

# Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 30 September 2013  
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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 30 September 2013

*The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

### Committee on Standards and Privileges

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before we begin today's business, I wish to inform the House that the Speaker has received the resignation of Mr Kieran McCarthy as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The nominating officer of the Alliance Party, Mr David Ford, has nominated Ms Anna Lo to fill the vacancy with effect from 30 September 2013. Ms Lo has accepted the nomination. The Speaker is satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met, and I confirm that Ms Lo has taken up office as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges today.

### Committee Membership

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

*Resolved:*

*That Mrs Dolores Kelly replace Mr Mark H Durkan as a member of the Committee for Social Development; and that Mr Fearghal McKinney be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — [Mr P Ramsey.]*

## Ministerial Statement

### GCSEs and A Levels: Fundamental Review

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh faoin toradh ar an athbhreithniú ar cháilíochtaí GCSE agus A leibhéal. I want to make a statement regarding the outcome of the review of GCSE and A-level qualifications. I commissioned the review from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on 1 October last year, and it has now reported.

The review was commissioned following a series of policy announcements in England. Those announcements sparked considerable debate about high-stakes qualifications across these islands. The Secretary of State for Education in England is at liberty to determine what he feels is right for England, but, when the brand is equally shared on a tripartite basis with the North of Ireland and Wales, he and his officials need to give due regard to the implications for those jurisdictions.

As I outlined last year, I do not believe that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the GCSEs and A levels that we have, and CCEA's report confirms that. The report contains 49 recommendations and helpfully condenses into one vehicle a range of short-term, medium-term and long-term actions that will provide a way forward for our next generation of learners.

The report draws on evidence provided by a wide range of stakeholders and was overseen by an expert group. The group consisted of employers, teachers, the FE and HE sectors and education specialists from the South of Ireland and Scotland. I would personally like to thank that expert group for its contribution to this significant work. This is only the start of the process. I am sure that we will continue to call on the members of that group for their views on the detailed work to be taken forward.

The report helpfully builds on the direction of travel that I have set in place here over the past two years, one that is based on engagement with as wide a range of stakeholders as possible, including the teaching profession. That involves listening to their views, challenging and testing those views and using their expertise and experience to determine the most appropriate way forward for our learners and our economy.

Among the recommendations is that GCSEs and A levels be retained in the short to medium term, with revisions to reflect the needs of our education policy and the economy. This would allow the qualifications to be developed to support our curriculum and reflect the needs of employers and higher education. There is also a need for flexibility in the design of GCSE and A-level qualifications to meet individual subject requirements. The qualification system should meet the needs of as wide a range of learners as possible. It is important that study from the age of 14 to 18 enables all our young people to develop wider skills that are of particular importance in further study and employment.

I recognise that the teaching profession is wary of the implications of significant change, particularly in high-stakes qualifications. However, faced with the choice of defining our own policy or following the Secretary of State for Education's proposed reforms in England, there was unanimous support for the former. We will lead our own path and determine our own future.

This review makes recommendations on how GCSEs and A levels might be taken forward and how the focus on improvements in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills could be supported by the qualifications system. It is important that a qualifications system provides opportunities for every young person to achieve his or her potential.

Recommendations have been made to develop, support and value alternative qualification routes to the traditional GCSE and A-level pathway. I welcome that, as it supports the aims of the entitlement framework to provide all our young people with a rich and varied curriculum. The entitlement framework is now statutory in our schools, and the full requirements will be in place by September 2015. It is about providing courses that are relevant to young people, engage and motivate them and provide clear, relevant progression pathways for them to continue in education or move into training or employment. The economy demands that education help young people to prepare for a world of work that is fast

changing and very different from when you or I were at school. In 2011-12, some 94.2% of school leavers remained in education, employment or training. We must continue to work to make sure that labour market information informs careers provision, informs choices and informs young people and their parents at the right time.

Young people who see their time in education as relevant are more likely to stay motivated and engaged with their learning. The currency of qualifications taken by learners in the North of Ireland must be ensured. Work must continue to provide young people here with qualifications that will take them wherever they wish to go. In the longer term, the sustainability of the qualifications strategy will have to be considered, taking account of changes being made to the qualifications in England and Wales and discussions on the use of qualification brand names.

The review draws together lessons from international best practice, and I would like to see that work built on in the longer term to promote continuous improvement in our qualifications. We need to start developing the vision now for the qualifications system that we want in 10 to 15 years' time.

I am satisfied that the report reflects opinions on the need for short-term changes, as well as an imperative to take a longer-term view of the qualifications system here. If necessary, that may include the consideration of a system that is independent from but demonstrably comparable with neighbouring jurisdictions. Given its magnitude and potential impact, I intend to consult on the recommendations in this final report, following which I will announce my decisions on the way forward.

Ba mhaith liom cloisteáil ó CTRí, ó ghairm na múinteoireachta, ó bhoird gobharnóirí, ó fhostóirí, ó thuismitheoirí, agus ó dhaltaí. Cuirim fáilte roimh gach tuairim. I want to hear views from MLAs, the teaching profession, boards of governors, employers, parents and pupils alike. All comments are welcome.

This is an extremely important and thought-provoking piece of work. It confirms where we are now and what we should strive for if we are to compete internationally with the best education provision in the world. I want to assure the Assembly that I will continue to take decisions that are in the best interests of all our young people, decisions that will safeguard their future, build on the positive aspects of our current education system and reach forward to the next quarter of the century to provide an

international educational passport to success. I commend the review to the Assembly and encourage everyone to contribute to the consultation that will follow.

**Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** I thank the Minister for his statement and for facilitating a briefing for me and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education before he came to the House. I encourage him to make the CCEA report, with its 49 recommendations, available to the Committee and to Members of the House as soon as possible.

I note that the Minister referred to concerns about the way forward. I welcome his recognition of the need to maintain the currency. I have been on public record as saying that we need to ensure that the transportability of our qualifications is not reduced to the proverbial Ulster Bank £5 note when it comes to acceptance in other parts of the United Kingdom. I encourage the Minister to do all in his power to ensure that the issue of transportability is maintained.

This was a very short statement on a very big issue. Perhaps, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will indulge me by allowing me to ask the Minister to tell us a little more about what he plans. I welcome the fact, however, that it seems that he is defending a traditional route this afternoon; maybe that might be transportable to other areas in the public domain at the moment.

The Minister has given us some information, but I would appreciate it if he could expand on that. Has he given up on the three-country model of accreditation, and will he consult further with his counterparts in Westminster on the way forward for GCSEs and A levels? Will he outline to the House the alternative qualification routes and progression pathways that he is consulting on? What elements of international best practice will he draw on in his longer-term plans for qualification systems? Finally, will he now begin, as a matter of urgency, the work of producing a 14-to-19 policy to provide an appropriate format for that important issue? Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Education for his questions.

I have not given up on the three-jurisdictions qualifications, but I suspect that others have. They are perfectly entitled to do so, but they have set a pathway that, they believe, suits their requirements and education system and their vision for education. I will continue to

engage with my English and Welsh counterparts on the way forward. We will share our report and its recommendations with them, and I will be happy to take views from them on the way forward around that. Of course, the report will be made immediately available to the Education Committee and will be available online to all Members and the public as soon as this debate is over.

The Member asked about the international best practice that I referred to. If there are to be radical changes to our education system, the next steps, as proposed in the report, are that we should take up to three years carrying out research and consultation before we reach that stage. That is only right and proper. If we are talking about a fundamental change to our examination systems, I do not believe that that is achievable or desirable in the short term. Let us do it in a planned, mapped-out way that is based on best practice and research, and we will take evidence from international best practice from wherever it may come. That is the way forward.

My officials and officials from DEL continue to engage on the 14- to 19-year-old strategy. I accept that we have not reached a conclusion on it, although one of the recommendations in the report is that we have to move forward with a 14-to-19 strategy. I will take that into account when deciding the way forward.

### 12.30 pm

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Like the Committee Chair, I welcome the statement. Given the confusion among parents, families and teaching staff about some of the proposed changes in England, it is important to put on record that our Minister has acted to protect the exams that we have and to quell any confusion in this part of Ireland over Michael Gove's changes. That is to be welcomed. Will the Minister outline how he will ensure that our local exams remain robust and that qualifications remain portable throughout these islands?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his question. Portability and the currency of exams has been foremost in my mind, and the expert review group touched on the issue several times in the report. I want to continue to see a situation in which students and potential employees can travel across these groups of islands with their examination results. In my statement, I referred to qualifications as a passport, and that is vital for our young people and our economy. It was commented on the

radio this morning that it is surely not beyond our wit to achieve that, and I do not believe that it is. For example, the Scots run a completely different examinations system from England, Wales, us or the South of Ireland, and students are able to transfer back and forth quite easily. The Dublin Government run a different exams system again, and many students travel back and forth. Many international students also travel to our universities here and across the water.

The issue of comparability can and will be resolved. The report refers to the need for the regulatory bodies to engage constantly with one another, and I support that. I believe that discussion and interrogation of one another's exams systems is perfectly possible and that we will be able to move forward with a system in which our young people are able to travel wherever they wish, confident that their exams will be recognised.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis agus as ucht a chuid freagraí go dtí seo. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an aontaíonn sé liom gur chóir líon na n-ábhar feidhmeach a mhéadú ag an dá leibhéal, GCSE agus ard leibhéal, sa dóigh is gur féidir cúrsaí oideachais agus cúrsaí fostaíochta a cheangal níos dlúithe le chéile?

Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers. Does he agree that it would be useful to increase the number of applied subjects at GCSE and A level? That would help to ensure that education and employment were more closely aligned.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question.

The report examined that issue in some detail. We have to place equal value on academic studies and what are commonly known as vocational studies. The report looked at alternative examinations for students who do not wish to go on to study A levels and may wish to go down other pathways. We have to examine that further as part of our work on the future of our examinations systems. The report recommends that that should happen over the next 10 to 15 years, although there will be shorter-term measures.

There are many pathways for our young people, and we have to be conscious that not all young people may want or be able to follow an academic route. It may not suit their needs

or, I have to say, those of the economy. As a society, as parents, as careers advisers and as employers, we have to place equal value on academic and vocational qualifications. The report concentrates on that and makes recommendations on the need to bring forward a new set of qualifications that are valued equally beside all other qualifications.

**Mr Kinahan:** I thank the Minister for his statement and very much welcome its broad direction.

From the meetings of the Westminster Education Committee, we note that the differences that have arisen over GCSEs are deeply regrettable. What action has the Minister taken to try to stop these divisions occurring? Will he elaborate on what he said about what he is putting in place to make sure that we know exactly what the Welsh and English will be doing? As an aside, did he or the Department respond to Ofqual's consultation on GCSEs?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not in a position to comment on what the Westminster Committee said about qualifications there. As I have said, the Secretary of State for Education in England is perfectly entitled to make whatever decisions he feels fit about his education system. However, I would offer some caution: where it affects the three jurisdictions, better communication and consultation should be in place before those decisions are made. I intend to share this report with my English and Welsh counterparts and, indeed, with my Scottish and Dublin counterparts for qualifications moving forward. I want to ensure that there are discussions and communications between the three.

I am not sure whether the Department responded to the Ofqual report that you refer to. I suspect that it was largely about changes that were taking place in England. We have had discussions. I have met Michael Gove, and my officials have had discussions with his officials on the way forward on GCSEs. Others are making decisions that they feel are right for their jurisdiction, and we have had to react to that. I think that the pathway mapped out in this report allows us to react to it in a measured, thought-out way without making any knee-jerk reactions and, at the same time, ensures that our qualifications are mutually respected across these islands, that they are portable and that the currency of the qualifications can and will be respected.



**Mrs Cochrane:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I am beginning to feel my age a little bit, because I can remember when the O levels were changed over to GCSEs. I was not in the first year of that but a couple of years after. Others have mentioned portability. Does the Minister envisage that, to best prepare our young people, there may be a need for flexibility to teach some subjects slightly differently? For example, the modular system could be continued for some so that certain topics can be explored further over a longer period, whereas others may be better tested under formal exam conditions at the end of year 12.

**Mr O'Dowd:** When Mr Gove previously made changes to the modular and linear system in England, we carried out a consultation with the sectors, and it came back that our education system valued modular education in the appropriate subjects. I decided at that time to keep modular in the appropriate subjects, and I intend to do that. The report published today also suggests that we should move forward with modular and linear. There is no research that would direct us to either being the superior model, although many of our local educationalists tell me that modular learning suits our young people. It allows them to progress at their pace, although it continues to test them and to ensure that young people's abilities are brought out. So, I intend to continue with modular and linear.

I met with a number of the English and Welsh exam bodies last week. They are going to change their system to provide only linear. They wanted to know whether I was going to allow them to continue to operate here. I said that I would allow them to continue to operate here as long as their exams did not corrupt our curriculum and we were not making changes to our curriculum to meet the needs of exam bodies rather than the other way round. I have asked my officials to continue those engagements. I found the engagement with the bodies very useful, and I have asked my officials to continue to engage with them on the way forward as we work our way through this report and as they, as exam bodies, work their way through the changes that are being implemented in England.

**Mr Craig:** Minister, your statement says that the report was provided by a:

*"range of stakeholders and was overseen by an expert group."*

That group consisted of employers, teachers, FE and HE sectors and education specialists

from, as I noted with interest, the South of Ireland and Scotland. I ask the obvious question: why were there not experts there from England and Wales as well? Probably the key thing that we want to maintain in these islands is equivalence of exam qualifications. As you state, this is also only the start of the process. Can we have a guarantee from the Minister that that expertise will be there in future?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I assure the Member that my officials and I continue to engage with the Department for Education in England. My officials and I have a very good working relationship with the Department for Education and Skills in Wales. There is a constant flow of information and, for want of a better term, pre-warning of any proposals that are coming from Wales in this direction.

The Department for Education in England has its way of working, and that is how it works. I cannot direct it to work in a different way. It has made its decisions on how it operates and works. At times, those do not offer the most helpful way forward, but we keep lines of communication open and will continue to do so.

The expert group was brought together from the different jurisdictions because Scotland is not going through a change programme. Scotland has its examinations in place, and they are completely different from what we have. The South has a different exam system again. It went through some changes to the junior certificate, but it brought a different perspective to the GCSE debate. That is why I thought that it was of value to the expert group. The list of members on the expert group is in the report, and it brings together a mixed range of backgrounds and career pathways, which added only value to our report. The group was useful, and I thank it for its work.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. In the best interests of all our young people and their academic abilities, what long-term opportunities may be created with the changes announced today?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not wish to pre-empt the long-term changes to our qualification system. Although I am on record as saying that I would not have commenced down this pathway at this stage, the decisions that were made in England allowed us to start a journey, which we have yet to map out the final pathway to. It has allowed us to start a debate about our qualifications, what they should be and what they should test and bring out in our young people.

In the long term, I want to see a qualification system that allows all our young people to cherish their education and allows us to test the abilities of all our young people. I want a system that our universities, employers, parents and young people understand and in which we value all qualifications. As I said to a previous contributor, we should place equal value on academic and vocational qualifications because the changing nature of our economy means that our young people have to be flexible in their skills and in their ability to deliver those skills in the workplace.

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the Minister for his statement, which mentioned the focus on improvements in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Given that we heard again on the radio this morning about ICT skills shortages, will the Minister give assurances that he will consult those sectors to endeavour to have relevant, up-to-date IT and ICT GCSEs that fit the market?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I can assure the Member of that. Over the past number of weeks, I have engaged with employers from a wide range of backgrounds, including those who require IT skills in their companies. Those discussions were enlightening about the skills base that exists and the absence of skills. One of our major employers had to go to India to recruit because the appropriately qualified people are not here. That sets alarm bells off in my head right away. I will take a particular interest in the report and its recommendations, particularly around IT, ICT skills and computer science.

I am not convinced that we have got it right just yet or that we start at an early enough age. The report looks at our qualifications, and I also want to see what more we can do in our primary schools with computer science to turn our young people on to that skills base.

### 12.30 pm

**Mr Sheehan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar maidin.

It has been mentioned a number of times this morning that it is important to have equivalent qualifications across these islands. I do not disagree with that. However, it is not more important that whatever qualification system we come up with is based on international best practice? If we use that criterion, then it does not matter where young people go because their qualifications will always be welcomed.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. The simple answer to that is yes, because young people here now compete in an international market. We want to be able to ensure that young people here leave school highly qualified, highly motivated and highly skilled and that we invest in our local economy.

Some young people will choose to travel. We want to attract international investors by ensuring that they can be confident that young people here are highly qualified. That is the way forward. Although it may be very comforting and reassuring at times to look around this group of islands and judge ourselves against the exam systems in England, Scotland, Wales or down South, we have to judge ourselves against the international best. That is where we want to be. I want to see our exam system being examined by others and held up as the way forward. That is where we need to get to in the next number of years.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the evolutionary nature of the whole process. Is it anticipated that there will be increased demand for our qualifications both from students here who do English board exams at present and students from England and Wales who are attracted to the continuation of a modular approach?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As I have said previously, I certainly want our exam system to be held up as an international example of the way forward. As I also said to a previous contributor, I am allowing an open market to remain with the English and Welsh boards delivering exams here as long as that does not corrupt our curriculum. If it starts to corrupt our curriculum, I will have to look at that again. Throughout the report, the consultation which led to its development, previous changes that I made to the examination system and the consultation contained in that, modular exams were highly regarded in the education system. I intend to keep them. I would like others to look at our examples and say that they want them in their schools also. However, as far as I am aware, changes being made in England have completely ruled out modular exams in their system. Again, that is a matter for them.

**Mrs Overend:** I thank the Minister for his statement and his interesting responses so far. Can he detail what Department, public organisation or industry body will, ultimately, be

responsible for informing business and employers about the practical differences between the new qualifications? I believe that there will be concern about the restriction on students' ability to partake of only one resit, particularly in English and maths, as many employers to whom I talk emphasise the need for those subjects. Can the Minister indicate his assessment of the English suggestion that students can resit ad infinitum?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I have to say that I am not comfortable talking about another jurisdiction's decisions. It is for others to do that. We have to ensure that young people who travel through the education system for 12 or 13 years are, at the end of that, capable of passing exams in English and maths which meet the needs of the young person and the economy. That is where we want to be. During a previous consultation, concerns were expressed about the number of resits available and whether that devalued the exam when it was achieved. I accepted those concerns. I believe that the resits that have been offered are appropriate and ensure that young people are tested on ability and that that ability can be expressed in the workplace. I am sorry: I have forgotten the first part of the Member's question. I will take guidance from the Chair on whether there is an opportunity to restate it.

**Mrs Overend:** Can the Minister detail what Department or organisation will inform employers of the difference in qualifications?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As part of the review, I insisted that a wide range of employers were involved in discussions. As we move the report forward and as the consultation is brought to an end, whatever recommendations come out of that, I want to ensure that employers are on board and are part of moving that forward, including the development of new exams, because my discussions over the last period have been very useful.

We all meet and engage regularly with business leaders and employers. There is a separation between education and employers, and we need to close that gap. We need to ensure that our schools understand what employment is going on and what employment opportunities are out there, and vice versa. I do not have the answers to that yet. Hence, we are going out to consultation. Whatever comes out of this, employers and education have to be one and the same.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Minister for his statement and, indeed, his answers so far.

Minister, my concerns are very much the same as those of Mrs Overend. I assume that, for pupils who do GCSEs and A levels in Northern Ireland and decide to go to university, there will be a benchmark against which they can sell their qualifications when looking for employment opportunities. From listening to your answers to Mrs Overend, I am not quite clear whether there is a route for employers, employer organisations or other outside bodies to benchmark the Northern Ireland qualifications against those that will come into being in England. That is particularly important where a young person does not go to university but seeks employment based on his GCSEs and A levels.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The benchmarking of qualifications here against those in England, Wales, Scotland and down South will be carried out by the regulator. There is a system in place to carry out that work. We have to ensure that the regulators engage with each other, which they are, and that the outcomes of that — knowledge, skills etc — are transferred back to employers, parents, schools etc so that when career pathways are being decided in schools, everyone knows what qualifications are required, whether you are staying here or are moving to university elsewhere.

