural areas, unlike the more concrete interfaces that we see in urban areas?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. I think that we need to tackle that right across the board. You are absolutely right: given the nature of rural areas, it can be very much a hidden issue. I am happy to engage and to try to break down any barriers that exist for anybody.

Farming: DARD Legal Action

9. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that a recent action taken by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development against a Fermanagh farmer was rejected by the courts. (AQT 409/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I did not hear the question.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member repeat the question?

Mr Elliott: Apologies, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister confirm that a recent action taken by her Department against a Fermanagh farmer was rejected by the courts?

2.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I will not confirm it because it is a legal issue and I do not want to get into it in the House. I am happy to talk to the Member outside of Question Time.

Mr Elliott: That maybe restricts my further point, but I will term it this way: if the farmer is cleared, will he receive his single farm payments that have been withheld for the past number of years?

Mrs O'Neill: I will not get into the ins and outs of an individual's situation.

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes Question Time with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Ballynagross Football Club

1. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support her Department

can offer to Ballynagross FC to raise funds to develop a recreational pitch. (AQO 5089/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for his question. Sport NI is the body responsible for the development of sport across the North, and all clubs can contact Sport NI to discuss their plans for the development of a recreational pitch. Sport NI is able to provide advice and guidance on how best to prepare for funding programmes, including Sport NI opportunities, and to help identify other potential funding sources. Ballynagross FC is also able to contact its local council for advice and support given that the responsibility for provision of adequate facilities for recreation, social, physical and cultural activities rests with the district council.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for her response. Minister, I have always found your officials very helpful when dealing with other clubs. Will the officials help the club to identify further funding streams to enable it to move forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his comments. Our officials, in conjunction with Sport NI, are there to help clubs develop their facilities and, as I said in the primary answer, to try to guide them to other potential sources of funding. If I am reading the Member right, I am happy to pass that request to officials to liaise with you to set that meeting up.

Mr Speaker: I warn Members that this is a specific question about a specific constituency.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Will the Minister give us an update on the capital programme from Sport NI? When will it be rolled out and who can apply?

Mr Speaker: Order. I did warn Members. That is well off the original question. We really should move on if there are no further supplementary questions to that particular question.

Mr Elliott: Given the release of information regarding a letter of comfort to offer £10 million to a Belfast club, will she ensure that the IFA facilities strategy —

Mr Speaker: Order. I listened to the Member, but I detect that he is far away from the original question. Is this particular question about a particular subject?

Mr Elliott: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member going to use his initiative to link it?

Mr Elliott: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Right. Let us listen.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I will finish that off. Will the Minister confirm that the IFA facilities strategy will not have a predetermined outcome that would be against Ballynagross Football Club? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Up until that point, the Member did extremely well. We will move on.

PRONI: Target Market

2. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given that 77% of new visitors use the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) for family history, 5% for local history, 2% for academic research and 1% for legal and business uses, whether PRONI is reaching its target market. (AQO 5090/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. PRONI's target market is any user seeking to access its archives. In 2012-13, PRONI welcomed almost 17,000 visitors on site and recorded over 10 million page views on the PRONI website. It also provides a free events programme and actively tries to reach new audiences, particularly those who live in areas of social exclusion and poverty. In October this year, Community Change NI brought a group to PRONI that included members of the Footprints Women's Centre in Poleglass and the Regimental Association of the UDR. It also welcomed a cross-community group of adults from the Dungannon area led by Youth Action NI, which visited PRONI to find out more about the decade of centenaries. PRONI has worked closely with the historical institutional abuse inquiry during the past 18 months. That research supports the ongoing work of the inquiry as victims come forward, and inquiry researchers are based in the PRONI building to facilitate direct access to records.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for her answer. The point that I would like her to grasp is that family history is the overwhelming reason why people go there. The figures show that 77% are interested in family history, yet the PRONI website rates it only as the fifth out of six reasons why it keeps archives. That poses the question to the Minister: are we charging

enough to some users, such as legal users or government bodies that need to consult these archives?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member has presented statistics that contradict the information that I have. In fairness to his question, I will try to find out the right answer. The question also remains whether enough people are using PRONI for all sorts of reasons. I am happy for people, regardless of their reasons, to use PRONI. I would like more people to use it to look at their family trees, their lineage and so on, but I do not want to be prescriptive. PRONI is an excellent public service, and the more people who use it for the public benefit, the better. That is a good thing.

Mr Campbell: The figures show that local history usage is about 5%. Does the Minister agree that, given the rich history of various groups and communities in Northern Ireland, she should attempt to drive that figure up so that people can utilise PRONI, as they should be doing, and get the maximum use out of it into their local communities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In short, I totally agree with the Member. I would like that figure to increase. I think that it is incredibly low, and I am surprised. As I said to Mr McNarry, I will certainly query that. If it means having to look at what additional resources, if any, are needed, or even whether a redeployment of PRONI priorities is required, to try to ensure that that figure increases, I am keen to do that. I recently spoke to a group of older people who, for the first time, are starting to look back into their lineage and their family trees. I do not want them to be prevented or put off from doing so, particularly when they are travelling from the Member's constituency in Derry to Belfast.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. Does PRONI do enough to attract other users who are not family historians?

Ms Ní Chuilín: PRONI would say that it does enough, and, thus far, I have no evidence to say that it has not done enough. Is there something that we could do more of and better? That seems to be the consistent theme from this and previous questions. PRONI has reconstituted its user forum to include stakeholders from a wide range of groups, including representatives from libraries, museums, the Workers' Educational Association, the Education and Training Inspectorate, Tourism Ireland and even some

bloggers and people who are involved in social media. I will bring the figures that were presented to me today to PRONI's attention to see what else we can do. It is an excellent public service. It is a beautiful building, which the public should have access to, and we need to find what particular interests they have to make that access greater.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. Arbh fhéidir leis an Aire a rá ar tháinig méadú ar líon na ndaoine atá ag baint úsáide as áiseanna agus seirbhísí Oifig na dTaifead Poiblí ó bogadh an oifig go dtí an cheathrú Titanic? Has there been an increase in the number of people using the facilities and services of the Public Record Office since it moved to the Titanic Quarter? If so, can the Minister provide figures?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I have anecdotal evidence that the site at the Titanic Quarter is much more accessible than the site at Balmoral Avenue. I do not have the figures, so I commit to writing to the Member with those figures. There was an issue about access to public records in the past. Given that almost £30 million of public money was spent on a new building, the last thing that we need to hear is that it is still hard to reach or out of reach for people. That is not a good use of public money.

Fishing: Lough Neagh

3. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if there are any proposals to change fishing by any method on Lough Neagh in the incoming season. (AQO 5091/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The main proposed change to fishing on Lough Neagh for the 2014 season is the prohibition of the taking of salmon by means of a draft net. This is one of a suite of salmon conservation measures that I am proposing, and my Department is consulting on the draft legislation to be put before the House.

The proposed amendment would allow those who fulfil the criteria for using a draft net for freshwater fish on Lough Neagh to be issued with such a licence. However, they would not be permitted to take any salmon, and any caught would have to be returned to the water.

A number of other issues relating to fishing on Lough Neagh were raised by stakeholders and are being considered by DCAL. Any decision

will be based on scientific advice and the sustainability of the fishery. If changes are to be implemented, the relevant legislation will require an amendment. To that end, I have asked officials to undertake work to develop a detailed fishery management plan for Lough Neagh that will inform the sustainable management of the fishery.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for the information that she shared, particularly on the use of draft nets. Will the Minister tell us whether she is considering a specific proposition to amend the rules on bait net use on Lough Neagh?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Lough Neagh commercial fishermen have put forward a proposal to my Department to amend the legislation on the use of bait nets, which are used by fishermen to catch small fish that are then used to bait eel long lines. The alternative is to use worms as bait, but this can result in smaller eels being caught, which has a negative impact on overall eel stocks. The fishermen would like to use trawl bait nets, as this is a more effective way of catching the number of small fish that they require. However, as I said in answer to the primary question, AFBI, which is responsible for the scientific evidence that I spoke about, is researching the use of bait nets and will advise me on that information before I make any decision on the matter.

Miss M McIlveen: What efforts are the Minister and her Department making to assist members of the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Association in obtaining eel fishing permits? Is she aware that members have been threatened for having raised this issue?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the Member's last question first. I am totally unaware that members have been threatened for raising an issue. I do not understand the context, but I appreciate that she has raised a serious issue. I am more than happy to speak to her about that and, indeed, to the people concerned. On the Member's other point, I do not have the details to hand, but I am happy to write to her. I am alarmed at the idea of anybody being threatened, let alone threatened for raising an issue. That is totally unacceptable.

Mr Swann: Has the Minister had any engagement yet with the European Commission about the increase in eel fishing in Lough Neagh and Lough Erne? I speak having recently met Bernhard Friess, the European commissioner for the north Atlantic, along with Jim Nicholson.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Jim Nicholson, your MEP candidate for the European election: OK, I know who that is.

My officials have had discussions with Europe, particularly on the proposed amendment. Discussions between officials and European fisheries experts are still ongoing. To be fair to the Member, there is genuine concern about the preservation of eels, particularly in Lough Neagh, where there is an eel management plan. Those discussions will be ongoing because we need to make sure that, first, stocks in our rivers and waterways increase, are protected and are sustained and that the 300-plus families on the lough continue to have a secure livelihood of well over £3 million a year. I thank the Member for his question.

Commonwealth Games 2014

4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Department's involvement in the Commonwealth Games 2014. (AQO 5092/11-15)

8. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support elite athletes are offered in advance of the Commonwealth Games 2014 in Glasgow. (AQO 5096/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 8 together.

The NI Commonwealth Games Council is responsible for all aspects of the North of Ireland team competing in the 2014 Glasgow games. My Department, through Sport NI, continues to work closely with the council as it takes forward its preparations for the games. The council has established two groups: an operational group to take forward the detailed preparations with the local governing bodies and a strategic task and finish group that oversees the work of the operational group and considers opportunities to maximise our team's performance in Glasgow. DCAL officials have attended the meetings of that group to hear at first hand how the preparations are progressing. From April 2013, in the lead-up to the games, my Department, through Sport NI, is providing direct financial assistance totalling £136,000 to the Commonwealth Games Council. That funding will help with the council's costs for staff and administration and other costs associated with attendance at the 2014 games.

3.00 pm

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her update and welcome the news. I am sure that the Minister and Members will join me in welcoming the news that the Northern Ireland netball team is to take part in next year's Commonwealth Games, given that we have not had a team take part since Kuala Lumpur in 1998. What is the Minister doing to develop greater participation in team sports?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I join her in congratulating the netball team on their recent successes. I am delighted to see them compete in different forums, and I wish them all the best.

As regards team sports, particularly sports for women and disability sport, it is important that we continue to provide current funding and give additional funding, particularly in respect of the Commonwealth Games, to help those who are performing. We have done that. Sport NI provides £2.5 million to the Sports Institute to help to support athletes who are competing. Additional funding has been brought forward, including packages of £450,000 for governing bodies to help them to prepare. That level of funding needs to be continued. If the athletes who are competing, regardless of where or how they are competing, are not supported, first, by the governing body and then at high levels by the Sports Institute, they will feel that they are not valued, which will have an impact on their performance.

Mr Ross: My question follows on neatly from my colleague's question. The Minister will be aware that, in Northern Ireland, we have a proud history of producing some of the best hockey players competing for both Ireland and Great Britain. She will also be aware that there is no Northern Ireland hockey team. Although it is too late for next year's games, will she seek a meeting with the Irish Hockey Association to see if she could help to form a Northern Ireland hockey team for the next Commonwealth Games to ensure that our elite athletes playing hockey in Northern Ireland are not prevented from competing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I think that it was his party colleague Jim Wells who, at a previous Question Time, asked me to do the same thing for rugby sevens. I do not get involved. I do not interfere, and I do not think that people should interfere politically. It is up to the governing bodies to decide what arrangements they will have. Whether we like that outcome or not, we need to support those governing bodies. That is the bottom line. We should not interfere

politically in decisions that governing bodies make. We need to support them, regardless of whether we like those decisions.

Mr McKinney: What discussions has the Minister had with the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council on the prospect of bidding to host a future Commonwealth Games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I have not had any discussions with the Commonwealth Games Council on hosting a future Commonwealth Games. Two or three Question Times ago, I was asked — by Alastair Ross, incidentally — whether I would support the building of a velodrome and bidding to host the games. I am keen to have a look at that, but I have not had any discussions. I have had discussions with officials, and they are aware that we need to have a serious scoping exercise. However, to be honest, that is as far as it has gone.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm that she is prepared to promote the magnificent Aurora swimming centre in Bangor as a training location prior to next year's Commonwealth Games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would like to think so: I put millions of pounds of public money into it. It is a facility that athletes across the North, not just people in that constituency, can use. It can be used for that competition and many others. It is important that young people who are interested in swimming now feel that, once they are in that pool or any other pool for that matter — particularly that pool, given the facilities there — they can go from swimming on a Saturday morning to performing. It is really important that we support that journey.

Cultural Bursaries

5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans she has to initiate cultural bursaries for individuals. (AQO 5093/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Although I have no plans to announce any cultural bursaries yet, it is my intention to launch another Gaeltacht bursary scheme in December. The Gaeltacht bursary scheme is aimed at broadening the appeal of the Irish language and offers the opportunity, irrespective of tradition and background, for eligible applicants to have a chance of attending an Irish language summer course.

The scheme also helps Líofo participants with financial outlays that may otherwise be a barrier to their accessing a Gaeltacht course.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister. Will she give us her assessment of how DCAL could encourage interest in the Irish language among the unionist community?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The very essence of the Líofo initiative is to make the language accessible to all, and I firmly believe that the Irish language is. Líofo continues to implement outreach work for groups and individuals from all walks of life. For example, this week, Líofo will take part in a cross-community event in Fermanagh organised by the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland and the GAA to bring young people from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds together to explore our cultural richness through sharing and learning, music, language and culture. Such events provide a good opportunity to promote Líofo, and events such as the Líofo birthday celebration allow everybody across the community to celebrate our rich cultural heritage.

Mr Humphrey: Following the supplementary question from the Member who spoke previously, does the Minister agree that one thing that would perhaps attract the unionist community to take part in Irish language classes would be if the Irish language was not being used as a political tool by politicians?

Ms Ní Chuilín: And you have just done that. *[Laughter.]* You have just done that. Experiences and examples such as that are really unhelpful, and they are not very supportive of people from your constituency who are learning the Irish language. It is not giving good leadership. I totally agree with you: we should not politicise any language.

Creative Industries Innovation Fund

6. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the creative industries innovation fund. (AQO 5094/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL has a Programme for Government target to support 200 projects through the creative industries innovation fund. Some 148 awards have been made thus far, and others are expected to be finalised shortly. A further funding round opens in January 2014 for projects to be delivered by March 2015. I am confident that our Programme for Government target will be achieved, if not exceeded.

The Arts Council recently held a conference to showcase companies that have received support from the fund. The event supported wider industry networking and demonstrated the fund's important contribution and how it makes growing our creative industries a priority.

Social clauses have also been introduced to the fund to provide industry support to schools engagement programmes, particularly schools with young people from deprived backgrounds. The initiative will help to inspire the next generation of creative entrepreneurs.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she outline in further detail work that her Department, either alone or in conjunction with other Departments, has carried out that is dedicated to ensuring that young people in Northern Ireland are adequately skilled to snap up any opportunities that are available in the creative industries sector?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. We had a pilot scheme in a deprived area of west Belfast where we invested in iPads for schools. Coincidentally, it is an area that suffers perhaps the worst child poverty in western Europe. The evidence that came back — not that we knew that it would, and it would certainly be contested — was that, as soon as those children and young people who had difficulties completing homework were given an iPad, they not only completed their homework but completed it in record time and expanded on it. Their self-confidence and self-esteem were literally raised through using the iPad's graphics, and it has given them an avenue and an opening that they did not have before. We are keen to replicate that work, particularly in the top 10% most deprived wards. Given that it is a wonderful opportunity, I am meeting the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to see what we can do in rural areas.

Other programmes, such as CultureTECH, have been supported as part of the Digital Circle. It is critical that we use every influence in each of our Departments to try to make sure that not only do we meet our Programme for Government commitments and exceed them where possible but we look for opportunities that have arisen outside of what we agreed some two years ago. So, I am happy that, with the support of Executive colleagues, the iPad initiative that DCAL introduced will be rolled out across the board.

Mr Dallat: This is exciting stuff, and obviously the Assembly would, I am sure, want it to be spread across the 26 council areas. Are all 26

councils participating? In other words, are they all culture vultures? If not, what will the Minister do to ensure that there is no disparity across Northern Ireland in this respect?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He can certainly talk about his council area, but I could not comment on whether they are culture vultures.

There have been criticisms that the applications mainly came from the Belfast City Council and Derry City Council areas. That was a big concern. I would certainly encourage other councils to make sure that they make applications to the creative industries innovative fund. They should certainly work with and talk to organisations such as the Arts Council and NI Screen to make sure that they make use of every available opportunity. I have absolutely no doubt about the example that I gave to Mrs Overend in terms of children and young people and small business incubation and development. Depending on their needs, I would like to see all 26 council areas availing themselves of that fund.

Mr McCarthy: What is the Minister doing to ensure that the funding provided for the arts in Northern Ireland is adhered to, regarding the funding in other regions and jurisdictions? There is a gap in the arts. What is the Minister doing to try to bridge that gap?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assume that the Member is talking about the creative industries innovation fund, rather than the arts across the board.

Mr McCarthy: In general.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would prefer to keep it to the creative industries innovation fund. If it is a general question, it is not linked, and, to be frank, I want to give you an answer.

Mr McCarthy: So you do not know.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not interrupt the Minister.

Ms Ní Chuilín: If the Member feels that the councils in his constituency of Strangford have not availed themselves properly of the creative industries innovation fund, he can talk to the Arts Council and NI Screen. If the Member has any other questions on any other aspects of arts funding, I am more than happy to answer them. He can ask a priority question for written answer or a question for written answer, or he can knock my door, write a letter or stop me in

the corridor. There is absolutely no bother with that, and he does not have to wait until the next Question Time to ask me a very important question like that.

Mr McCarthy: We are here to ask questions.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I commend the programme of the Department working with councils. Will the Minister give an update on the CIIF and how it has been beneficial for the Assembly and local councils in taking it forward in the collaborative approach that is being undertaken?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. It is a successful programme, and the fact that we have not only met our target but exceeded it shows that there is a demand. The concern is that the demand seems to be based on creative, digital or cultural hubs, particularly in Belfast City Council and Derry City Council areas. That is not to say that other areas cannot avail themselves of it. They can, and I am willing to help them do that.

The collaborative approach is certainly important, particularly when you are looking at other investments. Belfast City Council has done that. It has tried to marry those pots of money up to get a better return, and that is what it is all about. It is not only about looking at the investment that you can provide through local or city investment funds but how you can do it with entrepreneurs and even showing those who are considering the private sector route how they can avail themselves of opportunities they perhaps did not know they had. Councils are some of the best-placed agencies or bodies to do that.

Draperstown Library

7. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the current status of Draperstown library. (AQO 5095/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may recall that this particular library had previously been marked for closure. He will be aware that the local community was determined to save its service and worked in partnership with Libraries NI to obtain financial support from the rural development programme and the Big Lottery Fund. That community initiative resulted in the establishment of a modern replacement library and a multipurpose community centre.

The library, which was officially opened by my Executive colleague Michelle O'Neill on 11 September, is now attracting new users and providing an expanded programme of activities and initiatives. That partnership venture has been a success, with active membership of the library as of 1 October having increased by 23% compared to where it was last year. That is exactly what we need to see. We need to see libraries being used as dynamic community hubs and focal points for local communities.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for her comments. What has been done to improve library services for users in rural areas generally?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in my primary answer, I am working with my Executive colleagues on this, particularly around the rural White Paper action plan, which sets out a vision for sustainable rural communities and, indeed, services within those communities. There are 28 library branches in rural areas that play a valuable role in that regard. I am really keen to make sure that libraries are sustained and maintained. They should not be just used in isolation but seen as a wraparound public service, particular in rural areas that face ongoing exclusion and isolation.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes listed questions. We move to topical questions. Michael McGimpsey is not in place, and Stephen Moutray is not in his place.

Sports Hub: UUJ

3. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has had any discussions with the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, which the Committee visited recently, and, in particular, the Ulster Sports Academy about their exciting vision for a sports hub at the campus. (AQT 413/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I have plans to meet the Sports Institute early in the new year. Officials have had meetings with Sport NI in relation to ongoing support. The Member and other members of the CAL Committee will be aware that I made a substantial investment in the Sports Institute, but we need to look at future-proofing sports facilities for long-term usage.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer. Would she be supportive of exploring the creation of centres of sporting excellence at Jordanstown, such as a neutral venue for a boxing academy and an indoor velodrome?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to meet with the Sports Institute to look at future projects. I do not want to commit to anything in particular. The velodrome is one of the issues on the agenda for discussion, particularly as, since the last appraisal was done, the number of people using bicycles and those involved in competitive racing has increased tenfold. So, certainly, I am happy to talk to the institute about the velodrome. I had no plans to talk to the institute about boxing, but there is no reason why I would not do so.

Cycling: DCAL Funding

4. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given the increased interest in cycling and the importance of the tour of the north international cycle race to the cycling fraternity, would her Department be willing or able to fill the £40,000 funding gap required to run this event in April 2014. (AQT 414/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am meeting representatives of all the governing bodies to look at gaps in certain funds, particularly around events. I do not want to commit to saying, "Yes, I will be funding it", but I am happy to look at it. We all need to play our part in making sure that there are no gaps in events, should they be sporting, cultural or tourist events. First, we need to make sure that there are no gaps that prevent the event happening in the first place. So, I am happy to take details from the Member and bring them forward.

In relation to cycling, competitive cycling and racing, a number of proposals have been brought to my attention recently. I am not too sure whether they are the same ones or are different ones: I need to look at them all in the round. I am certainly happy to look at plugging holes in gaps. Given that the Giro d'Italia is coming here next year, we need to be very proactive in making sure that all communities that will not experience the Giro will get an opportunity to experience something similar.

Ms Lo: I am delighted by the answer from the Minister. I hope that she meets with the group fairly soon, because time is running on.

Does she agree that that would almost be a first step, and that it would particularly help all the

organisers and the PSNI, in preparing for the Giro d'Italia coming here?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The PSNI, the Tourist Board and the governing bodies have been meeting regularly to discuss plans for that. It is not a case of we know it is coming but have not done anything about it. Groups have asked to meet me about funding gaps, but I am not sure if they mean funding gaps in their groups, funding gaps around this event or other events or just funding gaps in the sport in general.

I have asked to meet the governing bodies, and I have already agreed to meet a couple of cycling clubs to see what we can do. I am taking a can-do attitude. If I have the money and the support of Executive colleagues, particularly when it comes to events that we are all keen to support, we will certainly be proactive and will do what we can. We are all taking a can-do attitude.