I am not here to say that I have all the answers at this stage. The report poses 49 recommendations. It poses questions to me, as Minister, and to our society about the way forward for qualifications. I am sending that out to consultation. There is no point in me standing here and saying, "These are 49 great recommendations. I have all the answers", because, currently, I do not have all the answers. However, I am confident that, given the research work carried out to date and the recommendations in the report, we will be able to map a steady course through an evolving education system and qualification system into the future. I am confident of that because, when I look around these islands, I see that the Welsh are currently mapping their way through that and the Scottish have done so previously. Their exam systems are highly regarded, the qualifications are transferable and their currency is respected.

Part of the report concentrates on the views of employers. I encourage all Members to read the report and particularly that paragraph. It is quite enlightening to hear the views of the employers who came back to the expert group. I think that that is an important element of the report. As I said to Mrs Overend, moving forward, the views of employers will not be ignored.

**Mr Dallat:** The Minister told us a few times this morning that he does not have all the answers. Is that not why pupils very often fail their exams?

The Minister is, I believe, trying to make school more relevant to the workplace, and we all welcome that. What plans does he have to afford teachers the opportunity to spend time in the workplace? Likewise, what incentives are there for people in the workplace to join the teaching profession?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Perhaps the wrong answer is as bad as no answer. I think that if I were to stand up at this stage — at the start of a consultation process — and say, "Behold, I have all the answers", I would be accused of ignoring the consultation. So let the consultation continue. The report that we are publishing today is very well informed, and I think that Members and educators will find it useful. Let us respond by having a debate about where we want to see our qualification system going in the future.

The question of providing opportunities for teachers to spend time in employment other than education needs to be thrashed out. Are we prepared to finance periods of leave for our teachers to work in industry? I think that we should.

Recently, I have been having conversations with employers about why we are not using more modern technology to bring the classroom into the workplace and vice versa. Many of our leading businesspeople are very busy, but they want to contribute society, and we should use more modern technology to allow those people to come into the classroom via the internet, or whatever way it may be, and let them speak directly to teachers and vice versa.

We are looking at teacher training. We recruit many of our teachers straight out of post-primary school at 18, 19 and 20 years of age. They are highly qualified and motivated, and they are great young people. Perhaps we should recruit them at 25 or 30 years of age to go into training colleges, to allow them the experience of the workplace or different environments before they go into the classroom. However, that question will be posed as part of a review of teacher education.

**Mr Allister:** My concern about where this may be going is its impact on the buying power of our local qualifications. If Secretary of State Gove is making GCSEs and A levels more rigorous in the greater part of the United

Kingdom, namely England, and we cling to the easier processes of modules and assessment, will the losers not be our own students, who emerge with qualifications that will be deemed lesser when compared with those in the majority of the United Kingdom? It is the question of portability. The Minister said that he is interested in that, but he is not interested enough to have had on his expert panel someone from the greater part of the United Kingdom — England — where those changes are being made to understand the whys, wherefores and outworkings. I repeat Mr Craig's question: why was that, and will the Minister seriously address the portability question?

**Mr O'Dowd:** You should not have an inferiority complex about our continuing ability to deliver rigorous exams. What educational research evidence do you use to state that the changes being made in England will make its examination system more rigorous? I challenge you to produce it. I assure you that the research panel, my Department and I, and others have studied this subject intensely, and no one can produce for me the educational research to suggest that the changes being made in England make its examination system more rigorous. There is certainly no research to suggest anything about the changes that we have introduced here or that will maybe flow from our recommendations. However, we will take three years, as proposed in the report, to establish a new examination system. As part of that, we will study what is happening in England and across the world and will end up with a rigorous examination system. It is a severe case of an inferiority complex, which the Member is not usually renowned for, if he believes that, because we do not follow England, our exam system will be easier. There is no research to support your thinking on that, and given your reputation as a man who interrogates subjects, I suggest that you interrogate that one a bit further.

**Mr McCallister:** In the Minister's earlier replies, he spoke about not wanting the process to be insular. How can he guarantee that, when seemingly all we have heard so far is that it will be very much a Northern Ireland model? If he goes down that road, and it becomes insular, how will he benchmark success, and how will we know what success looks like? Indeed, as Mr Allister said, how do you guarantee that standard? How does he stop what is effectively a two-tiered system developing between our secondary schools and grammar schools if they opt for different systems?

12.45 pm

**Mr O'Dowd:** All our schools, regardless of the title on the gate, teach the same curriculum, and the entitlement framework will be across all our schools by 2015. Indeed, it is being rolled out. So all our schools have to be entitlement-framework compliant, which means that they have to teach a wide range of subjects across academia, vocational skills etc. They have to offer those to their pupils. Schools will require an examination system that offers exams for all those young people. So I am not overly concerned that, in some way, two different systems will develop from this.

Throughout the changes announced in England, and their impacts here, we as a Department have been very careful to engage with our local educationalists and learn from best practice across this group of islands and, indeed, elsewhere before making any decisions. The report that I publish today recommends that we take three years to research and evaluate the best way forward to match our exam system with the best in the world.

How will we benchmark it? How do the Scottish benchmark their exam system? It can be done, as Scotland has proved. How does the South of Ireland benchmark its exam system? It can and will be done. The Welsh are moving in a different direction from Mr Gove. Indeed, Mr Gove will have to benchmark his system as well. We should not be thinking that, if there is a break in the GCSE and A-level link, we will be at sea on our own, and it will be impossible for us to compare our exam systems against the best in the world. It is done currently, it will be done in the future, and I have every confidence that, after the work carried out in producing this report, we will have an exam system that we can continue to be proud of.

As I said in my statement, I do not believe that GCSEs and A levels were so fundamentally flawed that they required overhauling at his stage. Others made decisions that gave us the opportunity to do something similar or different, but let us ensure that whatever we do is based not on press releases or statements made elsewhere but on research.

## Executive Committee Business

### Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

**Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice):** I beg to move

*That the draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.*

The Lands Tribunal is a court of record established under the Lands Tribunal and Compensation Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 and deals with a variety of civil disputes. My Department is responsible for the administration of the tribunal and for determining the remuneration of its judiciary. The tribunal's judiciary currently consists of a president, one valuer member and a temporary member, all of whom were appointed by the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission.

The draft order before the House provides for an increase in the remuneration of the tribunal's judiciary, effective from 1 April this year. It is made under powers contained in the 1964 Act, which provides that the draft of the order must be approved by the Assembly. The draft order provides for an increase in the office holders' salaries of 1%. This follows the announcement by the Prime Minister on 14 March that the Government had decided to increase judicial salaries by 1%, based on the recommendation of the Review Body on Senior Salaries.

Judicial salaries were last increased in April 2009. This announcement, therefore, follows the end of a three-year pay freeze. The Department of Finance and Personnel has approved the increase, and I would like to thank the Committee for Justice for its consideration of the draft order and its support for the proposal. I commend the order to the House.

**Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):** I am pleased to speak as Chairman of the Committee. As the Minister outlined, the rule provides for increases in the annual salary of the president and other members of the Lands Tribunal for Northern Ireland. It is in line with the 2013 report of the Review Body on Senior Salaries and the subsequent announcement by the Prime Minister in a written statement in March that the Government had decided that judicial salaries should increase by 1%. On that basis, the Committee agreed that it was content with the

statutory rule, and, therefore, supports the motion today.

Speaking in a personal capacity, I think that there is, perhaps, something for the Department to look at. It seems a little odd that we have to deal with an affirmative resolution procedure for a pay increase in the region of £1,300 to £1,400, and it has to come to the Assembly. Indeed, I think that one individual will not even benefit from this.

Yet we deal with the likes of legal aid, which handles millions of pounds and impacts on the whole legal profession, by way of negative resolution. It seems strange that the 1964 Act requires this detail of debate — if that exciting debate follows — and yet the vast majority of other issues for the Committee are dealt with by way of negative resolution. I am of the view that that should be regularised in order that it be treated in the same fashion as negative resolution. I do not envisage a problem in taking that course of action on this issue. Nevertheless, the 1964 Act requires the Assembly to debate this, and the Committee has indicated its support for the order to go through.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Chair for expressing the Committee's opinion so lucidly, and I agree with Paul Givan in the sentiments that he personally expressed. The fact that the 1964 Act requires this to go through by way of affirmative resolution is no doubt something that, as we tidy up what has not been done right in the period before devolution, we will have to add to, although on this occasion we are blaming the previous Stormont Parliament rather than blaming Westminster, which makes a slight change. He also correctly identified that one of the individual members, because he is the Lord Justice of Appeal, will not be affected by the order. Having noted those interesting historical quirks, I commend the order to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.*

## Committee Business

### Financial Provisions Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** We may have a difficulty continuing in that we do not have a quorum. *[Interruption.]* I call Mr Daithí McKay.

**Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel):** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 December 2013, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill (NIA Bill 22/11-15).*

The Financial Provisions Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 17 June 2013 and received its second reading on 1 July 2013. The Bill consists of six substantive clauses and one schedule.

The main purpose of the Bill is to adjust statutory limits and to address other routine financial matters for various Departments. The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is the lead department, and, therefore, the Finance and Personnel Committee is coordinating the scrutiny of the Bill. However, the Bill includes a range of provisions relating to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of Justice, the Department for Social Development and the Audit Office. The Committee for Finance and Personnel sought early comment from the relevant Assembly Committees and raised issues of relevance in advance of Second Stage. Further written responses have also been invited from interested stakeholders during the Committee Stage.

In respect of the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Committee was recently briefed by departmental officials on two proposed amendments to the Bill that will make provision for rating. On 11 September, officials informed the Committee that the Minister will bring forward these amendments at Consideration Stage. The first amendment concerns the early payment discount and will seek to extend the current discount that is allowed for the early repayment of rates on occupied dwellings to include unoccupied dwellings or empty homes.

The second proposed amendment is technical in nature and will seek to clarify the need for

ratepayers to provide an effective date of occupation to Land and Property Services (LPS). Departmental officials advised that this will allow LPS to get much more accurate information for the purposes of rates billing and, in particular, the backdating of rates. The Committee is due to receive further briefing when the wording of the amendments becomes available.

The Examiner of Statutory Rules has also considered the delegated powers memorandum submitted by DFP, and raised issues in relation to powers of the Department of Justice to make subordinate legislation. We anticipate that that may also result in further amendments tabled for Consideration Stage.

Given the evidence that remains to be collected on the Bill and the content of amendments to be examined, the Committee is seeking an extension to ensure that it can conduct the appropriate level of scrutiny required. The extension is also being sought in the context of a Committee work programme that is fully committed until Halloween recess, with the Committee Stage of the Public Service Pensions Bill taking priority. The proposed date of extension, which has been agreed with the Department, will allow for existing work pressures to be met, as well as any unforeseen business. I therefore seek an extension to the deadline for the Committee Stage until 13 December 2013 to allow the Committee sufficient time to reach a considered position and report on the Bill to the Assembly.

I ask Members to give their support to the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 December 2013, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill (NIA Bill 22/11-15).*

## Private Members' Business

### Exploitation of Children and Young People

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

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes with concern the recent revelations regarding the abuse and exploitation of children and young people; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to liaise with the Minister of Justice to initiate an inquiry to ascertain the prevalence of abuse and exploitation of children both in care and elsewhere; and further calls on all relevant Departments to outline the strategies that will be put in place to safeguard and protect all children and young people.*

I start by reinforcing the last line of the motion, which is that all that we do is about strategies that will protect children and young people. Everything that we do in the House and beyond to highlight and eradicate that abuse needs to be child-centred and about safeguarding and protecting our children and young people, especially those who are most vulnerable.

No one can ignore the public exposure of the issues over the past few weeks. However, we should not be shocked, as the issue was highlighted in a Barnardo's report that was published in 2011. Its research dates back to 2009. In effect, the work is four years old. In fact, I can confirm to the House that a Social Services Inspectorate report titled 'Our Children and Young People — Our Shared Responsibility' was commissioned in 2006. Although the vulnerable nature of young people involved in sexual exploitation is shocking, particularly when we learn that some of them do not even realise that they are being abused, it is just as shocking that reports date back to 2006 in which organisations and agencies were recommended and mandated to respond to the

abuse of children. That, in anybody's terms, is wrong and has failed children.

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

Although I appreciate that a huge amount of work goes on in social services to protect children, the fact remains that 18 children left care facilities over 400 times in an 18-month period. That is nothing short of failure. Although I am not advocating that those children be locked up, we need to ensure that the law is robust so that it enshrines the protection of children as paramount and that that is the judgement taken in all those situations.

'Minimum Standards for Children's Homes' states:

*"The home considers with the placing authority what action should be taken to prevent the child or young person going missing in future."*

It refers to the statutory implementation of the North of Ireland guidance on missing children in homes policy. If a child's whereabouts is known to the PSNI, assistance must be sought. Regional guidance for police involved in residential units was published by the Health and Social Care Board and the PSNI in May 2012. Although it is apparent that child sexual exploitation is not an offence under the Sexual Offences Order 2008, there is enough to act if harbourers are used. Article 21 concerns the arranging or facilitating commission of a sex offence against a child.

**1.00 pm**

So, if options exist within the law, if safeguarding boards are in place and if joint protocols exist, why have we failed these children? Although I very much welcome the Health Minister's change of heart, going from considering appointing an independent expert to reviewing practices and then, finally, to establishing an independent expert-led inquiry, a number of questions still need to be answered. Following his statement, during public interviews the Minister referred to an "investigation". That is not what is required. An inquiry with proper independence, powers to investigate and accountability mechanisms is required. We should not be afraid to learn the lessons, and, if Departments have failed after they have been mandated to act, they will need to be accountable.

The Barnardo's report had six recommendations. Five were in the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the sixth was the responsibility of the Department of Justice. Recommendation 3 requested that the Health and Social Care Board develop a:

*"targeted and fully resourced action plan ... that includes consideration of ... data collection and monitoring; professional competency and capacity; best practice models ... including ... a co-located inter-agency model of response; regional implementation of the sexual exploitation risk assessment tool; resourcing of a regional specialist support service."*

It was recommended that the Public Health Agency develop a public campaign to:

*"raise awareness of the sexual exploitation of children and young people."*

However, at the joint Health and Justice Committee meeting of the past few weeks, we were told that this is only the beginning of some of these processes. I remind Members that all six of those recommendations were commissioned by the Department of Health and were launched publicly in 2011.

I also remind the House that the children order was established in 1995, which is some 18 years ago. That order requires an examination that ensures that the protection of children and young people is paramount. Although the focus in this current investigation has been on children in care, child sexual exploitation will be happening to children in the community who are not known to social services. It is vital, therefore, that we get messages to parents who may be concerned about their children. NSPCC has initiated a public helpline, and its number is 0800 389 1701. Since 16 September, there have been 13 enquiries, resulting in 10 referrals to PSNI and social services. That is 10 referrals in 14 days.

On Wednesday 25 September, the Minister of Health announced in a written statement to the Assembly that he and the Minister of Justice will set up an independent expert-led inquiry. No further detail has been provided on that. There is no further detail on the nature of the inquiry, the powers that it will have or whether it will be a public inquiry that experts will lead or whether it will take evidence and hear witnesses. It is our view and the view of the Children's Law Centre and other groups supporting children and young people that this inquiry must be robust, fully independent and equipped with all



the necessary resources and powers to address the abuse that has taken place. The inquiry must acknowledge the experiences of the children and young people who have been abused. Critically, it must look at the failures that have allowed child sexual exploitation to continue.

I note that the Health and Social Care Board produced a strategic action plan in August 2010 entitled 'Children Missing from Home or Care'. That was never consulted on, disseminated or acted on. It is now fundamental to the credibility of any inquiry established to address child sexual exploitation that it is wholly independent. Independence must be real and viewed as such by the children involved, the agencies of government and the public.

Although the Safeguarding Board plays an important role in safeguarding children, given the jurisdictional nature of the issue and the fact that the Safeguarding Board is constituted of people representing bodies that have a current statutory duty to protect children, it may be perceived — probably wrongly — that the Safeguarding Board may not be independent enough to examine those cases. Transparency is critical. Although the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) and the Criminal Justice Inspection do an excellent job, they will not be perceived as sufficiently independent to carry out the inquiry. In that context, it is vital that the inquiry examines why, when it was known that child sexual exploitation was happening from at least 2006, the Departments failed to protect those children.

Any proposed inquiry must also be set within the framework of international human rights standards. What does not appear to have been included in the proposed remit at present is an examination of whether any failings have occurred regarding the Health Department's obligations to children and young people. There does not appear to be any accountability mechanism for those failings within the proposed remit. This is an opportunity to address an awful blight in our communities and societies. We all need to remain focused.

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

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Nothing short of a full, independent, robust inquiry can provide us with those answers.

**Mr Beggs:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "protect" and insert*

*"all children and young people."*

It is important that we put in place safeguarding and protection strategies that will cover all our young children; it is not just about the children in care. Yes, we need to have a particular focus on them, but we have to ensure that all vulnerable children, particularly those living in our communities, are also adequately protected.

I picked up on some comments at the end of last week from a child carer who had been talking to a group of young people. The comment that was reported in the media was, "Why are the officials arguing when we are still being raped?" Let us make sure that we move forward constructively, take the lessons and solve the difficulties that are there. After all that is done, let us spend as much time as it takes to investigate the past, but let us try to prevent the abuse that is happening now today. It is important that we move forward.

Why did I feel that it was necessary to table an amendment to the original motion? In the evidence to the joint Health and Justice Committee, Seán Holland, chief social services officer, said:

*"Children in care are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation for a number of reasons, particularly the experiences that probably led them to being in care in the first place. However, the academic evidence is that they represent only about 20% of children likely to experience childhood sexual exploitation. So it is a much bigger issue than just children who are in care."*

For that primary reason, I felt that it was important for us to look at the safeguarding and protection of all children.

The statistic recently highlighted was that 22 young people have been sexually exploited while in care. There is a lot of information stating that that is just the tip of the iceberg. There may well be other children in care also suffering, but even just look at those 22. If those statistics, which have been established from desktop research, are accurate, we can expect there to be 80 more young children in Northern Ireland being sexually exploited in the community where they are living. So, it is important that, while focusing on the children in care, who are particularly vulnerable, we must also ensure that we look at other young children in our community who are equally vulnerable.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the Member for giving way. He has outlined that 20% of children are in care, in addition to the greater number of children who are not. Therefore, does he agree that it is essential that the wider community gets the unanimous message from the Assembly that it is the care of and compassion for all children that must be the defining factor of the outcome of today's deliberations?

**Mr Beggs:** I accept that absolutely. Given the fact that sexual exploitation is occurring in the community, it is important that we do not overlook that fact, and that we do not stigmatise the children who are in care. The life that they have experienced so far is not their fault. However, it is important that we recognise the scale of the problem that exists beyond our care homes. It is important that the community — neighbours, friends, and children and young people in schools — watch out for warning signs and feed their concerns into the system so that they can be addressed at the earliest possible opportunity, and so that fewer children reach our care homes and experience such difficulties in their life.

I notice from the recent child protection referral statistics that, at 30 June 2013, 1,790 children and young people are on the child protection register. There are 436 in the Northern Trust; 378 in the Belfast Trust; 359 in the South Eastern Trust; 316 in the Southern Trust, and 301 in the Western Trust. Those young people are deemed to be vulnerable. However, it is widely known that that vulnerability can often expose them to additional risks. I have no doubt that there are predators in the community who would spot a vulnerability — a lack of parenting assistance perhaps — and try to take advantage of that. So, it is important that, as a community, we look together to try to combat that and protect some of the weakest members in our community, those vulnerable children. We must look after all children in our community. It is not just about the children in care.

The third reason for the amendment is that, if we are actually going to empower our children and young people against grooming and predators who try to ingratiate themselves and ultimately abuse and misuse them, it is important that we work at the earliest possible stage. There is no point simply working with children once they reach care and have a very thorough protection and safeguarding system at that stage. We must work at the earliest stage, right from primary-school age children. Take, for example, stranger danger; we must start warning all our children and young people, with

age-appropriate messages, of the dangers that exist.

There has been a lot of concern recently around how inappropriate relationships are built over the internet, through Facebook etc. It is important that children and young people are educated in that with, I say once again, age-appropriate information. Ultimately, where children are vulnerable, they have to be told about the dangers of grooming. Where there is a clear risk for older children, that must be talked about. It goes much wider than our care homes. We have to start in the community, in schools and in youth clubs. Perhaps some vulnerable children are not at school regularly.