Brighter Hoard: Limavady

5. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a rough estimate of how many people viewed the recent successful Brighter hoard exhibition in Limavady. (AQT 415/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The beautiful Brighter hoard is in the Member's constituency. I have no idea of the number of visitors. I have heard that there are people from Belfast who are going up tomorrow evening; there must be an event. That is good because Belfast people do not travel very well. I have heard about children and young people from schools going to see the Brighter hoard, which is very good. I think that the original expectations will be exceeded, and I am hoping to hear the final figures. People who have not yet been to Limavady to see the Brighter hoard should go. It is a rare treat, and I am glad to see the Brighter hoard back where it belongs.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister give consideration to supporting a permanent display of the Brighter hoard in Limavady — the borough in which it was found — even if some of the pieces would have to be replicas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly will. I am keen to have discussions with the museums and the people who are the curators at the minute. I believe passionately that it should come back to where it was found and where it belongs. There have not been many opportunities presented to that area over the decades,

particularly around tourism, so the Brighter gold hoard is one opportunity that we cannot afford not to fight for.

City of Culture 2013

6. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she is satisfied that the various traditions in Londonderry have been properly promoted and represented during the city's year as the UK City of Culture. (AQT 416/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am, but there are always complaints and perhaps concerns at times that areas felt that they were passed by. I have met many groups in the community, not just the ones involved in big-ticket events, who are not only happy that they got involved this year but are looking at how they can strengthen their work as part of the legacy from this year and beyond. That is across the community.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that answer. What has her Department done or what is it doing for the annual Apprentice Boys shutting of the gates pageant in the city of Londonderry on Saturday 7 December, which is a major cultural event?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not aware of the Department giving any specific support for that, but I have been at events that the Apprentice Boys of Derry have attended. They have been part of the cultural programme. I can check with officials to see whether there were any requests. I am supportive. As a woman who lives in north Belfast, I can see that there are many things that we can look to the Apprentice Boys for as examples of what we need to do. Up and down the road over the past year and even more, it has almost become a tale of two cities.

C S Lewis

7. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how we can ensure that the legacy of a great writer — C S Lewis — can be used to encourage greater involvement in literature and the arts. (AQT 417/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The Member may be aware that there was an Adjournment debate brought forward by her party colleague Sammy Douglas last week. It was unfortunate that a deadline was missed for an application to the Arts Council for the C S Lewis festival. However, we are working with the East Belfast Partnership to

try to make sure that there is a legacy around C S Lewis. The bits of funding that have been used for the festival thus far have not been huge but have been very effective, and I am keen to make sure that C S Lewis is not confined to the dusty books of history. He was a proud Belfast man, and we need to be proud of him and use whatever opportunities we can to celebrate his work and to ensure that the legacy of his work is passed on from one generation to another so that we all know who he is.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. She mentioned the passing from one generation to the next. Has her Department had any talks with the Department of Education on the legacy of C S Lewis and how we can promote it in our schools to bring young people on in literature and the arts?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any discussions with the Department of Education, but I think that it is a good idea. Given the literature that he produced, and given that a lot of children will be aware of the Narnia stories, it would be a missed opportunity not to try to advance any opportunities that we have across the Executive. I am happy to talk to the Department of Education to see what we are doing around C S Lewis. It might be something that we can do better next year. Rather than waiting for a big significant date, there will be opportunities to do something in between to try to raise the profile of some of our cultural giants.

Eoghan Ruadh Hurling Club

8. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she agrees that the Eoghan Ruadh Hurling Club in Dungannon needs to be redeveloped, given the increase in club membership. (AQT 418/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I do. The Member invited me down, so she is aware that I have visited. Many, many children were crammed into a very, very small space. I am delighted that they are involved in sport and that boys and girls are involved in sport together, but I agree that there is a need to look at the development of facilities. As I indicated to other Members, I am happy to have those meetings with her and officials of Sport NI to take it forward.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. My supplementary question regarding a further invite to the club has been answered. So, I would appreciate it if we could follow up on that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I confirm that. I am genuine about that, not only to the Member of my party but to other Members. I am happy to facilitate a time that suits her, Sport NI and the club.

Mr Speaker: Dr McDonnell is not in his place, so question 9 cannot be asked.

Sports Facilities

10. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she can give an assessment of the shortage of sports facilities, particularly for football, in Northern Ireland. (AQT 420/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware that some council areas have done a needs analysis of the different levels of sport within each council area. Coleraine, Belfast and Derry, for example, have produced a deficit for not only football but for hockey and track and field. There is certainly a lack of facilities across the board. Some of the council groups are talking to officials in Sport NI and others, such as the Big Lottery, to see about the potential of trying to bring forward a collaborative approach to provision.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her response. I listened to her response to the previous question about an individual club. In my area in south Antrim, and Antrim in particular, there is an under-provision for football, as you identified, and for hockey. Can the Minister indicate what her Department could do to address that, given that the people who participate in a sport can go on to bigger and greater things?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to meet the Member and representatives of Antrim and some of the governing bodies in the new year, if that would help the Member. The last thing that I want to see is provision by postcode. I do not want to see that. There will never be enough money to try to meet the need, but there are certainly inventive ways of working towards trying to achieve the same ends, if we look at different potential sources of funding. I appreciate that, for some groups on the ground, it is sometimes a case of who is going to blink first. Do they get it from DCAL and Sport NI? Do they get it from the council? They do not care, so long as they get it. I am happy to have a meeting in the new year to see what we can take forward.

Committee Business

Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Inquiry into Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland [NIA 141/11-15]; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained in the report. — [Mr Swann.]

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): As Chair of the Education Committee, I commend the Committee for Employment and Learning for undertaking the inquiry and for producing what I believe is a very evidence-based report. Unfortunately, there is more in the report than we could possibly comment on in the time allotted to us. I will, therefore, confine my comments, in the main, to issues that are relevant to the Department of Education. I trust that I will get to other comments that I want to make as a Member.

The Employment and Learning Committee gathered a considerable amount of evidence on the current arrangements for careers education, information, advice and guidance, and all the evidence is notable, even very worrying in some cases. For example, all of us were concerned to learn of the degree of inconsistency in the careers services provided across the educational sectors.

I also noted the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association's (NISCA) assertion that there is insufficient capacity to give all students access to individual careers guidance prior to making important Key Stages 4 and 5 subject choices. Clearly, that is a crucial juncture for children and young people, and they should be given every support by careers personnel, including advice on work experience and even the completion of UCAS forms, for example. Consequently, the Education Committee is happy to support the relevant recommendations in respect of an adequately resourced statutory mechanism through which a consistently high standard of careers services could be provided to all schools and colleges in Northern Ireland.

The report deals with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects,

and I thank the Employment and Learning Committee for its work in that area. Like members of that Committee, Education Committee members find it difficult to wade through the plethora of STEM initiatives to determine whether they are having the impact that they should have. Indeed, I attended a launch at Stranmillis College this morning for a report on teaching coding to Key Stages 2 and 3 pupils, which will undoubtedly make its way to the Assembly. One has only to listen to comments by participants at any such event to be convinced that professionals and practitioners — they are not politicians — who, despite all that we want to say about what is being achieved, still believe that the fundamental problem is that there is not a joined-up approach to how we address these programmes.

3.30 pm

Members on the Benches opposite tell us today that they have concerns about STEM subjects, when their Education Minister, in correspondence to the Education Committee just two or three weeks ago, said that he was not going to consider baselining STEM provision in primary schools and that keeping it under review was enough. I have to say that that is not enough and more needs to be done by the Department of Education. I also note some very interesting evidence on whether STEM careers advice should be delivered by careers teachers or by subject specialists. The Department should consider that issue further, and the Education Committee would be happy to do so. We have to add a caveat of concern, but it is a valid point that needs further explanation.

I note with concern the evidence from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), which highlights the apparent failure of schools to understand the vocational, technical career route. That is compounded by the evidence from Belfast Met, which indicated that disadvantaged pupils were less likely to gain informal careers advice from family or friends.

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

The report highlights the importance of good careers advice for all our pupils and students and, indeed, for the economy in general. The evidence to which I referred shows something else, which is the crucial nature of careers services for students whose backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged. Many such pupils are in the non-selective controlled and maintained sectors. The report shows the

value of their having proper advice, informed by work placements, on the range of career options that are available to them.

Speaking as a Member, I will conclude with a few comments on the report. Unfortunately, it seems that the time allocated is never enough, but all that I will say is this: we need to ensure that a working group is set up between the four Departments and even their Committees. I put the challenge out to the Chairs of the four Committees — Employment and Learning, Education, Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and Culture, Arts and Leisure (CAL) — to come together with the various reports that have been referred to in the House, such as the CAL Committee report, today's report and work that has been carried out by my Committee on some of the issues.

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

Mr Storey: Together, the Committees can prove that there is valuable work that we can do, if it is not going to happen through the Ministers who are responsible for those Departments. I support the motion.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the Assembly on the Employment and Learning Committee's inquiry into careers education, information, advice and guidance. I commend the substantial work carried out by the Committee. I recognise the depth and breadth of the evidence provided to it, and the inquiry has highlighted many notable issues. Together with my colleague Minister O'Dowd, I welcome the report.

Although we will take time to study the report in detail and respond formally to the Committee on each of its recommendations, I can announce today that the Minister of Education and I have agreed to begin a formal review of the careers strategy and careers provision. The review will take into account the recommendations of the Employment and Learning Committee inquiry report.

I cannot overstate the importance to the transformation of our economy of effectively investing in our people and developing their skills. Therefore, I believe that good careers policy and delivery structures should be considered a foundation stone of a strong economy, and key to that is ensuring a good match between supply and demand.

Although much has been achieved from the implementation of the existing strategy for

careers information and guidance, *Preparing for Success*, I firmly believe that it is now time for a reinvigoration of careers policy and delivery. The need for change has been, in no small part, highlighted by the work of the Committee.

Before I discuss my vision for the way forward, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight some of the successes and positive changes that have resulted from the existing careers strategy. The all-age strategy for careers education, information, advice and guidance, *Preparing for Success*, was launched in 2009. Its overall objective was to ensure that young people and adults had access to impartial advice and guidance, had an equal opportunity to reach their full potential and were able to contribute positively to their community and the local economy.

Both Departments have been supported by a cross-sector advisory group, which included representatives from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, business and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). In 2011, membership was extended to include representatives from Queen's University, the University of Ulster, Colleges NI and schools. I would like to thank the group for its efforts in ensuring that actions were delivered and for its helpful contributions to ongoing service improvements. A full evaluation report on *Preparing for Success* is being produced and will be available at the end of the year.

There are two main actors in the delivery of careers services: careers teachers in schools, who develop employability skills and a general knowledge of the world of work; and careers advisers from my Department, who provide personalised and impartial advice and guidance tailored to suit the needs of the individual. To help schools, the Education and Training Inspectorate developed quality standards to improve how careers education is taught across the curriculum from primary school through to post-primary school. The ETI now routinely reports on the quality of careers education.

Schools continue to engage with the business sector to explore how businesses can play an even greater role in careers education. The recent CBI survey of primary and post-primary schools and business leaders aims to measure and assess the effectiveness of that engagement and point up areas for attention in developing the skills and knowledge needed to grow the economy. The Committee report refers to that issue, and I agree with its recommendation that the planned careers strategy consider how career-related learning

between schools and business can be improved.