So, we must work out how we are going to get the message to such vulnerable children, how we are going to look after them and how we are going to support families with difficulties. In my own constituency, I am aware of some very successful programmes with families where relationships had become estranged. By early intervention — perhaps for children deemed to be at risk of offending — and by working with the family, the parent and the child, great improvements can be made at that early stage so that family breakdown does not happen, so that children become less vulnerable, so that normal parenting support is there and so that we are not reliant on our care homes, with the difficult relationships that exist there.

We must be cognisant of our social workers who work in care homes. It is a very difficult job. They are working with young people who have been frequently damaged by their life experience, and there are regulations and restrictions in respect of what you can and cannot do. Do we want children in our care homes all placed under lock and key? That would be a fire hazard to start with. What are we going to do in terms of restraining? When is it appropriate? If you are going to rely on that as a last resort, I say that that is much too late. We must put greater emphasis at the earlier stage, have earlier intervention, work through the community and give better education and support so that fewer of our vulnerable children reach that stage.

**1.15 pm**

Equally, we must continue to fund Safe Choices, which is the very successful programme that Barnardo's has been running. It tries to befriend and to help to make many young people aware that they are in abusive relationships, as they might not recognise that they are in such relationships, because abusive adults have befriended them and, ultimately,

have betrayed those friendships and are abusing them. So, I think that it is important to widen it to all our children at that earlier stage.

Turning briefly to some of the wider issues, I agree that it is important that we have an independent inquiry, which the Minister has set up. It is equally important that we have a speedy inquiry and that we concentrate on learning lessons and not looking back into the past for the sake of it but making sure that we have the best possible procedures in place today so that we can safeguard and protect the children of today. There is great concern and danger that, if we look back at what happened in the past, the cooperation that has been happening could fall apart and the protection may not be as good as it should be.

I have spoken to some social workers, and they have told me that they have been aware that this has been going on for 30 years. This is nothing new. There have been abusive adults in our society.

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

**Mr Beggs:** We must get wiser and better and protect our children in need.

**Mr Wells:** There is no doubt that this is one of the most serious issues that the Assembly will debate in this mandate. We have to accept that the basic building blocks of our society that protect our children are rapidly breaking down. We have a huge increase in the number of relationship failures. We have social media, the internet and the shocking statistic that 90% of boys under 16 years of age in the United Kingdom have been exposed to hard-core pornography. These are all issues that many of us in this Chamber did not face as children. Many of us were fortunate to be brought up in very stable, loving homes, where many of the things that our young people today are being exposed to were unimaginable. Yet, now, unfortunately, our children are being exposed to things that no 16-year-old should ever experience.

We also have to accept that, unfortunately, while we are dealing today with abuse in institutions controlled by the trusts, the vast majority of abuse that goes on in Northern Ireland is going on in the home or is being committed by persons known to the victim. Therefore, while this is a very worrying situation, and there is a special need to care for those in homes who are most vulnerable, we seem to be facing an epidemic of abuse of our

most vulnerable well away from the eyes of the state and the trusts. Therefore, I agree entirely with Mr Beggs when he states that we need to look much more widely at what is happening to our children.

Sadly, a large number of those who are abused do not realise that they are being abused at all. The majority are young girls who have had a desperately poor hand dealt to them in life. They have perhaps come from broken homes and been passed from pillar to post and from one family to the other, and when they are shown some form of affection by an older man — these men do not tend to be in their 50s or 60s; they tend to be only a few years older than the girls — they latch on to it. Even though that affection can often have a terrible price in terms of abuse, and, often, the young girl is passed around for sexual services among other men, they still latch on to the fact that someone cares for them, someone is paying them attention and someone is buying them alcohol, drugs or presents for what they are doing. Therefore, you are dealing with a situation where it is very difficult to control young people leaving institutions and getting involved in things that are highly undesirable.

Now that we realise that it is happening, the Minister has been absolutely right in taking the action that he has taken. It was the Rochdale and Oxford cases that alerted the police to a succession of random events that were building up and indicating a pattern of almost systematic sexual abuse. As soon as the Minister became aware of that, action was taken.

The Safeguarding Board was established. The Committee, when I was its Chair, spent a huge amount of time ensuring that that body was strengthened in its powers and effectiveness. The Bill that set up the Safeguarding Board was improved as a result of the scrutiny of all members of the Committee. The board is up and running, and it has produced an action plan.

The Minister has announced that there will be an inquiry, which is also the right action. The honourable Member for Foyle mentioned that she felt that there was a lack of detail about that. I have no doubt that the Minister, during his summation, will provide more detail. If he does not, it is up to the Member to table any questions that she feels need to be answered so that we have more information. Given past records, I am absolutely certain that this inquiry will be open, exhaustive and extensive. We have learned our lessons from other inquiries in Northern Ireland. We now know that we need to try to make them quick and to the point, and

they should report quickly. With the pseudomonas inquiry, for example, rather than going for a full-blown judicial inquiry that could last a decade — as one has — we have gone for something that gets to the point of concern more quickly. I am absolutely certain that this inquiry will be very much like that.

We need to know the facts and the truth, but we have a much more fundamental issue to address. If our society continues to break down the way that it is, we will have more and more examples of vulnerable people being abused. We need to address the core issues as to why that is happening and take action immediately.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirimse fáilte roimh an rún agus roimh an leasú chomh maith. I welcome the motion and the amendment. The recent revelations have caused widespread concern among the public about how we care for some of the most vulnerable in our society. From the media reports, it appears to many that children in care have been abandoned to deal by themselves with the abusers and sexual predators. It is essential that we restore faith in the social care system that is responsible for looking after children and young people at risk. Likewise, it is crucial that we recognise and put on the record that many people in that social care system do valuable and good work.

It is vital that the justice system is seen to be able to deal with those responsible for abusing children and young people. I welcome the decision to direct the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to undertake a thematic review of the cases that triggered the police investigation in order to learn lessons from the management of those cases and improve future practice.

The setting up of an independent, expert-led inquiry into child exploitation here, supported by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, is also a welcome step. The Health Minister has said of the inquiry:

*"The remit is wide-ranging and not confined to children in the care system ... the recommendations will be wider reaching than justice and health and social care."*

Let us hope so, because it is clear that there has been a massive failure in some areas of social care and policing. There are any number of unanswered questions to be addressed by the review and inquiry. Why did the police decide to review those cases in the first place? Having done so, what mistakes were found to

have been made in the initial investigations? What interventions did social services attempt in those cases? Who was responsible for the decisions being taken? We have all seen reports, and the problems have been highlighted previously. Why was prompt and properly coordinated action not taken to address those problems?

Of particular concern is the suggestion that the recommendations of a 2010 Health and Social Care Board report on children missing from care have not been fully implemented. It has been reported that there are:

*"concerns about how much information was shared between the police and social services about young people at risk of abuse."*

If that is the case, that issue also needs to be investigated fully.

We must also be mindful of the warnings from the NSPCC and the children's charity Barnardo's. The cases currently identified, involving 22 young people aged between 13 and 18, may be only the tip of the iceberg.

We have a responsibility to investigate what went wrong and do everything we can to prevent that situation recurring. However, there is also a need to ensure that attention and resources are not diverted from the crucial task of protecting children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation, and keeping them safe, here and now.

I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr McCarthy:** I support the motion. I have to concur with the comments of the Deputy Chair, Jim Wells, who said that this was perhaps one of the most important and distressing debates that we have had in the Assembly during this mandate.

What we have heard recently is totally and absolutely obnoxious, shocking and horrendous and a real let-down and failure of our young people. Though the words of the motion may have been somewhat overtaken by events, the debate remains highly relevant, and I am grateful to Maeve McLaughlin, the Chair of the Committee, and her colleagues for bringing it to the Floor.

Everyone must join in expressing alarm at the sexual exploitation of children and young people and how it has been allowed to continue for so long. It is particularly sad when the

young people are vulnerable or have suffered abuse.

Although the focus has primarily and originally fallen on young people who live in care homes or in other care settings, others have stressed that young people are at risk in a wide range of settings. Coercion can be obvious, but it can often be very subtle, so exploitation can come in many forms and may not be readily apparent to the victim, either at the time or even with the benefit of hindsight. Also, the nature of coercion or enticement can quickly change, and it is in this regard that we should be mindful of the particular dangers that can come from the internet and via social media.

The current efforts of the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister to coordinate the policy and actions of various Departments on the dangers of the internet and the protection of young people take on particular importance. No doubt, there have been systemic failings, but, in acknowledging that, we should also acknowledge the very committed and professional role played by many care staff, including social workers, in our social services and care system.

I welcome the statement by the Minister of Health and Social Services on setting up an independent inquiry in conjunction with others, including the Minister of Justice. This is a multifaceted problem, and addressing it will involve a range of inputs and responses from a number of Departments and agencies. However, it is right and appropriate that the Department of Health and Social Services takes the lead. A number of key questions must be asked and fully explored. It is not immediately clear whether all those issues are explicitly covered in the terms of reference of the inquiry announced by the Minister last week, but I presume that they will be addressed.

We need to understand how we ended up in this situation. My understanding is that relatively recent police investigations lifted the lid on a situation that is, potentially, much more widespread. Why did systems not flag up problems much earlier? Were previous attempts to highlight problems spurned or downplayed? What evidence is there of learning from the risks becoming apparent in other jurisdictions? Those are questions that should be answered. What lessons have already been learned and applied from the Barnardo's report and other similar initiatives?

**1.30 pm**

I hope, Mr Deputy Speaker, that this can be a speedy and efficient inquiry, given the urgency of getting it right. The key first step is to properly understand the nature and scale of the problem. Once the recommendations have been made, it will be incumbent upon government to work proactively and collectively to ensure that they are properly implemented without delay. I know that my colleague the Justice Minister and the agencies of the criminal justice system will be very committed to playing their part in supporting the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and others in that regard. Such is the urgency of the matter, I urge any of the relevant agencies to introduce new policies and procedures —

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

**Mr McCarthy:** — on an interim or provisional basis, as soon as possible. The Alliance Party gives its support to the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):** This is a very important issue. That is why I called a special meeting of the Justice and Health Committees when the news broke. Within 48 hours, we had the two Ministers sitting in front of the Committee and were holding them to account and asking questions about how this could have happened. I put on record my appreciation for them enabling us to do that.

What has disappointed me so far in this debate is that, to date, not one Member who has spoken has mentioned where the blame for this rests, which is on the perpetrators who carried out this most horrendous crime against the vulnerable individuals who are now the victims. I welcome the debate in the Assembly, but the proposer of the motion spent 10 minutes talking and did not mention the perpetrators. She spent 10 minutes saying that the focus needs to be on holding people to account and on an investigation of what went wrong in the past. I agree with that; it is right that we do those things. However, like the proposer of the amendment, I think that it is important that we focus on what we are doing today and now to protect people, children who are vulnerable in care and those across society. I say that because I am listening to the charities and those organisations that have said that the blame game is counterproductive. I could easily call for the resignation of the Justice Minister or the Chief Constable. If I so wanted to grab a cheap headline, I could do that. I do

not believe that that would be beneficial, because we need the organisations to work collectively. The charities rightly say that engaging in the blame game could lead to people retrenching into the silos, which is where the system failed in the past, and they say that they are now working more closely together. If we go back to trying to pin this on some individual, we are in danger of losing the practice that exists, which is better than what it was. Did it fail in the past? Yes, it did.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Thank you for taking an intervention. Does the Member agree with organisations such as the Children's Law Centre and other children's groups, which, in effect, say that we need a fully accountable, robust, transparent and independent inquiry in order to deal with what went on previously and to put in place safeguards for children today and from here on in?

**Mr Givan:** The Minister has been doing that. What disappoints me is the one-upmanship that Sinn Féin seems to be engaging in on this issue. From the start, when the Minister said that we needed to have a review, Sinn Féin sought to up it and said that we needed to have an inquiry; when the Minister said that we were going to have an expert-led, independent inquiry, Sinn Féin said, "How can we try to get another one over on the Minister?" From day one, the Minister has been to the fore in saying that we need to learn the lessons of what went wrong, that we need to ensure that what is happening now is best practice and that, where there have been failings, we need to be sure to redress them.

Since this Minister took up office, it has been a very proactive Minister who has been in charge. The Member who proposed the motion rightly highlighted the 2006 child protection inspection report, because it does go beyond Barnardo's. It was the DUP's Michelle McIlveen who picked that up and asked the questions to the then Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, and who then brought forward a private Member's Bill. When Miss McIlveen was being put under pressure, the Minister, in response, told her that the approach being put forward by the consultation ran a very real risk of stigmatising children in care, particularly those who lived in residential children's homes. The Department briefed against Michelle McIlveen at that time, when she was the one, out of everybody in the Chamber, who was leading in trying to address the problem.

If, at that time, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety had been listening

rather than trying to brief against people, vulnerable young people who were let down might have been protected. There are lessons that we need to learn from the mistakes that were clearly made.

The police have accepted that they failed to join all the dots. I cannot understand how we could have had that systemic failure in the police and that they looked at individual cases on their own without taking a more global approach. Should they be held to account for that? Yes, they should. I trust that the Policing Board will do that, because the Committee for Justice has already had the Chief Constable in front of it to answer questions.

However, we then asked about the resources that are going into the police now to deal with the investigation to protect children. Requests have been made for more detectives, and I trust that the Chief Constable will answer in the affirmative and provide those to the police, because they have requested them.

Roy Beggs rightly moved an amendment that all children need to be protected, and I agree with that. Early intervention is the key. Mr Beggs mentioned education, and I trust that the education authorities will step up. So far, the Department of Education has failed miserably when it comes to trying to protect vulnerable children. The Member for South Down shakes her head, yet —

**Ms Ruane:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mr Givan:** No, I will not.

**Ms Ruane:** The Member is afraid to hear the truth here. He is protecting his Minister, and he is afraid to hear the truth.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member will resume her seat. It is clear that the Member is not taking an intervention. All other Members should remain quiet.

**Mr Givan:** I trust that I will get an extra 20 seconds because the clock did not stop.

The Member for South Down shakes her head, yet it was on her watch that the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch for children with the most severe speech problems was closed down. She closed it down, and she should be ashamed for those vulnerable children. When the Shankill Road and Falls Road initiative to deal with vulnerable children who are truant from school was brought to the attention of the Department

of Education, it walked away, and it was the Health Minister, Edwin Poots, who had to step in to try to protect those children on the Falls Road.

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

**Mr Givan:** Let us get all the Departments that are engaged in this around the table, making sure that we are acting collectively to protect the most vulnerable in our society.

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

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment, and I will try to stick to the subject. In response to the previous contributor, this is not about one-upmanship but about the protection of children. We should all be very clear on that. This is not about scoring points but about dealing with an extremely serious and emotional subject.

There is an old cliché that is true, which is that the measure of any civilised society is how well it looks after its young people and its older people. Unfortunately, we appear not to be doing too well with either group, taking into account the issues around residential care and now this terrible business of child sexual exploitation involving children in care.

The Barnardo's report, 'Not a World Away', was published in 2011. It contains some horrifying examples of what can happen to young people who are used for the purposes of child sexual exploitation. Many young people will not see themselves as victims and will therefore not want to be rescued from their abuser. There is an onus on professionals to consider the young people's views in the light of the wider context of personal and structural vulnerability.

It is accepted that many young people who have been sexually exploited can, as a result of their chaotic background and experiences of abuse, be difficult to work with and resistant to social work support. They can be abusive to workers and refuse to engage. It is therefore important that such behaviours are not misinterpreted as a young person not being in need or deserving of support.

Young people in care are not the only ones affected by the issue. It also applies to many other young people who are not in the care population. Some of those young people potentially have less support than children who are in care because of their family background, and so on. As my colleague Maeve McLaughlin

stated, this issue came to light now because the PSNI initiated an internal review of missing persons, which led to the discovery of those cases.

The Minister announced separately that he had directed the Safeguarding Board:

*"to undertake a thematic review of the cases that triggered the investigation in order to identify the learning from the management of those cases to inform and improve future practice."*

The statement that was released by the Safeguarding Board, however, states that the direction from the Minister is:

*"to conduct a thematic review into the recent cases".*

There is some uncertainty as to what exactly the Safeguarding Board has been directed to do by the Minister. I am sure that he will clarify that particular issue.

As has been stated, the inquiry that is to be set up must be fully independent and equipped with all the necessary resources and powers. It must certainly look at the systems failures that have allowed the sexual exploitation to continue.

The Safeguarding Board also has an important part to play in this. However, where the inquiry is concerned, it may not be perceived to be wholly independent.

This whole issue of child sexual exploitation is a blight on our society. It must be dealt with in such a way that means that it ceases to continue. It is incumbent on the Minister to ensure that that happens.

**Mr Dunne:** As a member of the Health Committee, I also welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important and timely matter. The protection of our children and young people must always be to the fore, and we must ensure that the exploitation of young people is brought to an end.

The recent findings are shocking. They create fear in us all, and we must take all appropriate action to prevent any further exploitation of our children and young people, whether they are in care homes or living at home in our communities.

I welcome the recent measures that the Health Minister, Edwin Poots, undertook. I commend

him for taking swift action in announcing an independent expert-led inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland. That is an important measure that is correctly involving the Minister of Justice. It is right and proper that any review of policy addresses the current issues and the concerns about the protection of our children in care.

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland is an important body, and it certainly has played a useful role in safeguarding children and young people. The board quite rightly works to protect the most vulnerable by working in partnership with a wide range of agencies and organisations that work with young people. The only way to really combat this problem is to work in partnership. That should be the theme right from the top of the Executive, involving all Departments, right down to a grass-roots community level.

The PSNI also has a vital role to play in helping to bring those responsible to justice. It is essential that the perpetrators of any crime, not least sexual exploitation, are prosecuted to the full rigours of the law. I welcome the PSNI's investigations into this matter, and I trust that those investigations will help the victims and reduce the risk of further attacks or exploitation.

**Mr Givan:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Given that there is no specific offence of child exploitation, if, when this piece of work is completed, it is suggested that new legislation is required to empower workers in residential homes and to prosecute those who carry out this offence, does the Member agree with me that the Justice Minister should bring it forward?

**Mr Dunne:** Yes. I commend the Member for his point. It is well made, and no doubt the Assembly would consider it and be supportive of it.

Any inquiry must be wide reaching and look right across society. The missing persons register, which the PSNI manages, requires improvements. Agencies tend to report missing persons to the PSNI and, therefore, feel that the responsibility for many of those young people is then transferred to the PSNI. However, we keep being told that the PSNI does not have the resources or the expertise to manage the risks of those involved.

Social media has become another factor and another way for young people to be more open to potential exploitation by evil sexual predators. I feel that more could be done to warn children and young people in care, in their

homes and in our communities about the very real dangers of social media. Unfortunately, it is far too easy for false accounts to be set up that could lure vulnerable young people and children into a false sense of security that means that they could end up meeting with a total stranger whom they have never met and know nothing about. I believe that the relatively new risks of social media have created real dangers and the potential for the exploitation of our young people at all levels of society.

This is a very important issue, and we must do all that we can to tackle the problem and put the welfare of our children and young people to the forefront. I support the motion and commend the Minister for his actions to date. I trust that work will continue to resolve this terrible problem.

**1.45 pm**

**Mr A Maginness:** I welcome the debate on the motion. I will be supporting the motion and the amendment.

It would be valuable if colleagues were not to exploit the debate in partisan political terms, as doing so would be unhelpful. It would be useful to quote the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Patricia Lewsley-Mooney, who said last week:

*"The immediate priority must be the children and young people who have been affected or are at risk of exploitation. They must be given the protection and support that they deserve so they are safe. While important, any reviews and lessons are a second priority. Any organisation releasing information or reporting on this must do it sensitively. The welfare of these young people must be at the forefront of their minds so as not to cause any further risk or distress. The victim must not be further victimised."*

That is a salutary statement from the commissioner, and we should bear that in mind. We are trying to protect children; we are not engaged in a witch-hunt. We certainly want to find out the truth of what happened, and that is very important. Neither should there be adverse comments about the professionalism of those who work in very difficult circumstances and carry out a very important role in our society. We should support them as well.

It is disturbing that 22 children have been targeted in this way. It is disturbing that there are at least 50 suspects in this sexual



exploitation of children, and there could well be more. This could be the tip of the iceberg, although I hope not. I hope that the investigations that will be carried out will be done so exhaustively, so that we have an accurate and truthful picture of what happened. That is absolutely essential.

During the joint Justice and Health Committee meeting, I was a little bit disturbed by some of the evidence, which related to children who were missing from care homes at least 137 times over about 18 months. It seemed to me that although procedures were in place for the monitoring and safeguarding of those children, if those children had been in an ordinary home — as we all have — they would probably not have gone missing. Parental authority would have been there to guide and protect the children and to keep them from leaving home. The Minister and the police emphasised the fact that care homes are not prisons, and that children should not be locked up. However, some balance has to be struck to safeguard the child so that there is not complete freedom to do whatever they want and, therefore, expose that vulnerable child to even more vulnerability. When the experts look at this situation, we will have to revisit the procedures in relation to children leaving the safety of a care home and going elsewhere. That is important.

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

**Mr A Maginness:** I welcome the Minister's announcement of an inquiry along with the Department of Justice. That is a valuable step.

**Mr McCallister:** There are few issues that stir the emotions as when we talk about children and young people, in this case vulnerable children and young people, and the exploitation that has been happening. We sometimes like to think of ourselves as a family orientated and family friendly society. That this happened and continues to happen in our society is a cause of huge concern.

I agree with colleagues who spoke of the need to do more. Most contributions, including that of Mr Maginness, were very much about where we go from here to ensure that this does not happen again, and how we can do our utmost to protect people, making sure that we are not doing so in a witch hunt. However, if there is evidence and people are brought before the courts, we will want to see prosecutions and people held accountable before the law. It is important that we do that in the context of how we prevent this in future. What roles do we

need to undertake? What changes do we need to make? What choices do the Assembly and Ministers need to make?

I served on the Health Committee for nearly six years. One piece of legislation, before I left the Committee, related to setting up the Safeguarding Board. This is now a challenge to the board to make its mark on how it lifts the protections for our children and young people to a new level. There is no question of anything but unanimous support for the motion and amendment on such an important issue.

I have a couple of concerns, which I mention only as concerns on this occasion. The Assembly talked about resources being put into this. We are spending huge amounts of police time, money and resources to police a society that is divided by protests and parades, and counter-parades and protests. Whatever side of the argument you are on, whatever protest, society cannot continue to fund that sort of activity and still expect the Police Service to meet all the other needs, whether it is in child abuse, rural crime or community policing. Resources are limited. You have only to listen to Deputy Chief Constable Judith Gillespie, who said that we cannot continue to use resources on those areas and expect the police to be able to carry out their other functions.

I agree with Alban Maginness about the need to have children in proper family homes. That is why I still have a huge concern about why we have sat for four years and not progressed an adoption Bill. With one single issue, and I do not need to highlight what that issue is, we have, effectively, held up that adoption Bill and the change that it could make to children's and young people's lives.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Member for giving way. With regard to the issue that he has raised, there is an analogy by way of children at school. If a child is at school and he or she leaves school and plays truant, the school has a responsibility and does everything it can to get the child back. I think that it is necessary for us to focus on that type of analogy in order to improve procedures with regard to children in care homes.

**Mr McCallister:** I agree with Alban Maginness's point: we do need to do that. I will happily commend the efforts that Michelle McIlveen has made with regard to children going missing from the care system. However, at present, we do not seem to have the procedures that the Member, quite rightly, highlights. We need to get to that point. When someone is in the care system, that person is already in a vulnerable,

difficult place in his or her life, never mind when he or she falls out of the system. No one seems to be following that up. It is an important point.

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

**Mr McCallister:** I am content to support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the Minister will respond.

*The debate stood suspended.*

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

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

#### OFMDFM Crisis

1. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the crisis within OFMDFM, which the deputy First Minister's party has spoken of in the media. (AQT 121/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):** I have been interviewed several times since coming back from the United States, and I have outlined my view that there are quite severe difficulties in relation to the events of recent times, not least the events over the past year, which has seen violence on the streets perpetrated, in the main, by elements within loyalism. I am on the public record as saying that it is my view that the activities of elements of the Orange Order, the PUP and the UVF in north Belfast are indistinguishable. I certainly think that that represents a real challenge to these institutions.

It is not the first time that these institutions have been challenged. There have been the killings of two soldiers in Antrim, Constables Stephen Carroll and Ronan Kerr, and prison officer David Black. I made some of the most forthright statements ever made by any republican leader in condemnation of those activities, effectively standing up against those who would try to plunge us back to the past. So, I do think that serious questions have to be asked about the response of unionist leaders to the activities on the streets, particularly the incident in which 56 police officers were injured in a full-scale riot in Belfast city centre. I find that very, very disturbing. I find it particularly disturbing in the context of what appears to be a common view of many within unionism that members of the UVF, particularly in east Belfast, are up to their necks in criminality and violence.

I am particularly disturbed by the shooting of 24-year-old Jemma McGrath just a few days ago. I think that all of you know what I am talking about and that all of you know the allegations that are flying around the place —

right, left and centre. I ask the question: if republicans were involved in that sort of activity, would we have the same silence that we have had from some Benches in the Assembly?

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

**Mr M McGuinness:** The other aspect is the decision to pull the plug on the peace-building and conflict resolution centre, which I think is directly related to some of the activities that are happening on the street, and that deeply saddens me.

**Mr Kinahan:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. He seems to cast all the blame on one side, but many would see this as simply competitive posturing between Sinn Féin and the DUP, which really does no favours whatsoever for Northern Ireland or the Assembly.

**Mr M McGuinness:** I am not one who is inclined to posture. In fact, I think that I have made my particular contribution towards the stability of these institutions through some of the most testing and difficult times that they have seen. In reality, for me, it is about the commitment of all of us to stand by the agreements that we have made and to face down violent extremists, whether they be so-called dissident republicans or extreme loyalists. That is the test for the Assembly and the Executive. I think that, thus far, serious questions have to be asked about the commitment to stand by the PSNI, particularly in the context of the PSNI Chief Constable's comments today about his dismay at the failure of politics to support the police.

## Maze/Long Kesh Site

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give an update on the developments at the Maze/Long Kesh site, given the recent withdrawal of support for the peace-building and reconciliation centre by the DUP. (AQT 122/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness:** As everybody knows, the peace-building and conflict resolution centre is a Programme for Government commitment, and we have received a letter of offer of £18 million from the European Union to complete the project. The withdrawal of support by our partners in government is deeply disappointing. The combined efforts of the Ulster Unionist Party, supported by extreme loyalists, in

mounting a campaign against the peace-building and conflict resolution centre were deplorable.

The inability to honour a Programme for Government commitment has created very significant difficulties for me as deputy First Minister. I always wanted the peace-building and conflict resolution centre to be a shrine to peace and a symbol of a new future that opened up space for dialogue and true reconciliation between our people. It was the jewel in the crown of the Maze/Long Kesh (MLK) site and would, undoubtedly, be a tourist Mecca. The EU had earmarked the site as its centre of excellence for conflict resolution and peace-building activities, and it saddens me that agreements have not been honoured and that extremes of unionism have shifted the direction of the DUP. In that context, it is essential that we find remedies to the problem that we face. We have to find a way to honour the agreements made, and I am also conscious that the peace-building and conflict resolution centre is part of a wider agreement.

The Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) moved on to that site last year and had a very successful show, and I intend to honour its courageous lead in recognising the incredible potential of the site. In September last year, we set up the MLK development corporation to oversee investment on the site. So the decision to withdraw support for constructing the peace-building and conflict resolution centre as agreed has jeopardised the future of the site as a whole. I am very content that the RUAS continues next year on the same basis as this year. However, the anticipated development of the site can proceed only on the basis of the honouring of the commitments made. The role of the development corporation and the board —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Minister, you have to adhere to the two-minute rule.

**Mr M McGuinness:** — has been undermined and called into question, and no further —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Alex Maskey for a supplementary question.

**Mr M McGuinness:** No further development will take place until this is satisfactorily resolved.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** If we obey Standing Orders and the Business Committee's guidance, we will give as many people as possible an opportunity to contribute. Ministers

have two minutes to respond, and supplementaries have to be questions — the previous one was not.

**Mr Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his very frank response. Will he clarify what he means by the issue being "satisfactorily resolved"?

**Mr M McGuinness:** As I said in my initial answer, there is a very clear commitment in the Programme for Government to build the peace-building and conflict resolution centre. Daniel Libeskind, a world-renowned architect, has been over here on countless occasions working with the people who had the responsibility to put the design in place. Daniel Libeskind has experience of difficulties with some of his buildings, particularly the construction of the new Jewish memorial museum in Berlin. From my perspective, and recognising the importance of the site strategically for employment prospects and the fact that it represents probably the prime area of potential real estate in the whole of western Europe, there is a huge responsibility on all of us to ensure that the initial commitments are honoured and that the peace-building and conflict resolution centre is built on that site for the benefit of all our people.

## Undocumented Irish

3. **Mr Rogers** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what representations the deputy First Minister has made to senior American figures on behalf of the undocumented, given that in answer to my question last week, the First Minister said that it was really up to the Irish Government to look after Irish passport holders, even though, as we all know, many people in the North exercise dual citizenship and the undocumented are from both communities. (AQT 123/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness:** This is an issue that has exercised SDLP and Sinn Féin Members in particular, given that many of them are being lobbied consistently by families who, on occasions, have very difficult circumstances as a result of the inability of undocumented people to travel back home for things such as funerals, weddings, baptisms and so forth; even for all-Ireland hurling and Gaelic football finals, which are close to the heart of many in Irish America.

Every time that I go to the United States, I contribute to that debate. I speak to people on Capitol Hill, and I am encouraged by the recent decision by the Senate to effectively propel the debate forward to the House of

Representatives. I hope that the outcome of that will be to deal satisfactorily with the plight of many of the undocumented. Quite clearly, they come from right across the community, and we have a duty and responsibility to try to alleviate hardship, wherever it exists, particularly in the context of how it affects our own people.

**Mr Rogers:** Thank you, Minister. I also welcome the bipartisan approach of the Republicans and Democrats in America. Can the Minister assure me that he will make representations at the highest level in the House of Representatives to ensure that this is brought to a vote as soon as possible?

**Mr M McGuinness:** It has been raised consistently and will continue to be raised. All of us are conscious that, when we talk about the undocumented Irish, the resolution of that issue is not just about how you resolve the difficulties relating to the island of Ireland, North or South. This is about many millions more people from different ethnic groups, particularly from Central America and South America. So, it is a huge issue, and I certainly hope that the deliberations taking place at the minute on Capitol Hill can lead to a resolution of the difficulties presented for people.

On my last visit to the United States, I ran, accidentally, into a man who had been undocumented for the past 12 years. He employs 100 people in the United States of America. That is the scale of what we are dealing with. These people are contributing to society and to providing employment for many others in society. There is a desperate need to resolve their plight as quickly as possible.

## Warrington

4. **Mr Allister** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the deputy First Minister's recent visit to Warrington, whether, apart from pious platitudes, the deputy First Minister has, at any time, from his inside knowledge gained through his position of leadership in the republican movement, done anything to help the police to catch the child killers of Warrington, the Birmingham bombers or, indeed, the perpetrators of any other crime such as that. (AQT 124/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness:** I was pleased and delighted to go to Warrington, at the invitation of Colin and Wendy Parry — two people who I have known for the past 10 or 11 years; people who have made an enormous contribution to

the peace process. I think that they have been asked questions similar to those posed to me today. They have answered them in their own way, particularly stressing, on every occasion, that all they want to do is to contribute to the ongoing success of the peace process.

I do not have any personal knowledge whatsoever about the individuals who were involved in either the events in Warrington or Birmingham. That obviously brings us into a big debate about how we deal with the past. Of course, that responsibility has been given now to Richard Haass, who will deliberate on these matters in conjunction with the panel of parties over the course of the next couple of months, and I hope that there will be a resolution to that.

It is quite a regular occurrence for the Member to portray himself as a paragon of virtue and say that he is anti-conflict and anti-violence, so it was interesting to see him standing with leading members of the UVF at a recent demonstration in north Belfast. He was not in the least shamefaced about it.

**2.15 pm**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That ends topical questions. We now move on to OFMDFM questions for oral answer.

## **Delivering Social Change**

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the projects being taken forward as part of the signature programmes under Delivering Social Change. (AQO 4645/11-15)

8. **Mr Irwin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the signature programmes under Delivering Social Change. (AQO 4652/11-15)

12. **Mr Rogers** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the six signature programmes under Delivering Social Change, announced in October 2012. (AQO 4656/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness:** With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I ask junior Minister McCann to answer the question.

**Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 8 and 12 together.

Work on the implementation of the six Delivering Social Change signature programmes that were announced by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on 10 October 2012 is progressing well. The Department of Education is leading on the signature programme to improve literacy and numeracy levels in both primary and post-primary schools. It expects to have concluded the recruitment of all teachers by the end of October. They will deliver tuition to children in 267 primary and post-primary schools to assist them in achieving higher grades.

The family support hubs programme will see 16 existing family support hubs receive continued support and 10 new family support hubs established. It is anticipated that all 10 new hubs will be online by April 2014; indeed, three are already operating in the Northern Trust area.

On the support for parents signature programme, a suite of programmes has been developed, and, through those programmes, guidance, training and information will be provided for up to 1,200 families. By way of the social enterprise hub programme, 11 hubs will be established in what are currently vacant commercial premises and will offer a range of business advice and practical support to social enterprise entrepreneurs.

Good progress has been made, and all hubs are due to be established by January 2014. In line with the objectives of the nurture units signature programme, 20 teachers and 20 classroom assistants have been recruited. The nurture units are now in place for the 2013-14 academic year. It is anticipated that 480 children and their families will benefit from the units.

The sixth and final signature programme will see the scaling up and rolling out of a pilot intervention to support young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and their families. From October, the pilot intervention that targeted 44 families in urban and rural areas is being replicated to reach up to 720 disadvantaged families. Further details on specific aspects of each of the signature programmes should be sought directly from the lead Departments.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr William Irwin. Sorry, I call Mr Beggs. I beg your pardon.

**Mr Beggs:** Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the junior Minister for her response, but the family support hubs were

announced over a year ago. Why has it taken so long to bring that additional support to families and why will it take a further year to have them all on the ground?

**Ms J McCann:** As the Member said, the hubs were announced last year, but work has been ongoing. First, we had to work together to find out where the families that needed to utilise the hubs were, and then we had to see where the hubs would be put. Some are virtual and some are hubs in themselves, so work had to be done on that. We wanted to ensure that the families who needed the support and the services were the ones receiving them, so we had to be careful in how the programme was rolled out.

**Mr Irwin:** I understand that the leases for the majority of hubs will be signed in October. Can the junior Minister confirm that?

**Ms J McCann:** I can, and I said that in my answer. There are already three hubs up and running at the moment, while 10 new hubs will be online by April 2014. The three that are already running are in the Northern Trust area, and a suite of programmes has been developed whereby the parenting programmes will happen in those hubs as well.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Sean Rogers.

Moving on, I call John Dallat.

**Mr Dallat:** Given the delay in getting that all off the ground, is it premature of me to ask whether the Department has developed any further programmes and initiatives as highlighted in the children and young persons' early action paper?

**Ms J McCann:** The early actions paper that you mention identifies the needs of children and families specifically. There is a Programme for Government commitment to deliver a range of measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Delivering Social Change is the framework that we hope to do that in. There is also the 10-year strategy. Obviously, Delivering Social Change is about trying to unify all that. Although it is a framework, we are trying to put a focus on specific departmental spending. We have identified some of the other future programmes from the early actions paper. In due course, I will let the Member know where that is going as well.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the junior Minister for her answers. Will she tell us how much of the £26 million that was allocated for that purpose has

been spent to date on the projects that she mentioned?

**Ms J McCann:** I cannot give you the exact spending, but a number of projects were to be rolled out under that £26 million. One was tuition with the Education Department and another was the hubs that I just mentioned with the health and parenting programmes. Another was the social economy hubs, and the last was pathways to employment. Some money has been spent on scoping out where those particular services will be put. I do not have the exact figure, but I will get it for the Member. The work has progressed, particularly on the education side of it, in that the teachers will be in place in this academic year for those young children who need that help and tuition for better educational attainment.

## Accountability Mechanisms

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the need for robust accountability mechanisms in order to address the past. (AQO 4646/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness:** We all recognise the need for a robust mechanism for addressing the past. A panel of parties, chaired by Dr Richard Haass, has now begun its work to consider parades and protests, flags and emblems, and the past. The panel is expected to conclude its work by December. I think that we are all agreed that, although these are all difficult issues, dealing with the past will present the greatest challenges. There is also work going on in the victims' forum, whereby a working group is looking at that very issue. Those are victims from a diverse range of backgrounds who are examining their shared experience of dealing with and acknowledging the past. The group will advise the Victims' Commissioner, who will then present us, as Ministers, with her findings. I look forward to receiving that advice, which we will consider in advancing our work in that area.

The work of the Historical Enquiries Team (HET), while falling under the remit of the Minister of Justice, is also an issue of interest and importance to us all. We have a role to play in ensuring that any concerns about its operation and remit are resolved. In that respect, it is important that any organisation dealing with the issue, including the HET, is credible and effective. It must also be viewed as impartial, and it must have the public's full confidence.

**Mr Attwood:** When, in topical questions, the deputy First Minister referred to a commitment of all of us to what had been agreed, I think that many of us were thinking of the family of Columba McVeigh, which today said that people still have information on his whereabouts but are not forthcoming. Does the deputy First Minister agree that the essential architecture of the Eames/Bradley group offers a comprehensive way forward to address the past? Does he believe that, as part of that, those who were in command and control of and directed state organisations and terror groups and who are responsible for the horror of the past 40 years should be held personally to account?

**Mr M McGuinness:** I, too, have tremendous sympathy for the McVeigh family in their efforts to recover Columba's body. I have met the McVeighs on a number of occasions over recent years. Every Member will know that Gerry Adams in particular has been very proactive, resulting in the recovery of a number of bodies through information provided. That work has to continue, and I appeal to everybody who has any scrap of information about any of the remaining cases that need to be resolved to bring that forward.

No doubt, there were many laudable suggestions from what Bishop Eames and Denis Bradley proffered for all of us. Of course, we know that there was significant opposition among some political parties to Eames/Bradley. All of this will be considered very seriously in the context of the Haass talks and, no doubt, all the parties in this House will have their opportunity to contribute to that. Recovering the truth about the past is very important, not only from those who were involved in military organisations but from those who were in positions of political leadership who gave wholehearted support to military organisations. Indeed, some of those people were in government.

**Mr Allister:** What about those in the army council? What about them?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order, order.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. Does the deputy First Minister agree with the views of people who say that dealing with the past is too difficult and that the Haass talks will not find a solution?

**Mr M McGuinness:** We all know that dealing with the past is an incredibly difficult issue, and I do not accept that the Haass talks cannot find

a solution. However, if we are to find a solution, there has to be a generosity of spirit. Our past is contested because of different experiences, and, when I hear phrases such as, "We will not allow a rewriting of history", it immediately makes me think that someone has decided that they own the past and that they are seeking to enforce their view of it on the rest of us. That approach will not work. Of course, recently, at the annual peace lecture in Warrington, I made it clear that the past cannot be undone and that we all have to recognise our role in the conflict.

The challenge for all of us is to ensure that there can never be a repeat of what went before. Despite all our difficulties, dialogue and not coercion are at the centre of our relationships on these islands. I approach the Haass talks as I approach everything else in my political life, and that is with the belief that resolutions of these difficult issues are doable and that it is workable. I absolutely do believe that, if there is goodwill from all the participants, a solution can be found.

**Mr Campbell:** Most people view the Haass team's examination of the past as its most difficult assignment, but will the deputy First Minister take this opportunity to expand further than he did when he was on the stand at the Saville inquiry, when he pleaded the fifth amendment regarding declaring and opening up about his grim and grisly past?

**Mr M McGuinness:** That is not the first time that I have heard that question posed. I remind the Member and everybody else in this House that I sat in the witness box for two days at the Saville tribunal in Derry's Guildhall and allowed myself to be questioned. I answered honestly all the questions that I was asked. What is most significant about the outcome of the Saville tribunal is that Saville accepted every single thing that I said as the truth in finding against the Parachute Regiment and the British Army. Saville accepted not only every single thing that I said but that which other young men like me who were involved in the IRA in the city at that time said. That totally undermines what you just said.