As a result of the strategy, my Department now has formal partnership agreements with 98% of post-primary schools, all further education colleges and all training organisations. Those arrangements have delivered results. The Careers Service now provides impartial advice to 92% of pupils in year 12. That figure was below 80% before the implementation of the strategy. In addition, my Department receives a complete list of all pupils in year 10 from all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. That enables us to ensure that no child misses out, even if he or she is not attending school because of ill health or other reasons or has transferred to alternative education provision. We also have formal agreements with the Youth Justice Agency and the health and social care trusts to ensure that young people in danger of becoming socially excluded are supported fully by the Careers Service.

Of course, careers guidance is not just for young people. The service is available to all, irrespective of age or ability. In 2009-2010, over 3,500 adults availed themselves of careers guidance. By March 2013, that figure had risen to over 15,000. Many of those adults were unemployed as a result of the economic downturn.

Preparing for Success recognised that parents have a vital role in supporting young people to make appropriate career decisions. In acknowledgement of that, the Careers Service published a guide for parents in March 2013. It is intended to enable parents to support their children's plans and to understand the range of options and support available at key transition stages. It highlights the importance of parents encouraging their child to research information about current trends and future employment opportunities and to consider those against their child's abilities and aspirations.

Those are just some examples of what has been achieved to date.

Although the *Preparing for Success* strategy has laid the foundations necessary for continual improvement of careers services, there is still more to be done. As I mentioned at the outset, a review of careers will be initiated that presents a way forward for Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that Northern Ireland has a careers service that reflects the needs of a modern, vibrant and dynamic 21st century economy in which all individuals, regardless of age or aspiration, have access to independent

and quality advice and guidance on the full range of opportunities available to them.

The review will concentrate on the role of the careers teacher, the careers adviser, employers, parents and other key influencers and providers of education and training opportunities. In conducting the review, we will also consult key stakeholders in industry, education and experts in the field of careers education and guidance, including those who provided evidence to the inquiry. Consultation with service users, including young people, will also be important in shaping future provision.

Although the terms of reference are still being finalised, I would like to share with Members some of the early thinking on a few of the issues that I would like the review to address, some of which have already been highlighted in the Committee inquiry report. Those include the need to strengthen and embed links between education providers and industry; making sure that work experience is meaningful and well planned; utilising different modes of delivery including improving online support and consistency of approach; ensuring that all young people, irrespective of ability, have access to impartial careers advice at appropriate stages; improving and promoting access for the wider population, including those who are in work and those who are not; and strengthening the role that up-to-date labour market information plays in informing education, training and careers decisions.

I believe that the changing face of the labour market and the rapidly evolving global economy requires careers policy and delivery to move to a new phase. Job opportunities in the future will tend to be increasingly concentrated in high-skill sectors of the economy, often requiring strong skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. We must ensure that everyone receives impartial, timely and focused careers advice and guidance on those opportunities, allowing them to make the right choices to maximise their potential.

I firmly believe that a key feature of careers delivery in the future will be to maximise participation of young people in the labour market. The local labour market has become increasingly complex and difficult to navigate, particularly for those who are entering it for the first time. An estimated 24,000 young people enter the local labour market each year, with differing ages and qualification levels. It will be important for Northern Ireland's future prospects that individuals do not become detached from the labour market. That will be a

key focus for the Careers Service as we move forward.

Effectively mobilising our young people will be critical in fully maximising our potential and opportunity for economic growth. In particular, good careers advice is a key aspect of squaring the circle between levels of youth unemployment existing alongside skills pressures in certain sectors. That is a point that was drawn out by a number of contributors to the debate.

Another key avenue lies through apprenticeships. Earlier this year, I announced a review of apprenticeships. I believe that we need to get the message out to our young people, their parents and schools that apprenticeships are a really valuable way of securing an excellent career, enabling the young person to obtain qualifications while gaining experience and progressing in their career through a route that is of equal value and prestige to the more traditional university pathway.

The Careers Service will have a key role to play in facilitating access to a new, innovative apprenticeship model that is consistent with the highest standards of vocational education and training and structured to deliver our future skills needs. To achieve that aspiration, I will explore the possibility of using the skills of the Careers Service to act as a gatekeeper to the options that are provided post-16. We want to ensure that we maximise the return on this investment, not only to the individual but the local economy overall.

Sound and impartial pre-entry advice and guidance, with ongoing mentoring and support that is focused on outcomes, is at the heart of a successful transition from education to work. I feel strongly that our young people must be given the opportunity to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills that are essential to becoming our future wealth creators, entrepreneurs, employers and employees. That has intensified the need for high-quality careers education and guidance to allow them to respond positively in a fast-changing, increasingly globalised workplace.

3.45 pm

That is why I believe that all young people, regardless of ability or aspiration, should have the right to access independent careers advice and guidance. I will explore how that should be achieved, including, if necessary, a statutory right to access.

For those who are temporarily excluded from the labour market, we will build on the work that is already progressing through Pathways to Success, which is the NEET strategy, to mentor and support young people not in employment, education or training.

Another key area where work is needed, which is also highlighted in the Committee report, is the need to support young people with learning disabilities and their families in the transition from school to education, training or employment. A number of Members highlighted that during the debate, and it touches on other areas that are of deep interest to the Committee and to the Assembly as a whole. I understand that, in the near future, the Committee intends to take forward some more detailed work on the issue at a more general level, not just specifically on careers.

Careers advisers already work in partnership with schools, other professionals and agencies to ensure that young people are aware of post-school opportunity progression routes and lifelong learning to help them to develop and fulfil their potential. I would like to develop that work further, taking account of best practice in other countries.

Currently, one of the biggest challenges facing Northern Ireland businesses is finding the right people to help them to grow. Recruiting and developing young people is a great way to build a dynamic and productive workforce. They have the talent and skills to help businesses to succeed. I believe that work experience is key to bridging the gap between education and the world of work. At its broadest and best, work experience can open young people's eyes to jobs that they have never thought of, help people to understand the market value of STEM subjects and help to inform career decisions. It offers young people a chance to prove themselves to an employer and helps to instil the attitudes and behaviours that are expected at work. We need to invest much further in the soft skills that employers so frequently cite.

A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report highlighted that the countries in Europe with the lowest rate of youth unemployment provide the best work experience opportunities for their young people. Together with the Department of Education, my Department will develop work experiences for our young people that are much more meaningful and inspiring. We will introduce all our young people, regardless of ability or aspiration, to a range of career opportunities. In particular, I would like to see a focus on the growth in employment sectors

such as business and financial services, including ICT, advanced manufacturing and engineering, life and health sciences, agrifood, and the creative industries. We will challenge assumptions and preconceptions about some areas of work that are not attracting the right calibre of talent in sufficient numbers but that offer excellent career opportunities both at home and internationally.

One key aspect of that is combating gender stereotypes. I made a statement to the Assembly in June this year setting out the gender imbalances that exist across our training and education system and in the labour market. I also set out the consequences that flow from that. Put simply, we cannot expect to compete in the global marketplace if we are not making the most effective use of our local marketplace of talent. I believe that there is a need for the key influencers of young people, including parents, to participate in that process, and I will work with groups such as Parenting NI to see how we could better achieve that result. Working with employers, as well as engagement by the business community, will be key. I encourage employers to work with us to help to build the workforce that they need for the future. It is important to ensure that education and skills outcomes are more closely aligned with the economy's current and future needs.

Moving on to developing the Careers Service for adults, in this dynamic economy, many people expect to change jobs or working patterns several times over their working life. For some, that event is forced on them through illness, caring responsibilities, redundancy or through otherwise being unemployed. Making the right, informed decision at those key transition points about further training or education is vital to future success. That is why I am committed to the principle of an all-age Careers Service that supports the individual to make the right choices for them and their families.

The Careers Service already works closely with the employment service, but I will strengthen and extend the support that careers advisers can provide to people so that they maximise the opportunities available. I also see a significant role for the Careers Service in supporting those in work who want to progress up the career ladder. Therefore, I will explore the possibility of underpinning the support provided through initiatives like Assured Skills and Skills Solutions with tailored careers guidance.

Economic globalisation and digital technology have changed the way that people see and access things. I agree with the Committee's recommendation that we should establish an

inclusive and fit-for-purpose careers website. However, I do not believe that a website provision should be the end of our aspirations. Already, the Careers Service pages on NI Direct feature consistently in the top five most viewed pages within the education, learning and skills theme. Since April 2013, over 113,000 people have viewed careers information on NI Direct. We will continue to develop our online offering through the NI Direct portal to allow more people to get the help they need in the way they wish to access it.

However, there are a range of additional modes of delivery that could also be examined. Some of those could focus on specific client groups, for example, working with the community and voluntary sector to reach young people who are NEET, or working with employers and industry bodies to support people in work. We will look at examples of best practice elsewhere and consult with key stakeholders to ensure that we achieve the best possible outcomes, irrespective of the mode of delivery.

Those are just some of the issues that I would like to explore through the review of the careers strategy, many of which have been highlighted in the Committee report. The Committee can take some reassurance from the systematic manner in which we went through the recommendations it made in its inquiry into those who are not in employment, education or training, which were integrated into the final 'Pathways to Success' document.

The key driver for me is making sure that every person in Northern Ireland, irrespective of their age or ability, has the right to access the impartial careers guidance that he or she needs to help them fulfil their ambitions and contribute to the economy and the wider community. I hope that that has given some sense of what is emerging in terms of careers education, information, advice and guidance, and I look forward to working with the Committee — indeed, several Committees — during the course of the review. I am sure that that goes for my colleague Minister O'Dowd as well.

We are currently finalising the terms of reference for the review, and hope to progress that in the very near future. It will be an issue of priority for both Departments, because we appreciate and understand the importance of getting it right and ensuring not just that we address the skills offering in Northern Ireland but that we play our part in the wider transformation that the Assembly and wider society want to see.

In conclusion, I again commend the Committee for its detailed work on the issue and congratulate my party colleague for his initiative in bringing the issue forward. I also commend the two Chairs of the Committee over the life of the inquiry for their work in taking it forward, and, indeed, all of the members of the Committee for their attention to the issue, alongside the Committee staff. I concur that it is a tremendous and very detailed piece of work. We will study it in great depth and ensure that it is given proper and due consideration in our ongoing work across both my Department and the Department of Education.

Mr Buchanan: As Deputy Chair of the Committee, I rise to wind up the debate. I thank everyone who took part in this important debate around the Chamber. In rising to support the motion, I thank the Members for all of the contributions that they have made. I think it is perhaps one of the better reports to have been brought before the House. I also join the Chairman in thanking the Minister for Employment and Learning for responding to the issues raised. It is clear that the Committee's inquiry has proved to be a very valuable piece of work that has provided useful information and recommendations to the Minister and his officials which they can now take forward to improve careers provision in Northern Ireland.

I echo the Chairman's thanks to the Committee and Committee staff for their work on the inquiry. The Committee staff have done an excellent amount of work on the inquiry.

It was a heavy workload, but the inquiry provided good evidence, so our best thanks goes to them.

The terms of reference for the inquiry covered a broad area, and, although it is as thorough as it could be, the report asks the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to give more detailed consideration to specific concerns. The Committee has only limited resources, and there is work that we must leave to the Ministers to undertake. I hope that, following this debate, the Ministers will take on board the recommendations in the report and do what has to be done to move the careers strategy forward.

As has already been outlined, the Committee's primary purpose in undertaking the inquiry was to look closely at concerns that were raised about careers provision and to provide the Department with a direction of travel ahead of its review of the careers strategy Preparing for Success. The debate reflected how important good careers advice is and how important it is

to the economy. Most Members who spoke mentioned the importance of a good Careers Service to the economy.