**Mr Nesbitt:** During the deputy First Minister's evidence to Saville, there were questions that he told Lord Saville that he would not answer "under any circumstances". Is that still the case? How does he expect us to get to the truth when there are people who hold the truth but will not reveal it under any circumstances?

2.30 pm

**Mr M McGuinness:** I remind the Member again that the Saville tribunal was a very lengthy and hugely significant tribunal. It was probably the longest in legal history. The outcome of the tribunal, as identified by Lord Saville and his colleagues in their judgement, found totally and absolutely against the Parachute Regiment — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr M McGuinness:** And, in the course of outlining his judgement, he totally and absolutely exonerated the IRA in Derry from any involvement whatsoever in the events of Bloody Sunday. *[Interruption.]* I know that you and others find that hard to accept.

## Child Poverty

3. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what additional measures they intend to bring forward to fight child poverty. (AQO 4647/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness:** With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, junior Minister McCann will answer this question.

**Ms J McCann:** The work taken forward under the Delivering Social Change framework, as I mentioned earlier, focuses on the needs of children and families. The Member will know that child poverty cannot be seen in isolation as just affecting the child; the family has to be taken into consideration as well. To ensure that the most urgent and significant problems in our society are addressed, including deprivation, social exclusion and disadvantage, the six signature programmes that I mentioned earlier will contribute to the delivery of the child poverty strategy. We are keen that further programmes are identified as part of a rolling programme of initiatives.

We are currently considering a range of possible future signature programmes for a second phase of the work to be taken forward. That may include the development of further interventions to specifically tackle child poverty. Our Department has also commissioned work by the National Children's Bureau to develop a child poverty outcomes model to help better understand the role of each Department in addressing child poverty. The National Children's Bureau is assisting Departments to establish a cross-governmental approach in which every Department would understand its role in reducing child poverty and make an effective contribution to improving outcomes.

The model, based on the key principles of outcomes-based accountability, is designed to allow assessment of which interventions are likely to produce the best outcomes over the long term and assess the impact of mainstream programmes already in place. The model, which has a track record of delivering improvements in outcomes, will be published shortly. The work on the outcomes model will also help to address and inform the third annual report on the delivery of the child poverty strategy, which is scheduled to be laid before the Assembly on March 2014.

The Child Poverty Act 2010 required the Executive to publish a child poverty strategy and measure how departmental actions impact on the numbers of children living in poverty. The Act details four statutory measures against which progress has to be measured and reported on annually. The overall target is the eradication of child poverty by 2020. We are pleased with the progress made and look forward to further progress in line with our commitments in the Programme for Government.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the junior Minister for her response. Does she not agree that what is most worrying in recent reports is the persistent level of poverty among families and children, as she pointed out? What specific, direct measures is the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister going to take to make a difference in those areas where there is the long-term poverty that we all know exists in all of our communities?

**Ms J McCann:** The Member makes a valid point. Research has shown that there is persistent poverty in particular families. The 'Children and Young Persons Early Action Document' identified where we need to focus on tackling that "generational poverty", which is another term for it. Some of the added measures we are taking — for instance, the child poverty outcomes model that I mentioned — will look at the outcomes instead of just measuring against outputs, which is what normally would have happened. I think that we can see, tangibly, the difference we are making as we go along.

Last week, junior Minister Bell and I launched the Bright Start, part of the framework of the childcare strategy. Within that there are a number of measures looking particularly at rural childcare, childcare for children with disabilities and creating new childcare places in areas of disadvantage and need. That all adds to new measures that were taken to try to actually deal with child poverty.



**Mr Lyttle:** I welcome the publication of the Executive framework for childcare. How concerned is the junior Minister that an early years organisation in Northern Ireland has assessed that childcare provision is as much as 10 years behind European standards?

**Ms J McCann:** We had a long consultation process when we first went out with the framework document. The gaps that we identified were for school-age children between the ages of four and 14, children with disabilities and rural childcare. So, we did have quite a lengthy consultation around that. There are 15 key actions in the childcare strategy that we are looking to put in place. Over the next 12 months, we hope to review the performance on those 15 actions, because, while you say that we may be behind in our delivery on childcare, we are very keen to get it right this time. We are trying to create new childcare places where they are needed, and, as we go on, we will try to measure and evaluate, as I said earlier, the outcomes of that as opposed to the outputs.

**Mr Copeland:** I thank the junior Minister for her answers so far on this important subject. Will she detail what investigations have been carried out by the deputy First Minister's Department to assess the impact on child poverty potentially arising from the Minister for Social Development's proposals to reform the welfare system?

**Ms J McCann:** The Member will be aware that there is deep concern that child poverty is on the rise and that the proposed welfare reforms — I know that you are a member of that Committee — will make child poverty and family poverty even worse. We have been looking at that. I have met a number of organisations, including the Child Poverty Alliance and others that represent families. We are looking particularly at issues around universal benefits; for instance, that the person getting paid those benefits would be the prime carer of the child in the household, that payments of benefits are more frequent, and the bedroom tax. Those are all going to have a knock-on effect on child poverty and family poverty in general. At the moment, those are the types of issues that we are looking at.

**Mr Agnew:** I concur with the previous questioner on the concerns about the impact of welfare reform. Does the junior Minister agree that in-work poverty is a significant element of child poverty? Will her office, in that regard, support a living wage in public procurement contracts at the Executive?

**Ms J McCann:** The short answer is yes. Public procurement is something that we have discussed in the Assembly on a number of occasions, and I know that different Members have strong views about the way that we deliver good services. In the public procurement framework, we are looking to tackle disadvantage and best serve the needs of our communities. For instance, we need to ensure that the childcare strategy, which we launched part of last week, looks at building childcare delivery mechanisms in and around the social economy sector. That means that it will employ local people and regenerate local communities, because those childcare services are very much based in the community. Certainly, procurement is one issue that we will be looking at.

## New York Investment Trip

4. **Mr Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the benefits that their recent visit to the United States will bring to the local economy. (AQO 4648/11-15)

**Mr M McGuinness:** The First Minister and I travelled to New York city on Monday 9 September to undertake a number of engagements to promote the local business message in advance of the economic conference that will take place here on 10 and 11 October. Therefore, one of the main benefits of our visit will be increased US participation in the conference. We also had the opportunity to consolidate relationships with existing investors, who are our greatest advocates in encouraging others to follow in their footsteps.

We began our mission by meeting senior executives at Citigroup. It came here in 2004 with an original plan to create 375 jobs by 2009. The company now employs in excess of 1,200, and the Belfast facility is one of only four centres of excellence in the world. We also met Duncan Niederauer, who is CEO of the New York Stock Exchange. Like Citigroup, the New York Stock Exchange is an internationally recognised blue chip company. Both companies confirmed that they would act as advocates on our behalf at the October conference. We also met Mayor Bloomberg at City Hall, where we discussed the conference. We spent Wednesday morning travelling outside the city to meet a potential investor. On Thursday, we were guests at the World Trade Center memorial, where we met Marcus Robinson, who is a Belfast-based award-winning documentary film-maker. We also met Larry Silverstein, who is the New York real

estate developer who has transformed the World Trade Center site into what it is today. We visited Brooklyn Navy Yard to meet executives at Steiner Studios to look at opportunities to promote film production here, and we attended the Wall Street 50 event on Thursday evening, where we addressed an audience of 250 financial services executives.

In summary, the visit allowed us to extend the invitation to attend the economic conference to a wide range of business executives. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity to strengthen relationships with existing investors and to begin relationships with potential new ones. All in all, it was an extremely successful visit.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his response. Will he advise what steps are being taken to ensure that these benefits will be realised throughout all parts of Northern Ireland and that places such as my constituency of West Tyrone, which is a rural area, will be a beneficiary of this trip?

**Mr M McGuinness:** There is a huge responsibility on Invest NI, working with potential investors, to ensure that there is, as far as is practicable, foreign direct investment. However, people have to bear it in mind that large companies make their own decisions about what they think is best for them. Invest is conscious of the point that the Member has made not just in relation to his constituency, as similar appeals have come from MLAs in other constituencies. Invest NI is conscious of the arguments and is doing everything in its power to ensure as equal a distribution of jobs as possible.

This was an extremely important and successful visit, and we look forward to addressing the House in the coming months with news of new inward investments that were supported by our intervention. The duty then falls on Invest, and I am sure that it will take on board the comments that the Member for West Tyrone and other Members have made consistently over recent times.

**Mr G Kelly:** Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Will the deputy First Minister elaborate on his view of the importance of American investment at this time, especially in the current economic situation?

**Mr M McGuinness:** It is hugely important. The First Minister and I travel regularly to the United States, and I can say without fear of

contradiction that our travels there over the past couple of years, particularly at a time of world economic recession, have produced remarkable results for inward investment for our people and for jobs. We are all conscious that America remains our largest source of investment, and we have a long history of US investment. There are something like 165 US-owned companies here, and they employ in the region of 19,000 people. I am absolutely convinced that there will be more very positive announcements in the next short while. Naturally, I hope that the economic investment conference will be the success that we expect it to be.

2.45 pm

## Regional Development

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** We will start with topical questions. The first Member on the list, Mrs Dolores Kelly, has withdrawn her name, so I call Mr Michael McGimpsey.

### Parking Schemes: South Belfast

2. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the long-running saga of the provision of residents' parking schemes in inner south Belfast, specifically at Stranmillis, the Markets, Sandy Row and Donegall Pass, what progress has been made to allow us to give an undertaking to those residents and communities about such a provision. (AQT 132/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful to the Member for his question and pay tribute to him for his ongoing interest in the matter. He has taken the opportunity to meet me along with interested groups from areas around his constituency. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to implement a scheme in any of those areas, but I hope that we will continue to work to resolve outstanding issues and ensure that a scheme can be introduced. The schemes, once established in one area, have the potential to be enacted in other areas. I am aware of interest in other places where people want to see progress. I am keen that there is progress, and I know that the Member is, too.

**Mr McGimpsey:** I thank the Minister for his answer. There seems to be some optimism there. Bear in mind that we began this about 10 years ago when John Spellar was a direct rule Minister. Roads Service appears to have fought a very valiant fight for the provision of

these schemes. Conditions have deteriorated since the advent of Belfast on the Move, and parking in these areas is absolutely dire. This is critical for these communities. Given that the last consultation finished a few weeks ago, can the Minister give an assurance that we are on the cusp of getting this provision?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member and accept his frustration — it is equally frustrating for me. As he rightly says, this has been going on for years, way before my tenure as Minister. Nonetheless, I, as Minister, am keen for the schemes to advance. I will reflect again on the situation in the areas that he has referred to and see whether progress can be made at the earliest stage.

**Mr Irwin:** Can the Minister tell the House the cost to date of the vesting of land for the A5?

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for his question. The Member raised the issue of the A5 in topical questions last time, so it clearly remains topical for him. The answer is largely the same: approximately £60 million has been expended on the A5 project to date. As the Member well knows, the project is delayed for very well rehearsed reasons that he, the House and the Executive have heard before. However, it is delayed but not abandoned, and he will know that it is an Executive priority.

**Mr Irwin:** I have spoken to farmers who have lost the use of land and buildings for over a year now. Not only have they not received any compensation but no one has come near them to assess the losses incurred. Is that acceptable? When can those farmers expect payment?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member. I need to challenge some of his assertions. There has been ongoing contact with landowners. Decisions have been made and agreed on whether landowners will carry out existing accommodation works in the situation in which we find ourselves. I am certainly aware that a number of landowners who had applied for up to 90% of compensation for loss of land in the A5 scheme have received their compensation. It remains a very fluid situation and, in many ways, a challenging one, given the legal and financial difficulties. We are working our way through it, but I do not accept that Roads Service or my Department have in any way been unhelpful to resolving issues by mutual agreement with landowners in the current situation.

## Street Lighting

4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development, following a previous question of mine in relation to street lighting in residential areas to the rear of properties whether he can tell the House exactly when that policy was changed. (AQT 134/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** My understanding is that that policy was changed a number of years ago. Certainly, the change predated my time, and it may even have predated devolution in this place. I understand the Member's point, but the policy is in place, and, currently, I have no plans to have it reviewed. A number of Members have written to me particularly on the issues of new lighting schemes and where old lights are being made redundant. I have sympathy for the position that many people find themselves in, but the policy is such that I am not able to show the flexibility that perhaps the Member would like me to and which I may like to show too.

**Mr Clarke:** Given that you are Minister and, I am sure, have the power to review any policy, are you suggesting that it is acceptable that, where street lighting is being upgraded, people are now left in fear, particularly at this time of year with winter and the dark nights drawing in? These people have, in the past, enjoyed street lighting. The Minister should consult his Department because a departmental official told me that the policy had changed only within the last number of months, and hence those street lights have been removed. Maybe it would be a better use of money than the £60 million that has been squandered on the A5 road scheme.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. As a Minister, you are not allowed simply to conjure up changes in policy without proper consultation and adherence to all the section 75 and other equality issues. I understand the Member's point. He seemed to make a reference, at the end, to the A5 project: I remind the Member that his party is fully supportive, at Executive level, of the A5 scheme.

## Local Trade Initiatives

5. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether, given the difficult economic environment in which our businesses are operating, he agrees that his Department has a role to play in supporting initiatives run by local traders' associations that promote shopping locally. (AQT 135/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for her question. Indeed, as a member of the

Executive and someone in charge of a Department, I believe that every effort should be made to continue to support the local economy and traders. We all know how difficult trading has been in town and city centres. Last week, I was in the Ballyhackamore area in the Member's constituency, and I took the opportunity to speak with traders and to learn at first hand some of the problems that they are experiencing. Most of their concerns related to the high cost of rates, which is a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Nevertheless, I take on board their concerns, and the Member knows that what I have tried to do as Minister in respect of parking was not to implement on-street car parking charges. Indeed, I have successfully argued at Executive level for a moratorium on increases in car parking charges until at least 2015.

**Mrs Cochrane:** I thank the Minister for his answer and his support for small businesses. Can the Minister explain the rationale that his Department used, which seemingly, targeted the honest, hard-working business owners of the Ballyhackamore traders' association, when it requested that the association remove its "Eat, Shop, Live" banners from street furniture, while allowing tattered flags, which surely distract from business opportunities, to remain on the same lamp posts?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question, but I am not sure that the Alliance Party is in a particularly strong position to criticise anybody, given the flags protest, which came about as a result of its decision at Belfast City Hall, and the problems that emerged from that. Therefore, I am afraid that I am not going to take lectures on flags from the Alliance Party.

Street furniture is an issue. There are issues of public safety that have to be adhered to, and the Member should recognise that. Some discretion and flexibility can be arrived at, and we are happy to facilitate that. I felt that I had a very productive meeting with the traders of Ballyhackamore last week. The Member was not present at that meeting, and I do not know the readout that she has got from that meeting. Nevertheless, I heard at first hand the issues that were raised, and I was encouraged. I was also encouraged to see the economic activity in Ballyhackamore.

### **Doran's Rock, Saintfield**

6. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the possibility of bringing forward the construction

of road improvements at the A7 at Doran's Rock just outside Saintfield. (AQT 136/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for her question. How topical it is I am not entirely sure, but it is clearly topical in Doran's Rock.

I think that I have discussed with Members, certainly in response to questions, the possibility of bringing forward a clutch of road improvement schemes that would make a significant contribution to and give a lot of relief to the travelling public in key areas. The scheme that she mentioned could fall into that.

I had discussions with the Finance Minister recently. I want to pursue those and encourage him that a line in a budget can be created whereby we can bring forward those schemes, because sometimes the big, grandiose schemes, while important, can encounter difficulties, be they legal or financial. On the ground, people would be much more impressed by the work of the Assembly and the Executive if we were able to create road improvements that people could see were improving their area.

**Miss M McIlveen:** Obviously, the inclusion of the A7 in the October monitoring round would be very helpful. Without providing the specifics of the scheme, can he give me any information on the A24 Ballynahinch bypass?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member. We have moved rather deftly from Doran's Rock to the Ballynahinch bypass. I have no difficulty in saying that the Ballynahinch bypass is a scheme worthy of support. In fact, my party leader, Mike Nesbitt, who is also a Member for Strangford, has been keen to promote that scheme. As the Member will know, I have met traders and local representatives in Ballynahinch. We understand the issues that are prevalent there. There are still a number of stages to be gone through on the technical side of things, leading ultimately to procurement, so it is likely that the earliest time for the scheme would be in the new budgetary period.

### **A2/A8: Compensation**

7. **Mr Wilson** asked the Minister for Regional Development why his Department has allowed documentation from the commissioner, which could help to decide compensation levels for the A2 and the A8, to be destroyed. (AQT 137/11-15)

I welcome the progress on the two road schemes in east Antrim, the A2 and the A8, but

there are many people who still are unhappy with the way in which the Department deals with some of the compensation issues.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his question and, obviously, for his support for the A2 and A8 schemes. They will substantially improve travelling times and the connectivity that is so necessary. The Member has raised a particular issue, and, if he wishes to write to me directly with the detail, I will be happy to give him a full and detailed explanation.

**3.00 pm**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am afraid that the time for topical questions is up. We will move to the questions for oral answer that have been listed for the Minister. Question 6 has been withdrawn.

## **Blackrock Area, Newtownabbey**

1. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department has recently inspected the roads, footways and street lighting at Blackrock Square and Blackrock Park Avenue, Newtownabbey. (AQO 4660/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** My officials carried out an inspection on all the development in that area on 18 September 2013. Since being served with an article 11 enforcement notice, the developer has made significant progress. First, a closed-circuit television (CCTV) survey of the sewers has been completed within phases 1 to 3, and the results are expected to be with NI Water representatives shortly, confirming that repairs have been made. In addition, the Department has approved in principle the street lighting design, and officials await further technical documentation from the developer in the next few weeks to allow adoption of the street lighting to proceed. When all underground services are adopted, a final surface course will be placed, allowing the Blackrock development to be adopted.

Officials in my Department work continually with developers so that developments are brought up to the required standard for adoption. I advise the Member that, in the greater Belfast area, which comprises the Belfast, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and North Down council areas, my Department has adopted 33 sites in the period 1 April to 20 September 2013. Four of those involved article 11 enforcement works by my Department.

**Ms Brown:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I raised the issue with him back in May, and I appreciate the work that his Department has done on this case. A date in early July was estimated for completion of the streets, yet they remain unfinished. Will he provide assurances to the residents of Blackrock that he will continue to pressure the developer on this matter?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. Of course, Roads Service officials have worked hard to progress this, and I am confident that that will continue to be the case.

**Mr Dallat:** I assure the House that I have not moved my abode to Newtownabbey. My question is about the effectiveness of inspections in reducing the millions of pounds in compensation claims that, prior to Mr Kennedy's appointment, the Department paid out.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am afraid to say that I am not going to take responsibility for events that predate me, and the Member will know that. However, if there are any current issues that he wishes to raise with me, I am happy to hear from him.

## **Johnston's Bridge, Enniskillen**

2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to allay the concerns of residents and business owners following the revelation that Johnston's Bridge, Enniskillen, has failed a European strength test. (AQO 4661/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I am aware of the recent media attention suggesting that the Johnston Bridges over the east channel of the Erne river, which runs through Enniskillen, had failed a recent European strength test. I confirm that there is no such thing as a European strength test, nor is my Department aware of the source of such a claim.

The Johnston Bridges, like all bridges in Northern Ireland, are subject to a regular programme of inspections every two years. A more detailed inspection is carried out every six years in which structural engineers closely inspect all parts of the structure. The most recent inspection, undertaken in July 2012, did not highlight any evidence that would cause concern about the load-bearing capacity of the bridge or the continued use of the bridges by vehicular traffic. The bridges, which were

opened in 1954, will, however, require some minor repair works to ensure that their condition is preserved. Officials will continue to monitor all bridges, including the Johnston's Bridges, and will work to progress the bridge-strengthening programme.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that clarity and for the history lesson, which, I am sure, we all really enjoyed.

I hope that the Minister is not splitting hairs by taking umbrage at my use of the phrase "European strength test". Is he in a position to clarify that Johnston's Bridge has not failed any kind of a test in the past few months?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member. I had hoped that I had outlined to him that Johnston's Bridge is not regarded as being under serious threat nor an unsafe structure. That is very good news, and it is important that we convey that message, particularly to people in Enniskillen and County Fermanagh. Of course, they will remain on our rolling list for repairs, but I am assured there is nothing of an unsafe nature about the Johnston Bridges that warrants immediate remedial work.