The business sector's interest in the inquiry was testimony to how important it viewed careers advice to be. If one thing is taken from the inquiry, it should be that there is a willingness from the business sector to help with future careers provision. The Department needs to harness that willingness much more strategically. Submissions to the inquiry from the business community pointed to a lack of trained and qualified careers staff in post-primary schools. The report states:

"The CBI believes that it is imperative that all careers staff within DEL, Schools and Colleges and Universities commit to continuous professional development and remain up to date with qualification types, progression routes and future employment opportunities."

If we want to make a difference, that must be incorporated into the new careers strategy. The report adds:

"The CBI argues that to help careers staff to advise pupils on pursuing careers in business and the skills and qualifications that employers value they should be encouraged to undertake industry experience as part of their CPD to gain a fuller appreciation of business."

Perhaps one of the gaps has been that careers teachers do not have a knowledge of what happens in the business sector. When they do not have a hands-on, full knowledge and grasp of business, it creates a difficulty in providing advice to young people who are looking to go into the sector. That needs to be fully considered by the Departments.

I thank Robin Swann, Chair of the Committee, for his contribution and for setting the scene for the inquiry report. He raised the Committee's concerns about the poor advice given to students and pupils and explained why it launched an inquiry into the issue. Although I heard some people seeking to take some credit for bringing this issue forward for an inquiry, all parties on the Committee were concerned about this matter and felt that we needed an inquiry if we wanted to see change in the careers sector in order to make an improvement and ensure that young people got the correct advice that they needed to move into employment.

4.00 pm

The Chair pointed to the fact that it is our duty and responsibility to ensure that we put the needs of our pupils first. I think that that is one of the most important things to come out of the debate.

I thank my colleague Mr Hilditch for highlighting the need for better collaboration between the various organisations that offer advice on careers and for pointing to some of the barriers noted in the report that some people face in gaining careers support. Mr Hilditch referred to those with disabilities. Such barriers need to be broken down and overcome in order to help those people get into a place of employment.

Ms McGahan emphasised the skills gap facing Northern Ireland and the major role that the Careers Service plays in signposting individuals to the range of available jobs and the routes into them. There is no doubt that the Careers Service provides signposting. However, if that signposting service is not operating or is not pointing in the right direction, our young people will be pointed in completely the wrong direction. If we look back over the past number of years, we can see that that is what has happened. Young people have been pointed in the wrong direction and have not been given the advice that they should have been given. That needs to change.

Mr Rogers, speaking on behalf of the SDLP, drew Members' attention to the importance of beginning careers advice at a young age in primary schools and widening the horizons of what jobs are available before children make subject choices that close off future opportunities. I think that it is very important that we get careers advice into our primary schools. Again, that is an area where the current system is lacking. That must be taken on board if we want to see a change in the sector.

Mr Lyttle highlighted the issue that led to the inquiry, which is the inconsistency of approach across schools in offering careers advice and guidance. Mr Lyttle also drew Members' attention to the Committee's recommendation on dealing with the barriers that people with learning difficulties face in accessing good careers advice.

I was particularly glad to hear from my colleague Miss Michelle McIlveen, Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, who supported the Committee's recommendations. She drew attention to the fact that the Committee highlighted the CAL Committee's

report on the creative industries and noted how the reports complement each other. The fact that the two reports complement each other represents important progress that will, hopefully, help us to move forward.

Mr McCann highlighted the lack of a coordinated approach to career guidance provision and pointed to the fact that many of the businesses that provided evidence to the Committee had registered concerns about that. He also pointed to the many good things that the Careers Service in Northern Ireland has to offer, but he said that there seems to be conflicting and confusing advice. The conflicting messages being given to our young people was one of the concerns that the Committee had when considering whether to bring forward this inquiry.

Mr Alastair Ross noted that we live in a changing and increasingly technological economy, and that our higher and further education sectors need to better reflect that. On a positive note, he pointed out that, in Northern Ireland today, there exists the opportunity for individuals to work for world-leading global companies. I think that we have to focus on and capture that. He also said that young people coming through schools today will be training for jobs that have not been created yet, perhaps in a different sector. That is forward-thinking; it is a strategic vision that needs to be captured and brought into the report if we want to make it meaningful, purposeful and deliverable.

Danny Kinahan helpfully pointed out that, in response to the report, the Minister must bring forward not just platitudes but action plans, targets and timelines for how he will respond to the recommendations. Of course, the Committee waits for that level of response. It is important that we have the action plan, the targets and the timelines so that this is not another report that is left sitting on the shelf. We must ensure that action is taken, targets are put in place, timelines are set and delivery is forthcoming.

When Basil McCrea got up to speak, he said that he was speaking as an independent. I was wondering whether he had now left or resigned from NI21 and was going to start another party. I see that he is not in his seat to respond. He reminded Members that our universities need to react to the needs of businesses as much as to the request of students. His point that the Department should work harder to convince parents to persuade their children to choose technology subjects and careers is well founded.

Sammy Douglas praised individual teachers, careers advisers and parents who do so much, and he said that there needs to be action to improve the poor careers provision, inconsistency and lack of information. He also said that what information is available is hard to digest.

Mr Flanagan pointed out that there are significant skills for young people to learn at FE colleges and that young people need to gain good work experience. In pointing to that, he noted the good work that colleges are doing in the creative industries and in the media.

My colleague and Chair of the Education Committee, Mervyn Storey, commended the report as excellent and said that it was being supported by the Education Committee. He referred to the STEM recommendations and to recent correspondence from the Education Minister that pointed to his unwillingness to move forward with STEM, especially in the primary sector. Again, we will have to work on that. He also proposed that there should be a working group between DEL, DETI, the Department of Education and DCAL, and he challenged the four Chairs of the four Committees to come together to seek to put that in place so that we can move forward with this inquiry.

The Minister referred to a number of issues and the need for change, as has been highlighted by the Committee. I accept from the Minister the range of organisations that he works with. I wonder how well that is coordinated and whether they are all giving similar advice. That is the problem and the difficulty. The Minister is right that more needs to be done, and the Committee will wait with interest to see how the terms of reference for the review reflect the report.

I see that my time is almost gone. I am sure that everyone in here today will agree that it has been a useful and very positive debate on a very important issue. The Committee looks forward to the Minister's written responses to the recommendations and to working with him to take them forward so that, together, we can ensure that Northern Ireland has a structure for careers education, information, advice and guidance that is fit for purpose for the people using it and for our economic future. Once again, I thank all Members for their contributions and thank the Minister for sitting in on the entire debate and for his contribution. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Inquiry into Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland [NIA 141/11-15]; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Private Members' Business

Broadcasting Powers

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

Ms McCorley: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explore with the Secretary of State the potential for transferring broadcasting powers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to her Department and for funds for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund to be transferred and mainstreamed.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. Tá an rún seo an-tábhacht. Today's debate is very important. Its focus is on broadcasting powers, with a view to exploring the potential for the transfer of those powers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Britain to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in the North of Ireland. I wish to make the case that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure should be seeking to discuss the potential for such a move with the British Secretary of State without delay. Further to that, I wish to argue that funding for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund be transferred and put onto a secure footing by having them both mainstreamed.

There are a host of practical and operational reasons why it would be a good thing to have powers over broadcasting devolved to the North, an idea that is also being promoted in Scotland and Wales. The main argument, in my view, for such a move is to create an environment in which decisions on what is broadcast are the result of a local decision-making process. Currently, a small number of programmes are made in the North, utilising local talent and resources and reflecting life and culture as we know it. Ach níl go leor ann. However, there are not enough of them. So we need the Minister to begin the conversation

whereby those matters can be discussed and, hopefully, arrive at the conclusion that the powers will be transferred.

Cad chuige ar chóir dúinn amharc ar an chuid is mó de chláir a rinneadh do phobal eile ach nach bhfuil baint acu le saol áirithe s'againne? Why should we have to watch a majority of programmes that have been designed for other communities but which do not reflect our way of life? Why should we not have a greater say in what we watch? That leads me to my next point. The Irish language community makes up a sizeable section of our society. Those Irish speakers and Ulster-Scots communities have the right to have their experience of life reflected in what they see on a TV screen. Although there is no doubt that there have been improvements in recent years — níl dabht ar bith faoi sin — it has happened in quite a haphazard way and still does not have secure funding. Surely that cannot be the most appropriate way to make provision for what is a significant section of the population.

I will give some further information — le tuilleadh eolais a thabhairt: the Irish Language Broadcast Fund, just like the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund, is covered by a number of pieces of legislation, which ought to have resulted in many more positive outcomes than has been achieved thus far. The purpose of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund is to fund the Irish language television and film industry in the North. I wish to lay out the case for the Irish language in the understanding that the case for Ulster Scots follows but, as is acknowledged, is at a different stage of development. The broadcast fund is a fairly recent phenomenon, taking its origins from a commitment in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which states that the British Government will:

"seek more effective ways to encourage and provide financial support for Irish language film and television production".

Following the Good Friday Agreement, the UK Government signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in March 2000, which took effect from July 2001. Among its commitments to Irish were the following:

"to the extent that radio and television carry out a public service mission ... to make adequate provision so that broadcasters offer programmes in the regional or minority languages".

Further to that, the committee of experts for the charter visited the North over the years and reported extensively on how the implementation

of the charter has been achieved. It noted that the undertaking to make adequate provision for Irish language broadcasting was not currently fulfilled for television. It was also recommended by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which oversees the charter, that the authorities, as a matter of priority, improve public service television provision in Irish.

Between the visit of the committee of experts and the publication of its report, the joint declaration of the British and Irish Governments of April 2003, another international agreement, included the following commitment:

"the British Government will take all the necessary steps to secure the establishment as soon as possible, following receipt of the final business case in April, of a fund for financial support for Irish language film and television production."

Finally, finally, in 2005, seven years after the original commitment was made, the Irish Language Broadcast Fund was eventually set up. So, clearly, there are legal commitments and requirements in relation to the Irish language and Ulster Scots that have yet to be adequately fulfilled and for which the funds are still not secured.

4.15 pm

The reality is that we have a thriving and growing Irish language community in the North whose needs must be met. Included in that community is a vibrant education sector, in which thousands of pupils are being educated entirely through the medium of Irish, and they wish to live their life through that medium.

Agus san earnáil sin tá na mílte dalta scoile ag dul fríd scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, agus ba mhaith leo saol s'acu a bheith go hiomlán fríd mheán na Gaeilge. It is very welcome that, nowadays, the Irish language is seen and heard much more often on television than has ever been the case. That is largely due to the influence of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund. In surveys of the effects of the fund, respondents have been extremely positive about the difference that it has made. Their comments are enlightening and give a real insight into the benefits that can accrue as a result of making positive interventions such as this. Respondents spoke about the significance of the fund in providing quality, diversity and richness and how it has made an important contribution to the survival of the language. One contributor commented on the fund:

"It is crucial as such programmes would not happen without this Fund. Without it there would be minimal development of Irish language especially in the TV sector ... For the process of learning to be a worthwhile project, Irish has to have social side to it. In the past 20 years there have been significant developments for example Gaeltacht housing developments, development in newspapers arts and theatre. However the biggest development is the ILBF which provides the biggest amount of financial aid to encourage training in a very important part of our social life, TV. Such developments are crucial and you need them all amalgamated to succeed."