The Member should bear it in mind that my Department has to look after 5,800 bridges. I am pleased to say that we do that on an ongoing basis and work hard to ensure that they are looked after. Safety has to be the paramount concern.

**Mr Byrne:** I want to ask the Minister about a bridge in Newtown Stewart that certainly has failed the test. We are waiting for it to be upgraded and refurbished. I also welcome the work that has been carried out by Roads Service on bridges in Beragh, Victoria Bridge and, more recently, a stone bridge at Mountjoy.

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for his detailed knowledge of and guide to bridges in west Tyrone and other areas. I am pleased that work to secure and maintain bridges has been happening. Of course, if the Member has further concerns about any of the bridges he mentioned or any others, he should communicate those to the Department as quickly as possible.

**Mr Elliott:** I will bring it back to Johnston's Bridge in Enniskillen. The Minister mentioned that it is part of a rolling programme of bridge upgrades and maintenance. Will he give us an indication of the timescale for the work on Johnston's Bridge?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. We certainly expect that work to commence within a couple of years. My sense is that the road surface and the deck waterproofing is likely to need replaced at some point. Of course, the bridge plays an important role in the life of Enniskillen, and it will be important to carefully manage the programming of that work so as to minimise any disruption to traffic flows. My information is that the earliest that that work is scheduled to be carried out is 2014-15. However, it is more likely that it will be the year after.

By way of record, in January 1999, 955 bridges required strengthening, but, because of the ongoing programme of work — the rolling programme that I referred to — that figure has now been reduced significantly to something like 283. We have spent £85 million to achieve that, and that indicates that we continue to take these things seriously.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr Mervyn Storey is not in his place.

## Kinnegar Lagoons Sewage Works

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the Kinnegar Lagoons sewage works improvement scheme. (AQO 4663/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the first phase of the £3.5 million project to resolve the sewerage pollution at Kinnegar Lagoons is progressing well. The project is at tender stage, and work is expected to commence in spring 2014 with a construction period of approximately 12 months. That phase of the project will prevent further pollution to the lagoons. A second phase will involve a scientific investigation that will determine the best remediation options for the lagoons and, particularly, for the odours that emanate from the mud at low tide. Remedial work will be undertaken on the basis of the scientific recommendations. The investigation is under way, and it is estimated that the emerging findings will be available in spring 2014.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister recognise that the ongoing stink and environmental pollution, which have been experienced by Holywood residents and commuters on the A2 Bangor dual carriageway in particular for over 20 years, are totally unacceptable? Will the measures that are now proposed give us assurance that they will address the matter once and for all?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I can well imagine the frustration and anger felt by a great many householders and business owners who live close by. The Member knows that this has been a historical problem over many years. I am pleased that the scheme that is planned and is at an advanced stage will be the first part in seeking to resolve the issues. It is important that, as we carry out the works for the waste water treatment plant, we await and assess the scientific report, which will be crucial in dealing with the legacy issues of the lagoon.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for his response so far. As has been said, the problem has existed for at least 20 years. I notice that, in 2010, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency issued a warning letter to the DRD. Will the Minister explain how the project will resolve the issue of odours and prevent pollution of these important lagoons?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and his welcome for the work that is about to commence. Phase 1 of the project will divert the combined sewer overflow discharges to the Kinnegar works and away from the lagoons, and it will comprise the construction of a new interceptor sewer and pumping station. It is hoped that phase 2 will address the odours from the lagoons and undertake remedial work. It is envisaged that, once both phases are complete, the frequency and severity of the odours in the area will be greatly reduced, if not eliminated. It is right that we are cautious enough to say that the scientific investigations will be key to making progress on phase 2 of the project.

**Mr Lyttle:** As a member for East Belfast, which is in close proximity to the area in question, I am aware of the seriousness of the issue. Is the Minister willing to meet the Mayor of North Down, Alliance councillor Andrew Muir, who has campaigned on the issue for a number of years, and a cross-party delegation of councillors on this important matter for residents and commuters in the area?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and for promoting his party colleague, with whom I have had meetings on other issues. I am generally receptive to elected representatives, and I like to be known as a listening Minister. When requests come in, I do my level best to accede to them, if appropriate. That might encourage you to speak to your friend.

## Immigration Control: Strangford

5. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department's plans to provide fenced areas for immigration control in Strangford village have been abandoned and will not be resurrected. (AQO 4664/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I am conscious of the importance of Strangford as a tourism area. The Member knows that we are under pressure to make security arrangements, for want of a better title, for the cruise ships that berth in that area. Hence, at one stage, a planning application had been submitted. I have taken action to have that application withdrawn. I intend to make a special case about arrangements for the area with the Department for Transport in London, and I have asked to meet the relevant Minister to put forward the unique circumstances that we have here.

### 3.15 pm

Not many cruise ships berth there on a yearly basis. However, that can continue to be developed, and I do not want people to be put off for any reason. Nonetheless, there are requirements that we have to meet, and we will see where those discussions take us.

**Mr Wells:** I hoped that the Minister would say that the project was shelved. I accept that there have to be special arrangements for cruise liners, but could passengers not be shepherded into a nearby building rather than building a cage-like structure, which is totally inappropriate not only for the village of Strangford but the village of Portaferry, just across the narrows, which was equally going to have one inflicted on it? It is simply just the wrong facility in the wrong place.

**Mr Kennedy:** I assure the Member that I am on the same side as him. In fact, I have been proactive in ensuring that the current planning application was withdrawn by my Department. We can resolve this through use of the temporary structures or some appropriate structure. I will approach the discussions with colleagues in London with that in mind in order to resolve this issue to the satisfaction of, hopefully, everyone.

**Mr Hazzard:** I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I welcome his withdrawal of what was an ill-advised planning application at new quay, Strangford, this month, which would have deprived local people of ongoing access to the lough. Will the Minister now bring forward proposals to develop Newry quay, in

Strangford village, which is owned by DRD, as a vehicle to service local tourism and, perhaps, to service sea-based tidal and wind farms that are being built off the coast in that area?

**Mr Kennedy:** The Member has wandered slightly off the subject, I suppose to his own advantage. We will make ourselves available to meet with and discuss further initiatives with relevant and interested agencies such as the local council and, perhaps, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board or whichever government agency or Department wishes to engage with us. There is much work to do to resolve the current situation, but simply withdrawing the planning application is a significant signal of my thinking on this issue.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn

### **Parking Charges: Magherafelt**

7. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on car-park charges in Magherafelt. (AQO 4666/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** My officials are making the necessary legislative changes via a new off-street parking order, which will see the tariff in Central car park, Magherafelt, reduced to 40p for three hours. The proposal is to be advertised in the local Magherafelt newspapers on 30 September, which is today. The new arrangement is expected to be in operation by November 2013.

Following a request from Magherafelt District Council, my officials also visited the Rainey Street, Central and Union Road pay-and-display car parks on 12 June 2013 to distribute information leaflets and speak to customers to promote the benefits of using Parkmobile to pay for parking. The Parkmobile cashless payment system is available in all my Department's pay-and-display off-street car parks and on-street charge car-parking locations throughout Northern Ireland. That system provides customers with a method to pay for parking other than using coins at the pay-and-display machines.

Usage of the Parkmobile system over Northern Ireland stands at 4%, with 35,000 vehicles registered and 128,000 transactions since January. If local councils feel that local economies would benefit from a relaxation of on-street charges in Roads Service's car parks, officials will be happy to engage with them to explore what may be feasible.

Officials recently accommodated a request from Newtownabbey Borough Council to introduce free car parking in The Square car park in Ballyclare on Saturdays during March 2013 and are considering a request for a similar arrangement for Saturdays in December 2013 and January 2014.

**Mr I McCrea:** The Minister has certainly been listening on the issue. There is no doubt that businesses and residents in the Magherafelt area will welcome his decision. However, the decision to introduce charges in the Central car park and to make approximately 50% of spaces pay-and-display rather than free has had a knock-on effect and caused difficulties in nearby streets. I have written to the Minister on the issue. Will he ensure that, where the charges have been introduced, footpaths are not obstructed for disabled people or parents pushing children in prams?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. We will take those comments on board, particularly in respect of safety issues. The issue of car-parking fees can be challenging, but we have sought to strike a reasonable balance. Such charges are necessary to keep traffic moving and to ensure turnover so that shops can benefit from more regular visits from people who want to come into towns such as Magherafelt.

**Mrs Overend:** I thank the Minister for his action in Magherafelt. I have met him a couple of times on the issue. I place on record my thanks to him for that.

Will the Minister update the House on the progress with Parkmobile since it was first piloted in Belfast?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for her positive comments and for her role in bringing forward those issues about Magherafelt.

Parkmobile was first piloted in Belfast in 2011. By 2012, usage was at 4%, and by 2013, that had more than doubled to 9%. Therefore, just shy of one in 10 of all payments in Belfast is now being made through the Parkmobile system. The system was introduced throughout Northern Ireland in November 2012, and usage was around 4%. As anticipated, I hope that that will increase over the next 12 months, as was the case in Belfast.

The system is being promoted in towns throughout Northern Ireland, and the public response from those who have engaged has



been positive. At this early stage, I am pleased with the one-in-10 usage in Belfast and one-in-25 usage throughout Northern Ireland. We will continue to monitor progress and hope that we can promote it further.

**Mr Sheehan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Has he any plans to introduce machines in DRD parking facilities that give change, and, particularly in parking facilities close to the border, machines that accept euros?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Machines that issue change would add further cost to the overall cost of car-parking services, and I would have to consider carefully whether we were getting value for money. That is one of the benefits of the Parkmobile system because you register for parking and, on your return, you re-register, and it charges you the exact amount. That is another encouragement for people to use it.

Mr Byrne previously raised the issue of euros with me. I will happily update the Member in writing on the current situation.

## Integrated Transport Pilot Scheme

8. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the integrated transport pilot scheme. (AQO 4667/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** Early work on the integrated transport pilot project has focused on identifying opportunities for the rationalisation of school services and public transport services provided by the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) and Translink to a joint campus in Dungannon. That work has resulted in integration on four routes, which, from today, will mean pupils transferring from SELB services to utilise spare capacity on existing Translink services. The initial exercise shows that there are clear opportunities to do things better. It also highlights the benefits of Departments and transport providers working collaboratively in local areas.

The next phase of work will involve examining opportunities for rationalisation in the provision of special needs transport in the Dungannon area, involving the Southern Education and Library Board and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. The project team also plans to consider what opportunities exist to utilise community transport more effectively, possibly

by involving it more in meeting school transport requirements in rural locations and by extending the collect-and-connect type services that it currently provides for mainstream Translink services.

At this stage, the pilot project is scheduled to last for about 12 months, during which time the Departments involved will also take forward the monitoring and evaluation arrangements. The evaluation will capture the potential for operational efficiencies and customer service improvements as a result of service integration, in the expectation that further improvements can be implemented over the period of a pilot early next year. The Departments involved will also begin work on an economic appraisal to inform the implementation of such integration on a wider scale over the longer term.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. Has the health service totally assisted in the process of the pilot scheme?

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for his initial comment. His supplementary seems to indicate some doubt, either in his mind or on his behalf, that the health authorities are not cooperating. That is not information available to me at this point. If the Member has concerns, I would be happy if he shared them with me.

**Ms Lo:** I understand that the pilot scheme is mostly about public transport. What role does the Minister envisage that cycling can play in the integration scheme?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am very pleased that the Member raised the issue of cycling. She will know that I am a very keen supporter and keen advocate of it. The time for cycling is now upon us. Hence, I am in the process of creating a cycling unit in the Department that can coordinate all aspects of the policy and its outworkings in transport arrangements. I am very pleased that there has been a lot of positive feedback on that. I think that there is widespread acceptance that cycling has been ignored for too long and has been something of a Cinderella — not now. I think that cycling will be actively promoted, and I welcome the Member's enthusiasm for it.

## South-east Coast Master Plan

9. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's

involvement in the south-east coast master plan. (AQO 4668/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** Officials from my Department and Translink are committed to assessing and developing the key roads and transport aspects of the south-east coast master plan, which was published by the Department for Social Development in February 2013. They will engage with all stakeholders, including the appointed consultants, to ascertain which aspects of the plan my Department can assist with. I am aware that meetings have already taken place. My Department will continue to take note of feedback from the consultation process and continue to be available to discuss the key opportunities and issues highlighted in the area of transportation.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** A quick supplementary, Sean; we are running out of time.

**3.30 pm**

**Mr Rogers:** Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Minister, what initial steps is your Department taking to ensure that the road infrastructure is improved as part of the south-east coast master plan?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. On an ongoing basis, we seek to improve the overall road network, both the strategic road network and the local road network, in all areas. However, it is useful that, where there are opportunities to share with other Departments and be aware of their initiatives, we can tie into those and either offer advice or indicate how we would seek to proceed with road improvement. I am certainly keen that, in the roads that we maintain and in any roads that we propose to build, a coordinated, sensible and logical approach is taken. That includes areas and roads in the Member's constituency and all through Northern Ireland.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up. That concludes Question Time.

## Private Members' Business

### Exploitation of Children and Young People

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That this Assembly notes with concern the recent revelations regarding the abuse and exploitation of children and young people; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to liaise with the Minister of Justice to initiate an inquiry to ascertain the prevalence of abuse and exploitation of children both in care and elsewhere; and further calls on all relevant Departments to outline the strategies that will be put in place to safeguard and protect children and young people in care. — [Ms Maeve McLaughlin.]*

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after "protect" and insert*

*"all children and young people." — [Mr Beggs.]*

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** I welcome today's debate on the exploitation and abuse of children, particularly the focus on children in care and beyond. You will have heard a number of voluntary organisations claim that what we know is only the tip of the iceberg, and since the disclosure of a police investigation into child sexual exploitation, attention has focused on children in care, as many of you have in your contributions. I can understand why, given the reported statistics from the police of 18 young people in care missing 437 times over an 18-month period.

I will take you back to the Barnardo's report, because we have known what it said for around two years now. Its findings came from a sample of over 1,100 cases. We wanted to get a measure of the scale of the problem, and that is why we commissioned the report, which relates to children known to social services, including looked-after children (LAC). The majority of the cases, around 779, are looked-after children, and of the LAC total, 618 were in residential care, 34 were in foster care and 36 were in kinship care. The remaining are in at-home placements. Of the 1,100 cases, it was assessed that one in five was at risk of exploitation and that one in five had been missing overnight or longer within the past year. Three out of five were from the residential care population, which leaves two out of five in the non-residential care population. So, although it

is important to identify the issues and problems in residential care homes, the problem does not end there; we have a much wider problem that has to be addressed. We should not seek to simplify things too much when we look at this issue, because it is much more complex and difficult and is not served well by simplification. Frankly, it gives a very shocking and bleak picture of our care system in that children can go missing and 18 young people have been missing from care 437 times over an 18-month period. To me, that is not good enough and is one reason why I want the review to take place and to be wholly independent.

We should not be under the impression that staff just stand idly by and allow these things to happen. That would be grossly unfair. They try to stop young people leaving. However, they are not always able to prevent them from leaving. Not preventing something from happening is not the same as allowing something to happen. I want to make it very clear that we have many good staff in children's residential care homes who do their best for young people who have been badly damaged long before they have become their responsibility. I want to say thank you and pay tribute to those staff, who work under very difficult situations, and I want to ensure that we make things easier for them in identifying the best resolutions and the way forward.

There has been an accusation made that we did not act on the Barnardo's report. I make it absolutely clear that there have been quite a number of Assembly questions on the subject. As opposed to my reading out all the answers concerning the actions that have been taken, which my 15 minutes would not allow me to, I encourage those who make such an accusation to read the answers to those questions. We have taken actions in every area. For example, social services are embedded with the PSNI; we are supporting safe choices; we did establish a Safeguarding Board; and we have introduced additional therapeutic care for children and young people. It is very important that people recognise that and that we do not get nonsense put out to the public that we have been sitting on the Barnardo's report from 2011 and not acting on it. It is not accurate, not true and not helpful to make those suggestions.

Sexual exploitation is not a new phenomenon. In fact, in the Victorian era, many people recognised that railway stations were a magnet for those who wanted to exploit children, because many children were running away from bad situations. Often they were leaving a bad situation to arrive at a worse one. To that extent, some things have not changed, and I

regret that. The issue will not be addressed overnight and by one Minister acting on his or her own. Today's child sexual exploitation appears to be more widespread and pernicious, with new dimensions to it that are harder to grasp. Youth and celebrity culture — reinforced through TV and media — portrays an image that sex, drugs, alcohol, parties and disposable relationships are the norm. That is hugely damaging. The fabric of society is undermined by that constant portrayal.

Schools have a vital role to play, along with us, in our efforts to address those broader societal issues, in raising awareness about the risk of child sexual exploitation and in identifying those at risk or who are being exploited. One of the scary things about this is that young people do not realise that they are being exploited. Even more scary is the fact that some of the perpetrators do not even realise that they are perpetrators. They are, and nobody should take away from the Chamber that I am suggesting anything else. However, some of them do not actually get that what they are doing is criminal, wrong, evil and wicked. Nonetheless, because they have been numbed to that reality by so many things around them, they do not realise that.

We need to be sure that we are doing everything that we can to prevent children from being sexually exploited. For that reason, I made the decision to appoint an independent expert in the area to conduct an inquiry into what we are doing and how effectively we are doing it; to determine whether there are barriers to doing things better; and to make recommendations. The expert or experts, whom we are still in the process of identifying, will be from outside Northern Ireland and independent. I will bring a further statement to the House, hopefully in the not-too-distant future, on how we intend to progress that.

I am indebted to the Minister of Justice for agreeing to join me in the exercise. With his full agreement, the review will be supported and facilitated by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority on my side working jointly with Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. I have suggested that it would be helpful for the Education and Training Inspectorate to join us in the review and for the Department of Education to be involved. If we are looking at an issue in which 20% of the problem rests with children in care and 80% elsewhere, schools are the only place where you can pick up on those children. It is fundamentally important that the Department of Education join us in the review exercise in order to identify whether there is more to be done on

that front that can assist all of us to arrive at the outcome that we want. To achieve that, it is important that we receive that Department's support.

I have already made a statement to the House setting out the broad remit of the review and the detail of what remains to be worked through. However, I have listened carefully to what has been said this afternoon, and I will consider all the points that were raised as we try to work out the detail. As I said, I will make a full statement on the inquiry.

I am mindful about previous investigations. I am not going down the route of having a full-blown legal inquiry. Some people may want that, but let me make it clear that we are not doing that. One reason is that the hyponatremia inquiry is ongoing. That inquiry started in 2004 and will be finished and reported on, hopefully, next year. I am not sure whether it will be, but, hopefully, it will. I cannot wait for 10 years to respond to these youngsters' needs. I need to respond this year and next year, and we need to get the details of any investigation kicking off quickly. It must be well thought out and well balanced, but it must kick off quickly so that we can get immediate feedback and act very quickly on the recommendations. That is what we did with the Troop review on pseudomonas, and it proved effective. So, why would I go down the route of having a long and drawn-out process when the learning that we would achieve at the end of it would have already been applied during the process? In truth, that has largely happened with hyponatremia. Things changed long before the inquiry report. So, for an inquiry to be useful and effective, it needs to report quickly.

I am also directing the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to undertake a thematic review of the children's cases that triggered the current police investigation. Some of the young people are now adults and cannot be subject to a case management review. I am directing a thematic review, as it is in my power to do so. I will meet the chair of the SBNI next week to seek his counsel and to ensure that the independence and objectivity are inbuilt into the arrangements from the outset.

The motion also asks the Department to set out what it is planning to do in strategic terms to respond to the sexual exploitation of children in Northern Ireland. First, what we do strategically —

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

**Mr Poots:** Yes, certainly.

**Mr Allister:** Just before the Minister leaves the subject of the Safeguarding Board, if he is leaving it, what is the explanation for the fact that the enabling legislation for the Safeguarding Board passed in February 2011, yet it appears not to have been until 19 months later, in September 2012, that the Safeguarding Board was appointed? Did that seemingly inordinate delay have a negative impact on contributing to where we are now?

**Mr Poots:** OK. It is a new board, and it took some time to set up and recruit people to post, including the chair. Members may remember that there was a dispute about remuneration for the chair, and with the intervention of elected representatives, that amount increased. There were problems in recruiting a director of operations, and the post had to be re-advertised. Secondary legislation had to be put in place, which required redrafting the regulations, consulting on them and taking them through the process of getting made. The Committee took evidence from officials and the chair designate of the SBNI prior to the regulations being made. Unfortunately, the SBNI was not established as quickly as we would have liked because of the issues that were beyond our control. I accept that that was a failing on our part going back to the original legislation and the problems that we encountered. So, we need to recognise that, when we identify the right thing to do, we must ensure that it happens expeditiously and that we are not delayed unnecessarily. The Member is quite right to identify that having a 19-month delay was not good enough. However, the board is now in place, it is carrying out the review and it has identified a strategic priority. It will continue to coordinate the multi-agency plan in response to children and young people in care.

If I am asked today whether we have failed these young people, I would have to answer yes. However, we have failed these young people for the past 15 or 16 years, not just the past one or two. We need to act to help children and young people, and that is why I support the hubs that we are proposing to set up in conjunction with Atlantic Philanthropies, other Ministers and the early intervention fund. That is why I supported integrated services for children and young people in west Belfast and did not think that it was worth letting go. I know that others perhaps thought that it was not worth saving. Given the vulnerability of the children from the most deprived area in Northern Ireland, I thought that we should not let it go. Others thought that it might be a good

idea to scrap integrated services, which was hugely regrettable.

**3.45 pm**

I am absolutely committed to helping children and young people in those early years. We need the full cooperation —

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Poots:** My time has almost gone. I am sorry.

We need the full cooperation of every Department. It is not about the Health Department alone. It is not about the Department of Justice alone. It is not about the Department of Education alone. If all those Departments come together, work together and stay together, and we do not engage in politicking or exploiting the issue, we will come out of today much stronger on the issue and we will offer better protection to children in the future.

**Mrs Overend:** I am making the winding-up speech on the amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party in the names of my colleague Roy Beggs and me. This is a very important issue before the House today. I commend Sinn Féin for taking the opportunity to raise it. Ms McLaughlin brought some vital points to the debate, including the need to ensure that the laws dealing with child exploitation are robust and that punishment is adequate. I thank the Health Minister for his response this afternoon. We have a job to do in ensuring that those who are exploiting our children and young people know that they are in the wrong. That behaviour, no matter how or where it is seen to be the norm, must be recognised as being wrong and unlawful. I welcome Sinn Féin's support for the amendment. I agree with Ms McLaughlin and the Member for Newry and Armagh's sentiments that it is vital that we get the right messages to the community and not just young people in care.

Child sexual abuse is surely one of the most awful crimes imaginable. The recent revelations have been met with shock and disgust. It was said that, in some respects, the wording of the motion has been pre-empted by the Health Minister. Last Wednesday, Mr Poots announced an independent expert-led inquiry into child sex exploitation in Northern Ireland. I welcome that step.

The Sinn Féin Members who spoke said that the inquiry must be robust and independent and must look at failures. I add that we need to ensure that, rather than just an exercise in navel-gazing, there is action quickly. I note that the NSPCC made it clear in the media that it believes that it is not the right time for an independent inquiry into the sexual exploitation of young people in Northern Ireland. It believes that our focus should be on directing scarce resources to ensure that children at risk of sexual exploitation are being protected and kept safe here and now. I understand and fully agree with that sentiment. However, the terms of the inquiry include the remit to:

*"determine the most pertinent issues that need to be addressed that can help to prevent, tackle and disrupt CSE;"*

and to:

*"examine the effectiveness of current measures aimed at tackling, preventing and disrupting CSE;"*

Those actions will ensure that children are protected in the here and now. I also make the extremely serious point that we, as politicians, must never act in a manner that complicates or compromises police investigations. We should be careful of our actions in that regard, whether that be through the provision of information to the media or otherwise.

I welcome the DUP support for the Ulster Unionist amendment today. Mr Wells talked about that sort of behaviour happening in many areas and being deemed as normal. I share his concern about opportunities for grooming in social media. His colleague Mr Dunne raised the same issue. I hope that they will join me in urging the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to respond to my pleas for progress on a departmental strategy on internet safety. Indeed, as Mr Dunne said, it is important that all Departments work together and look at their role in addressing child exploitation. It is equally important that grass-roots people in the community realise how wrong those actions are.

I was rather disappointed by the political posturing and one-upmanship expressed by the DUP's Paul Givan. We are not here to play the blame game; we are here to do what is right for our children and young people and for Northern Ireland.

I also welcome the contribution to the debate by SDLP Members. Mr McGlone rightly expressed the view that any inquiry will not only bring

answers but will raise many questions. I share the view of Mr Maginness that the immediate priority is that children and young people should experience no further risk or distress. I join him in asking for an accurate assessment.

I thank the Alliance Member Mr McCarthy for his support for the amendment. He rightly recognised that this is a multifaceted problem, with the Health Department taking the lead. I agree that this should be a speedy and efficient inquiry. I also thank John McCallister for his support today. It is nice to see it, and long may it continue. Jestingly aside, Mr McCallister raised some concerns around resources, which is a problem with all aspects of government decisions. I thank him for that.

Returning to the Ulster Unionist amendment; it is the case that child sexual exploitation is not confined to care homes or children in care. Although, in this case, the information suggests that the majority of children who were subjected to abuse went missing from care homes, there were and are other children outwith the care system, in this particular police investigation and more generally.

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

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht agus an tacaíocht ó gach páirtí. I welcome the debate and the all-party support for the motion, and, as Mrs Overend said, we are supporting the amendment.

Three decades ago, women's organisations created a fundamental shift in understanding and acting to end violence against women and children. In the past, gender-based violence was confined to whispers and taboos. No longer; it is now part of the public debate. Violence against women and children is a crime, and it needs to be treated as a crime. Rape is a profound violation of our bodily integrity and our right to dignity, security and freedom from discrimination. Rape is a weapon used by some men to control and dominate women. Women, slowly but surely, are naming the crimes against us and our children, and we expect action where crimes are committed against us. Women and children expect to be safe in our homes, our workplaces, our social life, our health centres, our schools and our universities. We do not want the lack of action or failure to act to be dressed up as being because this is complex or is a blame game or because it is difficult or because we do not want to re-criminalise the victims and survivors.

We do not want the juvenile games that we saw earlier today from the Chair of the Justice Committee, Paul Givan. He blatantly attempted to divert necessary scrutiny. Such behaviour does no service to children and young people. We want these crimes to be fully investigated. We want the victims and survivors to get justice and to be provided with the services that they deserve, and we will work with all organisations that have a track record in safeguarding children to ensure that children and young people will not be criminalised or stigmatised in any way. There needs to be a step change in our society regarding violence against women and children, and every Department has a particular role to play. We do not want excuses when they do not do the work that they are supposed to do.

When I was in the Department of Education, I made safeguarding children a top priority. During my tenure as Education Minister, we engaged with Women's Aid and developed and funded a very innovative programme to train teachers in early intervention in relation to emotional, physical and sexual violence against women and children. It was called the Helping Hands programme, and it was age appropriate. During my time, we put counsellors into every single post-primary school, and, under John O'Dowd's leadership, DE is playing its role fully on the Safeguarding Board. The Department has also established a child protection support service for schools, which is a helpline and structured training to enhance this work. John O'Dowd continues to prioritise protecting children, and he stands ready to learn any lessons from the inquiry and will obviously work with all agencies and Departments.

Sinn Féin makes no apology in calling for an inquiry into the rape and abuse of these young people. Sinn Féin believes that it is the tip of the iceberg, and we understand that only by carrying out a thorough inquiry — inquiry, Minister; not a review — will we ensure that it is given the priority it deserves.

I was at the detailed briefing at the Policing Board, and I absolutely support Sandra Overend's comments about protecting police investigations. I went into the meeting concerned and came out even more concerned. The Barnardo's report did not get the priority that it should have by the Department of Health. Out of five recommendations, it implemented one. The reality is that it did not do enough. I would have much greater respect for the Minister if he began implementing the recommendations, stopped being so defensive and began to provide the necessary resources now for the four recommendations that were not

completed. We do not need to wait for an inquiry for those recommendations to be completed.

The PSNI has come out with its hands up. The issue did not get the priority it should have in the PSNI at the highest level of the organisation. This is not about denying the work that goes on in certain sections of the PSNI. It is about the failure of the senior leadership to prioritise it and put it into the policing plan, despite the fact that there were endless discussions about it at Policing Board meetings. Recommendation 6 should have been implemented by the PSNI, and Sinn Féin will continue to fight for that recommendation at the Policing Board. Minister Ford needs to ensure that that recommendation is carried out fully.

I was also concerned to hear some Members, a few days ago the House, use the issue of the British National Crime Agency (NCA) as part of a political point-scoring exercise. In particular, claims have been made that information and analysis by other agencies to help the PSNI prevent and detect child online exploitation will be lost unless the British NCA gets to impose two-tier, unaccountable policing in the North. I find it disappointing to hear people use that in an emotive way on such an important issue as online exploitation of children. Online child exploitation is detected through an international network, which includes the cooperation of industry and the role of the North American-based National Criminal Intelligence Resource Centre. That type of crime requires international information sharing. In the current structure, early analysis and risk assessment is carried out by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) and then passed to the PSNI for executive action. It is incorrect and very misleading to say that work will not happen in the devolved sphere without NCA in the North.

The Minister for Justice is claiming that information on crime against children may be withheld from the PSNI in the future by other agencies in the criminal justice system. I believe that that is untrue. It is unfortunate that the Minister is not here today, but I have no doubt that he will read the debate, and I call on him to confirm to the Assembly that the PSNI will be given any information that it requires from wherever it requires in order to play its role in child protection. The PSNI — lest there be any doubt about it — is fully empowered and resourced to take action against online predators and paedophiles.

I agree that there should be no political spat on this issue, and I am concerned about some of the whisperings and briefings behind the scenes. I hope that Members are not saying that people in positions of responsibility such as Maeve McLaughlin, as Chair of the Health Committee, or me, as a member of the Policing Board, should not be playing our role in scrutiny and accountability. *[Interruption.]* The defensive people are muttering away there. What needs to happen here is that children —

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

**Ms Ruane:** No, I will not.

Children must be safeguarded and protected, and there is no justification when they are not. Society will have much greater respect for people who stand up and say, "We did this; we did not do that; we should have done it". That is what we need to hear. Let me tell you that Maeve will continue in her role of scrutinising the Minister of Health and working with him, and our policing team and I will continue our role in holding the Chief Constable and his team to account.

When they do good work, we will give them credit; when they fall down, we will be the first to ask questions and make no apology about it.

We understand. Sinn Féin takes its responsibilities on safeguarding very seriously. We understand that predators and abusers of women and children thrive in secrecy, poor accountability and by shifting the blame. That is why we called for and support a fully independent inquiry with powers. That is why we will continue our work on this. We will take our responsibilities very seriously.

**4.00 pm**

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes with concern the recent revelations regarding the abuse and exploitation of children and young people; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to liaise with the Minister of Justice to initiate an inquiry to ascertain the prevalence of abuse and exploitation of children both in care and elsewhere; and further calls on all relevant Departments to outline the*

*strategies that will be put in place to safeguard and protect all children and young people.*

## **Farm Safety Investment Scheme**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Buchanan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses its concern at the number of fatalities and injuries on farms; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to build upon the good work of the Farm Safety Partnership by, as a matter of urgency, providing adequate funding for a farm safety investment scheme to help protect people working on farms and encourage real and practical investment in farm safety.*

First, I express my sympathy to all the farming families in the agriculture community who have lost a loved one, should that be an elderly person or a child, as a result of an accident on the farm. Many homes in the farming community have had a loved one taken from them by an accident that, in hindsight, could have been avoided by a little preparation before work was carried out on a farm. Today, we want to assure those families of our continued thoughts and prayers for them as we debate the motion.

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

Farming is a vital part of the Northern Ireland economy, providing employment to almost 47,000 people across 24,500 farms. Unfortunately, the safety record of farming in Northern Ireland is poor and continues to represent a disproportionate number of deaths compared with other sectors. We have all witnessed many fatal incidents on farms and know of thousands more people who have been injured or made ill while working in the farming environment. The death toll is unrelenting. In proposing the motion, I call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to act swiftly by committing sufficient funds to a targeted farm safety investment scheme to enhance greatly the safety of the working environment on our farms.

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) has confirmed that farm safety continues to be its biggest challenge as it strives to improve health and safety standards

in workplaces across Northern Ireland. Until three years ago, fatal accidents on farms accounted for approximately one third of workplace fatalities. That has since risen to almost 60%, with the number of work-related fatalities in 2012-13 totalling 19. Again, the farming sector dominated the fatal accident statistics, with 11 out of 19 deaths attributed to farm accidents. Considerable research has been carried out in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain, Europe and worldwide to identify the main and underlying factors contributing to accidents in the farming sector. That work included careful analysis of the main and underlying causes of accidents in the industry and farmers' attitudes to health and safety, as well as research into slurry handling, work at height and machine design. The research has been used to help to tailor the Health and Safety Executive's health and safety measures and approach to enforcement for the farming sector. The Farm Safety Partnership, which is made up of the Health and Safety Executive, DARD, the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association, the National Farmers' Union and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster has a particular focus on the safety of farm workers and has employed a wide range of approaches to securing health and safety improvements on our farms.

The partnership launched its first farm action plan in November 2012 to look at ways to significantly reduce work-related deaths, injuries and illnesses on farms and drive up health and safety standards. The plan focused on four key areas: the provision of information and the promotion of a safe working area; health and safety training; motivating good practice; and collecting and analysing information. Everyone in the House appreciates that there is a culture of risk taking in the local agriculture industry; it is important that we work to change that mindset and work together to encourage farmers to stop and think about their working environment and the actions that they take.

In March, the partnership launched a major farm safety media advertising campaign, which, I am sure, we are all aware of. The campaign includes TV, radio and newspaper adverts that will run throughout the year. The main thrust of the Stay Farm Safe campaign was to advise farmers to Stop and Think SAFE — the main risks of slurry, animals, falls and equipment — before starting any farm job. The Stop and Think SAFE approach provides a process for farmers to carry out risk assessments and implement a safe system of work to manage risk based on the four main causes of



accidents. The multimedia campaign is hard-hitting. It is designed to change the attitudes of farmers to risk and target their family members to encourage the implementation of safety measures.

Farming is an extremely tough profession, and the challenges are immense. It requires huge determination, tenacity and skill. However, it can be deadly. The indications are that farmers are well aware of the risks and what they should do. It is a matter of changing their mindset so that they think about the risk before starting any farm job and encouraging them to consider the consequences of a major accident on the future of their family and their farm business.

The Health and Safety Executive is committed to helping to eliminate work-related accidents on the farm that have resulted in children being killed. Being hit or run over by farm machinery is the biggest danger faced by children on our farms, and falling from tractors, drowning, being injured by animals or being hit by falling objects are the other main dangers faced. Through the Be Aware Kids: Child Safety on Farms campaign, the Health and Safety Executive has sought to explain the key safety messages in rural primary schools across Northern Ireland. There are also rural Bee Safe events targeted at 222 schools, and the aim is to reinforce the three key safety messages: children must be 13-years-old, have completed a recognised training course and have permission before they can drive a tractor under supervision; busy farmyards are dangerous places to play; and female animals with their young can see children as a threat and may attack.

Many of our farming community are so familiar with their individual cattle that it can lead to complacency, especially when handling bulls. A number of accidents — some fatal — happen every year because farmers fail to treat these animals with respect. A familiar comment from individuals injured by a bull is that they were astonished at the speed of the bull during the attack. I am sure that we can all look to people in our constituency who have been attacked by bulls, and, unfortunately, some have even lost their life. It is important that the farming community is aware that a playful bull can kill just as easily as an angry one.

Many fatal accidents on Northern Ireland farms involve the operation of machinery. Power take-off shafts have been involved in many fatal injuries. Machines that are used while stationary — such as slurry pumps, slurry tanks, grain-roller mills, circular saws and standby generators — present the greatest risk

to users. Most farmers know someone who has had a close shave with a power take-off (PTO) shaft. Unfortunately, many will know of someone who has been killed or has lost a limb as a result of becoming entangled on an unguarded shaft. Many accidents would have been prevented if the shaft had been correctly fitted with a guard that was properly used and maintained. The fact is that broken, damaged or badly fitted guards can be just as dangerous as having no guard at all.

The continuing high number of deaths, particularly among the farming community, illustrates the need for the Health and Safety Executive and the Department of Agriculture to be constantly innovative and challenging. The research shows that, while most farmers appreciate that there are many dangers involved in everything that they do, too many do not routinely assess the risks and take a moment to think about what they are going to do and make preparations that will help to avoid injury or death. A startling statistic is that, on average, one farming family is bereaved every month.

We need adequate funding for a targeted farm investment scheme not only to enhance the safety of the working environment on our farms but to act as an incentive for our farming community to be more informed and to help to avoid the accidents that occur. A lot of good work is being done by the Health and Safety Executive, but that work has to be built on through proper investment in a proper scheme. There could be schemes such as providing facilities to cover PTO shafts and blades on saws —

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

**Mr Buchanan:** — for slurry detectors and all of that type of thing. We need investment from the Department to try to cut the risk of further farm accidents.

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

**Mr Milne:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this opportunity to speak on the important issue of farm safety. Members will be aware that fatalities on the farm account for over 50% of work-related deaths here in the North. In real terms, in 2012-13, 11 out of 19 work-related deaths were farm accidents. Behind each fatality lies an immeasurable loss and a family devastated. There are also the unknown statistics for serious accidents and near misses, all of which can have a profound

impact on the lives of those affected. Injuries can be long-term and debilitating and can mean an end to farm life. The nature and severity of accidents can leave a lasting trauma. Coming from a rural constituency, I am only too aware of the high potential for accidents. I know personally many people who have been injured as a result of such accidents.

The nature of a farm differs greatly from that of other employment sectors. Home and work life operate side by side. Every member of a family, regardless of age, is involved in some way or another. Training is very much on the job, with methods and systems learnt from the generation before. Busy seasons can see farmers work from dawn to dusk with few breaks and under considerable pressure, particularly in this economic climate. This can lead to tiredness and lapses of concentration for anyone. However, the risk is intensified given that those working on farms work with powerful machinery and livestock that can turn on you without warning.

The media focus on recent tragedies has brought home to many the seriousness of the situation. Hard-hitting media campaigns have gone some way to highlighting the fact that farming is a dangerous business and a farm can be a dangerous place. The partnership approach taken by the various stakeholders, including DARD, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), HSENI, which has overall responsibility for health and safety in the workplace, the Ulster Farmers' Union, NIAPA, NFU and the Young Farmers' Clubs has been an important step, but it is crucial that everyone works collectively. That is the way to get real improvements in farm safety. Raising awareness and changing attitudes and behaviours, as well as devising new work methods and systems, are all elements of that approach. If there is uptake and a willingness on every level, there is real potential for change. That is not to say that we should not continue to look for other opportunities to improve safety for those working and living on farms. I support the motion.

**4.15 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Members, I am aware of some background noise and interference. We have made the broadcasting unit aware of it. We will have to persevere in the meantime.

**Mr Byrne:** I, too, support this important motion and commend the signatories to it for tabling it.

Farm accidents and fatalities have been a major concern in the agriculture industry over the past number of years. There have been many deaths involving farm machinery, tractors, slurry tanks and slurry gas, as well as those involving animals, particularly bulls. Quite a number of older farmers have had accidents through falling from roofs and many children have been killed as a result of mishaps with machinery. Indeed, there were some examples of that over the summer. Farm-related deaths have a devastating effect on the families directly involved, as well as on neighbouring communities. Many are also killed or maimed by PTO shafts, which are very dangerous if not properly used and monitored. However, a very good initiative is being promoted at the moment on the use of and need for investment in good-quality PTO shafts. Many farm suppliers are involved in giving practical demonstrations for farmers.

For some time, the big question has been this: how can the number of farm-related deaths be reduced? The Farm Safety Partnership was launched in May 2012 by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. It was very welcome. Many stakeholders are involved in the safety partnership, including the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland. An action plan with the overall aim of eliminating work-related deaths on farms across Northern Ireland was launched in November 2012. At the time, the Health and Safety Executive gave the following statistics: slurry accounted for approximately 15% of farm fatalities; animals were responsible for 27%; falls from sheds and so on and things falling on people accounted for another 27%; and accidents with equipment — tractors and machinery — accounted for another 27%.