Clearly, the Irish Language Broadcast Fund has made a huge difference. Tá sé soiléir le feiceáil go bhfuil difir an-mhór deánta mar gheall ar an chiste craoltóireachta Gaeilge. That is great, but it must be built on. Is rud iontach é sin, ach caithfidimid tógáil air. It is high time that it was given a secure funding basis and allowed to grow and flourish. It is no longer acceptable for short-term funding to be the basis on which to build the broadcasting industry here in the North. It is wrong that those depending on this funding should go staggering from one funding process period to another, sitting in crisis waiting for continuation to come about. Furthermore, it is an affront that the amount of financial investment for the Irish language is minimal compared with that given to minority languages in Scotland and Wales. In 2011-12, for instance, a total of £119.3 million was spent on Welsh broadcast funding; in Scotland, £19.8 million was spent; for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund, £3.53 million was spent. There is a huge disparity in the figures, particularly when you look at the fact that 93,000 people in Scotland have knowledge of the Scots Gaelic language, whereas almost 185,000 people in the North of Ireland have knowledge of Irish. There needs to be greater equality when those funds are being given out. Per person, £19 was spent on Irish and £213 on Scots Gaelic. I call for equality of treatment for the Irish language. Iarraim ar chomhionannas don Ghaeilge.

On that note, I call on the Minister to take whatever action possible to ensure that the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund are transferred to the North and put on a mainstream funding footing as soon as possible. I call on her to explore the potential for transferring broadcasting powers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to her Department here in the North. Molaim an rún.

Mrs McKeivitt: I beg to move the following amendment:

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

"through the establishment of an independent advisory panel in order to assess the viability of any potential transfer and of the transfer and mainstreaming of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund."

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure must discuss with her counterpart at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport the potential for transferring broadcasting powers to this region and for funds for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund to be transferred and mainstreamed. The SDLP believes that such progress would be greatly enhanced by the establishment of an open and transparent independent advisory panel.

The panel would consider which powers should be transferred, the implications that any transfer of powers would have, what would be a realistic timescale for such a transfer and what procedures must be in place to allow for the transfer to be carried out smoothly and without interruption to existing broadcasters. It would also help to cast an objective eye over any potential transfer of broadcasting powers and mainstreaming of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund to this region.

Like other parties in the Chamber, the SDLP has taken a keen interest in the Commission on Devolution in Wales, known to many as the Silk Commission. It was established to review the present financial and constitutional arrangements in Wales, including devolving powers, such as fiscal taxing and broadcasting, from London to Cardiff. We can learn lessons from that commission as it has taken evidence from lots of organisations, including some in the political arena. Its report is due to be published in the spring of 2014. The commission is made up of eight unpaid members drawn from Welsh business, academia, the four main political parties and civic society. If the House agrees to the establishment of an independent advisory panel, it is my hope it would have similar demographic and political representation and be of little or no cost to the public taxpayer.

Fifteen years after the Good Friday Agreement, we still have no real movement on promoting the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots dialect. Although the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has paid lip service to actively promoting languages, it has failed to deliver the

kind of changes that we have seen in Scotland and Wales, for example. The agreement stipulates:

"the British Government will in particular in relation to the Irish language, where appropriate and where people so desire it: take resolute action to promote the language; facilitate and encourage the use of the language in speech and writing in public and private life where there is appropriate demand; seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language ... explore urgently with the relevant British authorities, and in co-operation with the Irish broadcasting authorities, the scope for achieving more widespread availability of Teilifis na Gaeilge in Northern Ireland ... encourage the parties to secure agreement that this commitment will be sustained by a new Assembly in a way which takes account of the desires and sensitivities of the community."

The Department must fulfil its obligations under the Good Friday Agreement and actively promote the use of the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots dialect. In reality, we have failed to match the successes of other jurisdictions and, in particular, Wales and Scotland. We must look to other jurisdictions for examples of best practice. Setting up an independent advisory panel that assesses the viability of any potential transfer of broadcasting powers would help to inform us how we could best promote the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots dialect. A panel of experts could advise on the best way forward.

I hope that the Assembly can reach some sort of consensus today regarding the need to do a lot more to promote our culture and, in particular, the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots dialect. There is a real potential to do that and to fulfil the pledge that was made 15 years ago in the Good Friday Agreement to facilitate and encourage the use of language.

I am very concerned that a petition of concern might be used. I think that that is a bit heavy-handed. The proposal that we make in our amendment is for an independent panel; it does not commit the Assembly to go beyond that.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I speak initially as the Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. The Committee has not discussed this issue in any depth or at any length and has no agreed view. The

transfer of broadcasting powers to DCAL is a significant issue that requires lengthy debate and scoping. Although the Committee would be supportive of more local programming, I am aware that it is a huge step for us to move to transferring the broadcasting function to DCAL. To date, the Committee has not received representations, that I am aware of, to advocate such a transfer.

The motion specifically mentions the Irish and Ulster-Scots language broadcast funds. Those funds come directly from DCMS to Northern Ireland Screen for management. The Committee is not aware of any substantive issues around that. It has not received any approaches around a transfer of the funds to DCAL or for them to be mainstreamed. Without a Committee position on the issue, I am not able to support the motion or otherwise on the Committee's behalf.

However, from a personal perspective, I will say that the DUP, as a devolutionist party, supports maximum devolution to Stormont. However, devolution must make sense and must be beneficial to Northern Ireland.

The matter is too important to be discussed in a 90-minute debate. The Executive should consider further devolution issues carefully before any proposals are agreed. In fact, I am not aware that this has ever even been mentioned at the Executive. So, in the light of that, it would be wholly inappropriate for a decision such as this to be made on the hoof or on the basis of a short Assembly debate. Certainly, we would be prepared to consider the issue in the longer term and to take all the arguments into account. In any event, further devolution issues should be for the First and deputy First Minister to negotiate with the UK Government. I believe that this debate is premature and is driven by a relatively small political agenda on language funding.

With limited information about the implications or otherwise of this proposal, my argument and that of others will be mainly academic. We must also ask whether Westminster is disposed to giving this power away. Even if that is the case, many risks are associated with this that are not immediately apparent. If broadcasting is to be devolved, who will pay for it? How will non-partisan protection of the BBC, for example, be enshrined? Does the BBC, or whatever might replace it, become subject to whoever happens to hold the culture, arts and leisure portfolio? That needs to be carefully considered. Broadcasters need to be responsive to their audience, but they also need journalistic and creative freedom.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree with me that, whatever the views of the parties around this Chamber on the BBC, it can be a unifying factor for the United Kingdom where devolution is concerned?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I agree with the Member; furthermore, I think that we also need to be aware that there may be implications for Ofcom as a UK body. That will undoubtedly cause difficulties for commercial companies.

Were the language broadcast funds to be transferred, where would the money come from? It is unrealistic to believe that London will simply hand this over, so who will pay for it? Will it come out of an already small DCAL budget, or will the BBC have to fund it out of the licence fee? Has consideration been given to the impact on local programming? In the future, will English-language programmes be competing against minority-language programmes?

I am aware that, from an Ulster-Scots perspective, the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund has struggled to live up to its potential. A concern about the amount of Ulster-Scots content has been raised with Northern Ireland Screen, and certainly a substantial improvement in the project-proposal process is required. Perhaps the Minister might look instead to how she could improve what we have in place. An appropriate way forward could be to develop the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund so that it has the ability to commission programmes. No doubt, there are issues for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund that have actually prompted this debate. That is why we are here today.

Call me cynical, but I do not believe that the rationale for the motion is the benefit of Northern Ireland at this time. I believe that the party on the opposite Benches is at risk of politicising both languages in a way that they have not been before, and I suggest that the Minister look at other ways to address the issue rather than the one that she is pursuing. My party will not be supporting either the motion or the amendment, and a petition of concern has been tabled to ensure longer-term consideration of this matter.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party firmly believes that culture should be a source of enrichment to all.

We recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in linguistic diversity. As laid out in the Good Friday Agreement, we must do what we can to promote that.

It is no secret that my party wants to see a fully comprehensive languages Act. That Act would include not only indigenous minority languages but minority ethnic languages and sign languages. The motion calls for the transfer of broadcasting powers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to DCAL, no doubt with the view that a Northern Ireland Minister is better qualified to address issues facing broadcasting here than a Minister in Westminster.

4.30 pm

There are obvious arguments on both sides, so it makes sense to look at the findings from Wales and Scotland, which have explored the possibility of devolving broadcasting powers. The Calman Commission, which looked at devolution in Scotland, did not recommend the further devolution of broadcasting to the Scottish Government, except that the Scottish member of the BBC Trust should be appointed by Scottish Ministers. The Richard Commission, which looked at Welsh devolution after the first Assembly, also did not recommend that broadcasting be devolved. The general consensus from across the devolved Administrations is that greater influence can be sought over broadcasting by examining other proposals, such as devolved Administrations making appointments to the BBC Trust and Ofcom or devolving community radio licensing decisions. There is room for improvement.

The Ofcom review of broadcasting in the regions in 2009 led the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to write a report on television broadcasting in Northern Ireland. The Ofcom review highlighted that there was an absence of the portrayal of everyday life in Northern Ireland that did not focus on the Troubles and that we felt left behind in broadcasting terms. Although there is a need to cater more for indigenous minority viewers, perhaps, rather than focusing too much on the devolution of broadcasting, it makes sense to make improvements under the current structures.

I wonder whether Members in the Chamber are aware that there is a five-minute programme on Radio Ulster that is broadcast in Cantonese. It is called 'Wah Yan Jee Sing', and it is broadcast every Wednesday evening. Although short,

that programme is an example of adapting to local needs.

The Northern Ireland Executive does not have the best track record of agreeing on public policy challenges that relate to the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots dialect. For example, the Irish language strategy has not appeared, despite the Good Friday Agreement stipulating that there should be one. The Irish language strategy consultation finished in November 2012, and responses were published in April 2013. I am not aware of any further developments. Perhaps the Minister could update us on that. Likewise, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was recently unable to agree a report to the EU on language issues. My point is that, if broadcasting and funding were devolved, would they really improve the quality of locally relevant programmes, or are we just attempting to politicise languages?

The SDLP amendment seems to be the more sensible suggestion. An independent panel would need to thoroughly scrutinise the viability of this proposal, specifically on the issue of costings. Would we be able to fund this ourselves without the subsidies from the rest of the UK's licence fee payers? At the risk of sounding blunt, it strikes me that there is little point in devolving broadcasting into a situation in which decision-making can be slow or, indeed, characterised by total deadlock. That has particularly been the case —

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

Ms Lo: — on matters that relate to languages and other cultural issues.

Mr Irwin: On the surface, the motion appears to be a request for an undertaking of considerable magnitude. As the vice-Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I can say that this issue has not been on the table for discussion in any great detail in the Committee. It seems, therefore, to be an issue that should be subject to an in-depth discussion in the Committee as a first step. That would allow Members from all parties to fully debate and discuss the ramifications of such a proposal based on research and, indeed, an informed foundation.

I do not believe that the motion that is before the House is the appropriate method of reaching any sort of consensus, especially when Members are really only getting a short time to give their views in the House without the formal intervention of the Committee, based on

its usual methods of investigation and evidence gathering. I am therefore very reluctant to endorse the motion, and I would value the input of our Committee's resources to explore this issue to really get a firm grip on issues such as pricing and any appetite for such a transfer.

I hasten to add that I do not get the remotest sense that there is an appetite for this type of devolved function, and with the current arrangements in place until 2016 with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Northern Ireland Screen, and with no issues previously raised with that arrangement, I am at a loss as to why the motion has been brought to the Floor.

Further to that, I am concerned that this has not been raised at the Executive, which is where such an issue should be discussed. On the basis of those facts alone, I do not intend to say any more on the issue until a proper investigation of the situation has been carried out.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo agus ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoin leasú fosta.

I support the motion, which calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explore with the Secretary of State the potential for the transfer of broadcasting powers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to her Department and for funds for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund to be transferred and mainstreamed. That would be very much in line with the organic and considerable development of the language and culture indigenous to this region. It is work that will consolidate and strengthen local film and television production and secure jobs in the sector.

I declare an interest as in 2002 I trained on the first Irish Language Broadcast Fund sponsored training course on film and television production, which was held at Springvale. That opened many doors for all who participated, then and since. Indeed, when I look at the individuals and companies still producing for broadcast on BBC, TG4 and RTÉ, as well as in film production, I realise the economic potential in this. More than half of those who trained on the first course are still actively involved in the industry. Many more have been involved since.

People like Pilib MacCathmhaoil from Tobar Productions have been prolific at supplying fascinating programmes that have been broadcast locally and exported, adding value to

the tourism potential for the region. Likewise, Meadh Uí hÍr from Stirling Film and Television Productions, Helen Bergin, Martin Campbell, Sinéad Ingoldsby and many others, have contributed positively to the image of the North and promotion of the languages. The economic benefits of that cannot be quantified, but they are undoubtedly of great economic importance and job potential.

There is a call in the other devolved regions for powers and responsibilities to be transferred, and there is also a desire that broadcasting become more localised and relevant to the areas where TV and film is produced. Other countries across Europe have already devolved a greater level of responsibility for broadcasting than there is in Britain or here. That has meant a more balanced product in places such as Catalonia, Germany and Spain. Greater autonomy in broadcasting policy will undoubtedly result in a better local product.

The commitment under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which has been signed up to by the British Government, states that resolute action should be taken to promote the minority languages. What better way to do that than encourage broadcasting in those languages? Article 11 of the European Charter is clear in the responsibilities of Governments towards the development of TV channels in minority languages. Likewise, the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement have committed the British Government to protect and enhance both Irish and Ulster Scots. Again, what better way to do that than through the most popular medium of film and television? The significant and increasing numbers of people who speak Irish and have an interest in Ulster Scots need to adequately catered for.

I am not 100% convinced that what the amendment proposes is critical to the transfer and mainstreaming of the language funds, but I remain open to the idea and can support the amendment. However, I am at a loss as to why a petition of concern has been brought forward and can only make assumptions on that matter. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Hilditch: This is a rather complex and confusing issue. Like others, I am somewhat surprised to see this motion before the House. Most motions that come before the House are of a topical nature or have a background of the relevant Committee having undertaken some investigatory work. However, even the research papers that have been made available appear to struggle to put any meat on the bones. It is like a proposal that has been

plucked from the sky — not Sky TV — perhaps in more ways than one.

I do not believe that there is a lobby out there to have the current arrangements changed, other than a willingness to enhance the resources for existing local programming, which sits nicely with inclusion on the national network. One of the main concerns is around the infrastructure and capabilities of such a small area, with a population really equivalent to a large city. Where would the additional finance and resources come from? I would hazard a guess that that would be substantial. What would the governance arrangements entail, and how would protection be afforded on a number of fronts? Ms Lo spoke about a few of those issues.

Those are not just my questions. Last week, having seen the topic on the agenda for debate, I sought some views and opinions from people in my community. I did not get particularly positive feedback. Most people felt that a small Department such as DCAL could do a lot more to make additional resources available for local programming, which has been mentioned. That would be a realistic step for the Department to take initially. Many will remember in the area of sport, particularly Irish League football, that when budgets were tight and resources were being prioritised, that was the type of programming that suffered. The reality is that, when many of the priorities of the current Government are assessed, this issue will not register on the radar for a vast majority of our people, particularly with the choice of broadcasting options available, of which there are a number already clearly catering for cultural diversity. Why reinvent the wheel? It cannot just be a case of devolution for devolution's sake. We must see clear benefits.

It is true that my party has put down a petition of concern on the matter, and, I believe, rightly so, because there is a distinct lack of information and clarity at this time. Questions also arise as to the responsibility for decision-making in this process. One would have thought that this would be a clear matter for the Northern Ireland Executive and not just an opportunity today — hopefully, not an opportunity for a party, group or Department — to go off on a solo run or act outside the Executive. That said, I have listened to the debate, and I look forward to further answers and information being made available.

Mr Swann: The motion talks about broadcasting but, having listened to some of the debate, it seems to be more about extensive additional funding for languages. To make

things clear, our overarching policy is to support a minority languages strategy. However, the motion continues to judge the subject in an old measurement of orange or green. Ms McCorley referred to that in her opening statement when she talked about the disparity between the Irish language body and the ability of the Ulster-Scots language body. There is simply no point in this motion, other than it being simply another one of Sinn Féin's cheap power games and an attempt to detach Northern Ireland from the UK as much as possible.

It amazes me that such an important issue as this has not come before the Committee or the Executive. I remember my time on the CAL Committee when the BBC in Northern Ireland was talking about reducing jobs and the cutbacks that it was facing because of financial restrictions being placed by the BBC centrally. The party that is bringing this motion was one of the most vociferous that the BBC should retain its funding, its licence fees and as many BBC jobs as possible in Northern Ireland. If this power were devolved to Northern Ireland, it confuses me how we would somehow have enough funding to maintain the jobs, the quality of broadcasting and everything else that was fought for at that time.

We already have local-content broadcasting in Northern Ireland. The BBC has a division called BBC Northern Ireland with headquarters in Belfast. As well as broadcasting standard UK-wide programmes, BBC Northern Ireland produces local content, including a news breakout called 'BBC Newslines'.

4.45 pm

I refer to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's third report of the 2009-2010 session. Recommendation 4 of the report was:

"We welcome the BBC's commitment to raise its level of production in Northern Ireland to a level broadly proportionate to Northern Ireland's population share of the UK. We note that it intends to do so by 2016, but strongly urge the BBC to make every effort to reach 3% of production from Northern Ireland more rapidly than that and to treat the 3% target not as a 'ceiling', but as a minimum."

I think that that is where the Minister's efforts would be better placed. Rather than looking for devolution of the BBC powers, she should be working to make sure that those targets are

being met and that we in Northern Ireland are getting as much out of the BBC as we can.

That report also recommended:

"the Minister for Creative Industries visits Northern Ireland as soon as possible, and thereafter, at least once a year subsequently to become fully acquainted with the broadcast environment there."

I ask this question to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and to the party that has proposed the motion: have you engaged with the relevant UK Minister, rather than simply making calls on the Secretary of State, as you are now, to bring about the devolution of the matter?

Mr Ó hOisín referred to the Irish language and how important it is, as did Ms Lo. In the 2011 census, 11% of the population of Northern Ireland claimed some knowledge of Irish, and 3.7% reported being able to speak, read, write and understand Irish. In another survey from 1991, 1% of respondents said that they spoke it as their main language, as do only 25% of people in the Republic of Ireland. We must accept the fact that society has moved on and that we are now a multicultural and multilingual society. Since 1998, we have seen an influx of people from a number of European countries including Portugal, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. We also have a significant number of Chinese speakers in the Province. Those are minority languages, and I would argue that all of them are used in everyday speech by more people in the Province than speak Irish.

Given how little we do with the powers that Stormont currently has in a variety of fields, I am not persuaded that now is the time to consider devolving yet more powers in an area as influential and central to public thinking as broadcasting. I oppose the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. While we are discussing broadcasting, it is ironic that someone has a mobile phone that is playing havoc with the recording system. I am sure that it is causing great difficulties for Hansard. Members, please check your mobile phones.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt daoibh as an rún a mholadh, agus ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt dó. *[Interruption.]* That is my Irish teacher telling me that I am doing well. *[Interruption.]* I do not know what that is about.

I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the House. It is important to have this debate on broadcasting, the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund. Even though broadcast responsibilities and powers are a reserved matter, as Members pointed out, I am committed, where possible, to ensuring that the specific characteristics and needs of the North are fully considered in the development of a broadcasting policy. I fully support the motion to explore the potential for transferring broadcasting powers to the Assembly.

There has been various correspondence, and, indeed, a meeting as recently as a few days ago. I have written to Jeremy Hunt and met and written to Ed Vaizey since taking up office. I recognised the significant impact that film and television production has had on our local creative industries and our economy. I wrote to encourage and support the introduction of a television drama tax incentive similar to the incentive provided for film. I continue to want to ensure that there is full, authentic, accurate and more up-to-date portrayals of the North on the networks, which will show us a fuller picture of a modern and evolving society. I also want to make sure that the role that diverse groups play in our society is reflected and that people are not portrayed by a single or singular aspect of their identity, such as ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or religious or political opinion.

In the past, I believe that British broadcasters have neglected their obligation to here, leaving it relatively invisible on some of their networks. We were the least well served region with regard to the network production that reflected and portrayed our culture and way of life, and in the amount of network programming produced here.

The situation has improved slightly, but there is still some way to go. In order to explore how best this can be achieved, I have had a series of productive meetings with relevant stakeholders to explore how the commissioning of locally made programmes can be increased and how opportunities for local companies improved.

Broadcasting is of enormous democratic, economic and cultural importance. The content broadcast on the BBC, RTÉ, Channel 4, TG4 and UTV touches all our lives here and shapes our opinions on local and international subjects, yet broadcasting policies and funding remain the responsibility of Westminster. TV is an extremely powerful medium of cultural expression in the modern world, and what is or is not broadcast on television massively

influences almost every facet of life. That applies to whether local GAA, rugby or soccer matches are available on our televisions; the way that news is reported and presented; what regions appear most often on our screens; arts coverage; whether the North is portrayed in television drama on any of the channels; and, equally importantly, what image of the North is portrayed to the rest of these islands and beyond.

Broadcasting is also of huge economic value, with higher-than-average-value jobs. We have, through the Programme for Government, prioritised the importance of the creative industries. Broadcasting is the anchor for all development within the creative industries. Broadcasting is incredibly important, but if the Assembly has no real power or direct influence over broadcasting, whether on the BBC, RTÉ, Channel 4, TG4 or UTV — we can work only around the margins with stakeholders to ensure that citizens of the North are well served by the broadcasting services for which they pay.

With government responsibility for broadcasting being held at Westminster, there is a huge accountability gap. The Assembly should have a say on the future of broadcasting here and the licensing of broadcasters — in the case of the BBC, a charter — must at the very least include a mechanism that makes the broadcasting companies accountable and answerable to the Assembly. Minister Foster and I wrote to Ofcom stressing that there should be a guaranteed quota of programming produced here. That was in response to Channel 4 having a poor track record in commissioning programmes from the North. Rather than making that point through a consultation, in which it may or may not be taken seriously, I believe that we should have the statutory right to influence that decision by Channel 4, which has had a massive impact here.

The BBC charter will be renewed soon. The last time that it was renewed, no one here had any say over the commitments that the BBC made to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It all took place behind closed doors, yet the consequences of that charter included many job losses in the local BBC and its services. It also, once again, failed to ensure that we received full cultural and economic value from the BBC network production that our population size and devolved status demand.

So, the BBC in particular, but not on its own, should not be able to short-change any of us. If we have a role in the regulation and accountability of the BBC and other broadcast

networks, we could ensure that the North is properly represented and valued across the whole networks. It is clear to me that audiences here are not getting the broadcast service that they deserve. Broadcasting power and production have seldom moved beyond the south-east of England, and our production facilities have remained largely dependent on network commissioning.

Broadcasting and television production are at the heart of our creative industries. They are increasingly becoming a powerhouse industry, a significant employer, a sizeable generator of wealth and one of the keys to the future prosperity of all economies. We have produced and will continue to produce talented writers, directors and producers, but many of them have had to leave our shores to find success, and that is not acceptable. I want our creative talent to have the opportunity to be successful while living and working here. Devolving broadcasting powers would bring that possibility closer.

The Irish Language Broadcast Fund has been extremely successful from the outset, delivering high-quality Irish language programming and, equally importantly, a steady stream of trainees every year since 2006. The Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund has been successful in producing high-quality Ulster-Scots content. The Irish Language Broadcast Fund supports a range of great programming, including recent local dramas 'Seacht' and 'Scúp'. Outside the BBC's small in-house budget, the fund provides all support for Irish language programming in the North and supports many training schemes and apprenticeships.

The Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund has also supported programming of cultural importance in the North, such as a documentary on the Ulster covenant and recent documentaries on forgotten people, such as Amy Carmichael and Lord Kelvin. Those critical language and cultural funds are controlled exclusively by DCMS, and their future is unclear. However, there are very positive indications from Westminster that the funding may be secured beyond 2015-16. It is wrong that we have no control over the funds and cannot ensure that they have a future funding mechanism, like the 10-year renewing commitments made to the BBC, that is appropriate to their importance.

I want to touch on comments made by Members during the debate. It is any Member's prerogative to table a motion. Members do not need Committee consent to do so, and I do not think that the Committee was saying that. Rosaleen McCorley, in moving the motion,

outlined the importance of legislation and said that commitments were made in legislation to broadcasting and, certainly, to the Irish language and Ulster-Scots broadcast funds.

On the amendment proposed by Karen McKeivitt, I have nothing to fear from an independent advisory panel. Anything that provides more accountability is better. However, it is rich of the SDLP to lecture my party on its commitment to the Irish language given that it has never raised the issue. It certainly did not raise it at any negotiations on the Programme for Government's commitments. I am happy to support the amendment because it is about greater transparency.

On the contribution from the Chair and others, this debate, like any other, is really about scoping out where there is need. It is disappointing that the motion and amendment were not supported and were on the receiving end of a DUP blocking mechanism. It is important that we scope out what is good for devolution and, particularly, for people in the creative industries. At that stage, you have to go in front of the Executive and through the whole process for an Order in Council and Executive consent. It was never going to be the case that this would be done as a solo run. I find it strange that people have taken defensive positions, particularly on broadcasting funds that provide opportunities in areas that have not received the attention that they deserve.

I am very happy that the debate has happened. We need debates, particularly when we do not agree, because that is how we ascertain people's opinion.

In conclusion, I support the motion unreservedly. I have already raised some broadcasting issues with Theresa Villiers and intend to do so again at further meetings. I welcome the opportunity to explore the potential to transfer broadcasting powers and the mainstreaming of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund. I will continue to take that forward.

I accept that the devolution of broadcasting requires complex policy discussions comprising of constitutional, economic, cultural and other elements that will require considerable expert analysis. I am not naive to that at all, and I do not think that the Members who proposed the motion are either. However, that should not prevent us from doing what is right and fair to people here. If the Executive had responsibility for broadcasting, we would be in a much better place to take action to realise the potential of

the broadcasting industry. It is an industry that needs our support.

I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím an babhta seo le tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú agus le hachóimriú a dhéanamh ar an díospóireacht inniu.

My party supports the principle that we should investigate seriously the transfer of broadcasting powers. However, we believe that it would be important to establish an independent advisory panel to assess the viability of that transfer and that of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund.

I realise that a valid petition of concern has been laid down. I think that that it is rather heavy-handed, as Mrs McKevitt said, because, as far as I know, there is nothing to stop the Minister establishing an advisory panel and scoping out the issue whether the Assembly votes the motion through or not. So it is a little over the top to have a petition of concern on this one.

5.00 pm

Let us start off with the first part of the motion, which is to do with the transfer of broadcasting powers. What should an independent advisory panel do to help assess the advantages of such a transfer? To my mind, widespread and informed consultation is needed with the major stakeholders about the powers that could be usefully and effectively transferred. How would that be done? Would it be done through Westminster legislation? Would we have our own communications Act here? Would we be asking for all powers or just some powers?

If all powers were to be transferred, what would the implications be for existing broadcasters and broadcasting? Would we still have a regional BBC, for example, or would we have to set up our own regional public service broadcasting company here? If so, how would we finance that? Would we collect the licence fee here ourselves? If we did, would there be enough resources in that to fund a regional public broadcasting company? What would the future relationship be with the BBC under such circumstances? Would we have to buy in BBC network productions and could we afford to do that? Would local production companies lose the facility to bid for BBC network productions,

which take in larger resources and are a major element in sustaining the film industry here?

Those are all important and relevant questions that we need to examine closely and consult on. We believe that an independent panel is the best way to do that. The panel should also look at ways of ensuring that international agreements such as the Good Friday Agreement are enshrined in the broadcast and production structure as appropriate in any future legislation. We believe that, as part of its terms of reference, the panel should look at ways of guaranteeing that sufficient funds are made available to the Irish language and Ulster-Scots broadcasting funds. It should help to ensure that the level of such funding reflects the growing interest in both languages.

We note that the Deloitte report on the Irish Language Broadcast Fund gave it a very clear endorsement. There is a necessity for the index-linking of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund to be within the remit of an independent panel. I believe that such a panel should examine whether funding is best mainstreamed in the block grant or in the DCMS budget. The panel should also look at the need to establish a long-term broadcasting framework for Northern Ireland that would ensure a stable and well-funded television landscape to serve the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots communities.

Such a framework should have the potential to create sufficient opportunity for the continuing

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

Mr D Bradley: — and wider distribution of programming in the Irish language and Ulster Scots, and —

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

Mr D Bradley: — the potential to use programmes in Scotland and the rest of Ireland.

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

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and I do not have any problem with the amendment.

The motion asks the Assembly to support a call for the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to meet the Secretary of State to explore:

"the potential for transferring broadcasting powers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to her Department and for funds for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund to be transferred and mainstreamed."

The recent investigation by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster showed that programmes about everyday life in Northern Ireland were, in the Committee report's own terms, almost invisible, the reason being that major television companies, which are mostly centred around London, had failed to commission such programmes.

The director of the BBC in Northern Ireland, Peter Johnston, said that he:

"accepted that Northern Ireland had not received sufficient attention in the past".

The Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee said that it found serious neglect of its public service broadcast responsibilities, and the Committee further called on the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to take its responsibility for broadcasting in Northern Ireland more seriously and for the Minister with responsibility for broadcasting to visit the Province to find out more about local broadcasting difficulties. At present, Northern Ireland is the least served of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in network product and also in the amount of network that is produced here. It also fares worst in the provision of minority-language broadcasting.

The St Andrews Agreement of October 2006 committed the UK Government to working with the incoming Executive to protect and enhance the development of the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages. It is interesting that Wales and Scotland are in the same frame of mind. There is no better time for the Minister to explore with the Secretary of State the potential for transferring the broadcasting process. Any discussion should also include the funding that has been set aside for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund.

We are told that one of the reasons for keeping broadcasting here as a reserved matter is so that finances can be pooled to allow major investment to be made in a range of programmes. However, that is in stark contrast to the findings of the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. So, let us have the discussion between the Minister and the Secretary of State. What is there to fear? Why, today, do we have a petition of concern? Does

the party on the opposite Benches not trust the Westminster Government, or has paranoia taken over? There are so many checks and balances to go through that nobody should be scared of any discussions. That is what this is all about: pure discussion.

I will comment on some of the things that were said. It was interesting to hear what Michelle McIlveen, the Chairman of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, had to say. She said that the Committee is in support of more programmes but that it needs more time to debate the issue. That is fine. However, she also said that the DUP supports devolution. I wonder, then, why we have a petition of concern. She said that broadcasting needs to be responsive to its customers, and that is what we are asking it to do: be responsive to their customers. That is what part of the discussion will be about. Those discussions will then come back to us.

Rosie McCorley talked about creating an environment for programmes that are based locally. There has been movement on that in recent years but very little, and it has been done in a very haphazard way.

Karen McKeivitt talked about an independent advisory panel. There may be merit in that, and, again, it could be worthy of discussion. Such a body would have the same remit and spread as the Welsh model. Again, we looked into that a wee bit, and we are not far away from the Welsh model. It is having the same problem.

William Irwin stated that the subject should be discussed at the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. That is something that the Committee can bring forward.

Robin Swann called the matter a "cheap" Sinn Féin power game. The only people in here today who talked about power games, cheap political games or anything to do with politics or power were from the party on the opposite Benches. Nobody from the Sinn Féin Benches mentioned that at all. We put the programme in front of you. However, as soon as we talk about the Irish language or languages at all, the wagons circle and the shutters go up, and we are talking about cheap power games. You talk about how we fought to retain jobs at the BBC. We did, and we are quite proud of that. However, what we are talking about today, which is having discussions to get broadcasting brought back here, could also create jobs. We do not know that, and you cannot guess what is going to happen until you discuss it. It may be that it will not come about, but, until we know

better, it should at least be discussed to see whether it could create jobs. To go down the road of cheap politics like that, to use your pun, takes away from your own argument and actually adds to our argument.

David Hilditch did not believe that there is a lobby out there, but there is a very strong lobby out there. People kept talking about finance, where all that was coming from and who was going to pay etc. They are quite legitimate questions to ask, but those are the sorts of questions that can be brought back after negotiations, talks or meetings between the Minister here and the Secretary of State. Those are the kinds of things that we can find out and bring back to the relevant Committee and the Assembly. I do think they are relevant questions, and those are the kinds of questions that I would expect people to ask, but they are the kinds of things that you would find out through any meetings like that.

I support the motion and the amendment. I ask the Assembly to think about it overnight and, if you vote on it tomorrow morning, vote positively and support the Minister to have those tentative talks. We have a long way to go on that if talks take place. It is not a power game or cheap politics. It is something that a sizeable number of members of the community would like.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As petitions of concern have been tabled on both the motion and the amendment, the votes will be taken as the first item of business tomorrow morning.

Adjourned at 5.11 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the Official Report (Hansard) process.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

RARE DISEASES: UK STRATEGY

Published at 9.30 am on Friday 22 November 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a Written Statement to the Assembly to advise Members of the publication of the United Kingdom (UK) Strategy for Rare Diseases.

In 2012, the Department of Health in London launched a UK-wide public consultation on a Plan for Rare Diseases which sought to set in motion the work to integrate all current and future initiatives at local, regional and national levels in the field of rare diseases.

I now wish to advise that the work on the UK Strategy for Rare Diseases by the Health Departments in the four UK countries is complete, and the Strategy is to be published today, 22 November 2013. Should Members wish to obtain a copy of the report, it can be found on my Department's website www.dhsspsni.gov.uk.

The UK Strategy is intended as an overarching framework document that sets out a shared vision for improving the lives of people with rare diseases, with a focus on patients and their families/carers. It includes a number of UK-wide strategic commitments for each UK nation to consider, and identifies key milestones up to 2020 for implementation of the Strategy.

While the Strategy is for the UK as a whole, its implementation in the four UK nations will be determined by each devolved administration to best meet the needs of their respective populations. The Northern Ireland implementation is being taken forward by the NI Rare Diseases Stakeholder Group led by my Department, which comprises representation from Queen's University, the University of Ulster, the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency, the Regional Genetics Centre and the Northern Ireland Rare Disease

Partnership which represents patients' interests.

The Northern Ireland Rare Diseases Implementation Plan will be published in early 2014.

There are between 5,000 and 8,000 rare diseases. Each one affects less than 0.1% of the UK's population, but together they affect the lives of 3 million people. I and the other health ministers across the UK are committed to improving services for people with rare diseases, and we share the hope that, through this Strategy and the forthcoming implementation plans for each of the four UK countries, we can significantly raise the profile of rare diseases, leading to better outcomes for the many people who live with these conditions as well as their families and carers



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