Better training and advice needs to be provided to farmers and farm workers on the operation of tractors and machinery and on other farm-related work so that good practice in farming methods takes place in a farm safety-conscious environment. Practical training and refresher courses are needed so that the operators of tractors and other farm machinery are confident and competent in their machinery-handling techniques. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the HSENI must become pioneers of planning and delivering relevant and practical courses for farm workers. DARD and DETI must place an emphasis on promoting those courses and provide the necessary funding to resource farm safety programmes. That means that more money needs to be invested in a farm safety

programme of education and training. Modern tractors, farm machinery and equipment are often large machines that come with a large number of gadgets and controls as standard. There is a need for tractor and machinery suppliers to provide practical handling courses to the farmers and farm workers who operate them. If a tractor costs between £40,000 and £60,000, surely a handling course for the driver would make sense as part of the purchase deal.

There needs to be investment in slurry gas monitors, appropriate safety gate mechanisms and dedicated practical courses in slurry handling. There have been too many tragedies connected to slurry for the issue to be treated lightly. It is a serious issue. We are all too aware of the tragic farm loss where a father and two sons, members of the Spence family of County Down, lost their life last year.

In Northern Ireland, farm deaths run at the rate of about 11.7 deaths for each 100,000 people; in GB overall, it is 11.1 for each 100,000; and, in the Republic, it is much higher, at 31 deaths for each 100,000. Unfortunately, fatal accidents on farms accounted for one third of workforce fatalities until three years ago.

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

**Mr Byrne:** That has now risen to 50% of all workplace fatalities. DARD- and DETI-sponsored action is needed, and a partnership approach is vital for tackling the problem.

**Mrs Overend:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The Allen family from Moneymore and the tragic death of Henry only a few months ago come to mind. Although the family may be able to adapt to new circumstances, they will never forget Henry or the wretched way in which he lost his life. Unfortunately, that is not the only farm accident that has touched my life in recent times. I remember two other friends who lost their life and two who survived to tell the tale.

Of course, when recent tragic events have brought farm safety to the fore, we must remember that the problem is nothing new and that farming families have had to go through the anguish of farm fatalities for many years. It is startling that, in the 21st century, agriculture has become the most dangerous industry in the country. The agriculture industry often accounts for well over half of the work-related fatalities in Northern Ireland. Think about that. Out of all the occupations in the different sectors, one in two workforce deaths occurs in

our farming industry. If such a rate existed in our manufacturing industry, it would be addressed, and, if such a rate existed in our construction industry, it would be addressed. Why, therefore, should such a high rate be tolerated in agriculture?

Today's motion rightly calls on the Agriculture Minister to build on the work of the Farm Safety Partnership. As we all know, the aim of the partnership was to increase awareness of farm safety and to reduce work-related fatalities on farms. Awareness is key, and I am sure that the Minister rightly accepts that prevention is always better than the cure. Statistics show that the highest number of accidents on local farms occur with machinery. That is followed by injuries caused by animals, then slurry and then falls. Therefore, I hope that the Department starts with those.

Although farming families know the dangers and although the messages are often drilled into young people from an early age, accidents do, unfortunately, happen. I grew up on a working farm. I know the challenges that working with livestock and machinery present, but I also understand how it is not always possible to predict accidents from what may otherwise be considered the routine. No matter how timid an animal may be or how often you have worked with it in the past, it does not mean that it is not capable of seriously injuring its handlers. Tractors are also regularly involved in farm accidents in which, tragically, children are often caught up. Of course, it goes without saying that children are naturally curious; they will climb heights or get themselves into situations that would fill the parents of young children in the House with dread.

I praise the work of the Health and Safety Executive, particularly its effective leafleting campaigns and its work with children and young people. However, I acknowledge that, although we have unprecedented warnings of the dangers on farms, too many people are still being injured and killed on our farms. I, therefore, support the call in the motion for a farm safety investment scheme. Following the tragic deaths of the Spences, for instance, my party called for research on the development of new breathing equipment or gas detectors for farmers during the dangerous task of mixing slurry. Funding through a farm safety investment scheme, the farm modernisation programme or whatever other source could be used to develop straightforward yet life-saving equipment. I encourage the Minister to explore all possible funding opportunities. If and when

such equipment becomes available, it should be actively promoted throughout the industry.

**Mr McCarthy:** At the outset, it is important to offer our total sympathy to all those from the farming community who, in recent times and, indeed, times past, have lost a loved one or, in some cases, more than one member of their family as a result of an accident on the farm.

We remain extremely grateful to our farmers and farm workers for the work that they do to provide food for our tables and for the contribution that they make to our economy in general. It is a hard life, with long hours and sleepless nights, yet our farmers are dedicated and love the work that they do. In the course of that work, things can happen totally unexpectedly but with serious and sometimes fatal results. We never think that it can happen to us; it is always someone else, if not here at home, perhaps somewhere down south or across the water. The loss is the same everywhere, and the distress to families and communities remains unbearable, so it is important that we always have safety at the top of our thinking. The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland must be commended for the work that it does to inform people of the dangers, and it is up to the community in general to stop, think about and listen to good, sound advice so as to avoid accidents. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has been very active in promoting safety on and around the farm but more needs to be done.

The motion calls for:

*"adequate funding for a farm safety investment scheme".*

This request comes on the back of the good work being carried out by the Farm Safety Partnership. This partnership involves the important groups that are engaged in the farming industry; in other words, that group has the experts. We have all seen the multimedia advertising campaign that is designed to raise awareness of farm safety, and it is certainly doing its job. Only time will tell how successful or otherwise the campaign will have been.

It is a fact of life — indeed, different Ministers have acknowledged it — that farming is a tough profession. With recent pressures on agriculture, safety may not have been at the top of the agenda. It is more likely that shortcuts were taken to save time and money, and with that comes risk until something happens. It is then too late.

The Stop and Think SAFE campaign with slurry, animals, falls and equipment to the fore has to be heeded to prevent disasters on our farms. Getting the message of safety across to children at an early age is a very welcome part of the action plan. The HSENI will deliver key farm messages to over 90 rural schools — perhaps that has been done, but I hope that it will continue to be done — and it will hold a children's safety on farms poster competition annually. This is a positive move that will give children a good start in understanding safety on farms.

I understand that the Minister has given a commitment to fund any proposal that may come from the Farm Safety Partnership. I hope that she lives up to her promise.

Common sense tells us all, including the farming community, that a farm has many areas where danger lurks. Everyone must think safety when working in or near a farm. The Alliance Party supports the motion and hopes that no further disasters will happen on our farms.

**Miss M McIlveen:** Like other Members, I welcome the opportunity to speak about farm safety in Northern Ireland, which has the potential to affect so many farmers, families and communities right across the Province.

Everyone in the Chamber who represents a rural constituency will be aware of the dangers and challenges of rural life and, indeed, of those families who have been affected by tragedy. There is no doubt also that there is a need to protect people who work and live on farms across Northern Ireland. That has never been more potent. The reality is that, between January 2008 and August 2013, there were 41 local farm-related deaths. The breakdown of those figures is startling: 16 deaths as a result of accidents involving farm equipment, including vehicles; 10 fatalities were caused by falls; nine animal-related deaths; and a further six caused by lethal slurry fumes. Those statistics translate into disproportionate losses for agriculture when compared with other industries. It is staggering to think that, in 2012-13, farming-related deaths accounted for almost 60% of work-related deaths.

To a large extent, this situation reflects the nature of the industry, which exposes people to high-risk situations, day and daily. However, they should not be regarded as mere statistics. They are fathers, husbands, sons and brothers, and their loss is devastating.

#### 4.30 pm

With the rising death toll, it is necessary for us to give cognisance to the specific requirements of older farmers and young people, who all too often fall victim to the accidents and incidents that we have heard so much about in recent times and, indeed, that have been explored in the Chamber today. It goes without saying that, with an ageing demographic, the risk ultimately becomes even higher. I endorse Mr Byrne's comments about the need for education and training, how necessary that is and the investment that needs to be targeted at that specifically.

For a long time, there was a perception that not enough was being done to improve farm safety and encourage greater caution among farmers across Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that the Farm Safety Partnership has brought together various stakeholders, including the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland, DARD, the UFU, NFU Mutual and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster in an attempt to better coordinate the action that is necessary on this issue. As a body, it has built on the positive work carried out in recent years, at times often in isolation, by HSENI, and it has attempted to drive up on-farm safety and reduce work-related deaths and injuries. Certainly, the launch of the farm safety action plan is to be welcomed, and I look forward to receiving an update on its work.

The fact that farmers are now participating in awareness meetings organised by the partnership is a positive outcome. However, although we should continue this work, we need to explore how to reach those who have not attended the meetings. Raising awareness is key, and it is a vital part of what we hope to do. Other Members who spoke referred to the current television drive, which is hard-hitting. Investment needs to continue to make farmers and the general public aware of the relevant dangers.

As the motion highlights, there is an overriding need to make more money available to invest in farm safety across Northern Ireland. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development could, perhaps, make funding available for a farm safety investment scheme under axis 3 of the rural development programme. The benefits of such a scheme would be far-reaching. Practical examples have been explored today, but we could look at funding animal-handling facilities, safety applications for machinery and training to increase awareness and best practice. Given the continuing pressure on farm profitability and the continuing

operational pressures that farm businesses in Northern Ireland face, that type of investment is imperative. We must ensure that lack of on-farm profitability does not render local farms and farmers at risk due to limited opportunities to invest in greater farm safety. To that end, I urge all Members to get behind the motion, and I look forward to exploring the issue further in Committee.

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to take this opportunity to speak in favour of the motion and support the comments made today about the importance of farm safety. The motion is timely. It comes ahead of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development's planned review of farm safety and its meeting with the representatives of the Farm Safety Partnership, which is scheduled for the coming month.

All of us are aware of the dangers associated with farming and of the human consequences when accidents happen. As a councillor in Omagh District Council, I witnessed such tragedy when my party colleague, and former chairman of the council, Mickey McAnespie, tragically lost his life in a farming accident on the last day of April 2007.

I commend the excellent work that has been undertaken to date by the HSE and the Farm Safety Partnership in bringing a focus to the subject. Their Stay Farm Safe campaign, which advises farmers to think safe, has been highly successful, and the continuing work of the Be Aware Kids child safety campaign, which has included presentations to over 11,500 children in 100 rural primary schools, is to be highly commended.

I also want to acknowledge the role that DARD and DETI have played in the Farm Safety Partnership. Although the current action plan has a target date of 31 March 2014, it is important that a focus continues on farm safety beyond that date.

The HSE and the Ministers recognise that there is a culture of risk taking in the farming community. Therefore, any farm safety scheme must also target the mindset of farmers if we are to avoid tragedies. It is essential that we educate those involved in the industry of the potential dangers and force them to stop and think about their surroundings and the potential consequences of their actions. Although I support the call for a focus on farm safety, it is important to point out that a scheme in itself will not be sufficient to prevent people being killed or injured as a result of farming accidents.

In conclusion, I hope that today's discussion and the actions that will flow from it will help to prevent another injury or fatality on a farm. I support the motion.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion and the opportunity to highlight the widespread concern at the number of fatalities and injuries on farms. As a representative of a rural constituency, I am very aware of the dangers faced by farmers almost daily. Other representatives will be similarly aware of the high risk in the farmyard, and, indeed, some of that has been highlighted today. We have a responsibility to do everything we can to reduce that risk. It remains one of the most dangerous sectors in our economy. Up to 2012, the five-year average for fatal accidents per 100,000 people at risk was 11.7, compared to 0.8 per 100,000 for all employment in the North. It is a high-risk activity across the world, with a comparable figure of 11.1 in GB, 31 in the rest of the island and 30 in the USA and Germany. Across Europe, the figure stands at 12.

However, behind every figure is a human tragedy. Despite the many individual tragic incidents that we are all aware of, we do not have a unique set of circumstances here in Northern Ireland. There were 19 work-related fatalities last year, and 11 of those were in the farming sector. In recognition of the ongoing problem, the Farm Safety Partnership was launched in May 2012. The original partners — the Health and Safety Executive, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ulster Farmers' Union — have since been joined by the National Farmers' Union Mutual, Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association. An action plan was produced and launched in November last year to run from September 2012 to March 2014, supported by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and, of course, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, as the responsibility for health and safety rests with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. That action plan contained 44 specific actions and four key areas: the provision of information and the promotion of safe working; health and safety training; motivating good practice and discouraging poor practice; and the collection and analysis of information.

The purpose of the plan is to integrate managing safety into the business of farming, in part by emphasising the cost of not managing safety. The assessment appears to have been that changing the mindset around risk taking by

farmers and those who work on the farm would be more effective than providing capital investment to make the processes of farming safe. That approach leaves farmers burdening the costs of achieving any targets for improving safety in the farming sector. Whether it is an accurate assessment or one driven by departmental budgetary concerns is a matter for debate. The absence of a fund for farm safety improvements has been raised as a point of concern in discussions during my time as Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

One measure of the current action plan is the number of farmers engaged in the farm safety awareness campaign. The target is for 3,000 participants in the safety awareness sessions by March 2014. To date, two thirds of the way through the plan's timetable, just 1,000 have taken part. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development may have welcomed that as evidence of success. I suspect that maths may not, essentially, be her Department's strong point. It is not clear how many of those farmers who have engaged with the campaign have gone on to introduce safer processes and safer equipment. However, it would not be unreasonable for the Executive to provide assistance to farmers wishing to improve safety on their farm by at least part-funding the introduction of safety equipment.

There is an argument to say that it should be up to the Farm Safety Partnership to decide whether such a fund should be part of the action plan and that the Assembly should wait until the action plan for 2012-14 is completed before considering whether additional measures are needed. The question that the Assembly must answer today is whether to wait for the action plan to fail or to intervene now.

**Mr McCallister:** I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster.

Like many colleagues, particularly those representing large rural constituencies, I do not have far to go to recall families and friends touched by fatalities and injuries on their farms. Before being elected to here, I farmed full time. I am aware of many of the issues that colleagues raised about the pressures of time, the workload and the stresses and strains.

It is stark when we look at and reflect on the figures, constantly reminding ourselves that behind all those figures are families facing difficulties, coping with horrendous events that usually took place right in their own farmyards, living with that and being there every day.

We should also look at other examples, and Mr McGlone rightly pointed out that this is not just a Northern Ireland problem. It is not even just a UK or Irish problem. It is a European problem and a world problem. We need to look at how a First World economy would respond to the challenges that that throws up. We took on board the tough messages of other industries and activities in our lives, asking how we could change behaviour. Traditionally, the construction industry was the most dangerous profession. Look at some of the changes that that industry went through and how seriously it now takes health and safety.

I say to the Minister that we need to raise the bar on health and safety. Do we need to look at further regulations or changes to legislation? I say to the Minister and her colleague Mrs Foster that I sense support and willingness in the House to look seriously at how we change mindsets in our farming sector. We cannot continue with the level of tragedy that we endured over the past number of years.

Road fatalities were significantly higher 20, 30 or 40 years ago. I accept that for families who lost a loved one on the roads, that is still one too many. However, look at the strides that were made in that area. Look at the difference that was made when all sectors got together and looked at car safety, car design, road design, how we make changes, driver awareness, and increasing driving test regulations. That is the sort of mindset change that we need to bring to the agriculture sector. We need to look at how all the people are pulled together.

That will require funding. It is regrettable that we do not have more movement on a farm safety fund. We need that to happen. We need to look at how we might do that or locate money from Europe. As I said, this is also a European problem, and Europe should be looking at it. We seem to get regulations from Europe about vibrations on tractors without worrying about all the other safety implications in farming. Europe would do better to look at farm safety and such issues rather than worrying about vibrations.

**4.45 pm**

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

**Mr McCallister:** We need to look at, for example, things that damage supporting roofs and power take-off (PTO) guards. I remind the

Minister that we need a complete change of mindset on the issue.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Members opposite who tabled the motion. Agriculture is a major industry here, with nearly 50,000 people working on just over 24,000 farms. In recent years, significant changes have taken place. An increasing number of farms now have off-farm employment. Farm size is increasing, and the number of labour units is decreasing. An increasing number of farmers rely heavily on single farm payments and other schemes. That is particularly true of dry stock farmers, especially hill men. Serious economic pressures mean that they have not been able to reinvest in new machinery and buildings, which, in itself, causes major safety problems. Despite the increasing use of technology and mechanisation in agriculture, farming is a labour-intensive and, sometimes, dangerous occupation. Farmers work in harsh weather conditions — sometimes, 24/7 — handle stock, operate large machinery and handle dangerous materials and chemicals.

In 2012-13, there were 11 deaths on farms. As we debate the motion, I am conscious of the many who are grieving having lost a loved one in a farm-related accident. Our thoughts are with them. In addition to those deaths, many farmers have had accidents on their farm. Some have made a full recovery; others have not and will live with a reminder of their accident for the rest of their days. The main causes of death and injury lie in the farmyard and buildings. The danger of working with slurry is well documented. When agitated or pumped, high amounts of hydrogen sulphide are released. Many tanks are around old houses. The farmer puts his stock out, but as the tank is usually under the cattle house, he has to go in to operate the machinery. Falling off a ladder or through a roof is also a killer. Farmers just do not have the financial capability to replace shed roofs that have corroded over the years. That had devastating consequences for farmers and their stock during the heavy snow earlier in the year.

With livestock, bulls are a primary concern. Animals with newborns also pose a risk. Farmers use stock-handling facilities that are, perhaps, 40 years old. Machinery deaths are frequent, caused by crushing or entanglement. PTO is a major cause of deaths and injuries. Farms are a high-risk environment for children and older people. A farmer uses an array of tools from chainsaws to welders. These are lethal if proper precautions are not taken. Of course, there are many fatalities as a result of using substandard or poorly maintained

electrical equipment or catching overhead cables.

There are the occupational health issues associated with farming, which include lung disease, perhaps as a result of too many fusty bales of hay over the years or asbestos, and serious back pain as a result of poor lifting techniques. Coming from a farming family, I am only too aware of the dangers and the close shaves. What of the future? First, future farm modernisation schemes must have farm safety at their core. There is definitely a need to update electrical installations, and so on. I certainly acknowledge the work of the Farm Safety Partnership. The Stay Farm Safe awareness campaign is a great idea, but it must be readily available to more farmers. Focus farms are the vehicle of delivery. However, there are not enough focus farms, especially in my area, where there are very few on the hills. Farm safety needs to be promoted at every opportunity — in schools, markets and at agricultural and vintage shows. DARD must take the lead in developing comprehensive health and safety training for all farmers and farm workers. Last week, there was a very successful PTO shaft awareness week, but we really need a cross-departmental approach to an annual farm safety week.

In recent years, we have experienced urban renewal in cities and many towns. There are many examples of that in South Down, whether it be the streetscape or the fabric of buildings that has been improved as a result of Executive funding. I believe that DARD needs to take the lead to utilise rural development moneys in a farm building improvement scheme in order to improve stock handling. Our winters are such that stock can no longer be out all winter, especially on the hills.

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

**Mr Rogers:** Research and development needs to be ongoing to ensure that every attempt is made to minimise death and injury on our farms.

In conclusion, our farming industry needs investment to ensure that its health and safety standards are comparable with those in other industries and, consequently, to ensure that it sees a reduction in death and injury on our farms.

**Mr Dallat:** Being probably the last contributor, I have had loads of time to reflect on my past. Although I spent most of my time as a teacher, I

began my working life on a farm. My father was a farm labourer, and he brought me along to the farm. In no time at all, I discovered how to start the Grey Ferguson and began improving my trailer-reversing skills. That is the sort of culture there was. I have to say that that mostly happened when the farmer was away. This is a serious subject today, and I do not want to sound flippant, because I am very aware that many people looking in have lost loved ones.

Investment, I think, runs parallel and is synonymous with safety. Other industries, roads, building sites and, indeed, homes have all needed investment. I feel very privileged that I was introduced to the farm. I was not a farmer's son, but through that experience, I gained an immense amount of education in respecting the environment, appreciating animal welfare and all the other good things that farmers are responsible for. I certainly want to see that continuing. When the Minister is summing up, perhaps she will tell us whether she has had any discussions with CCEA, because I believe that there is a place in every subject taught in school to at least touch on and raise awareness of farm safety.

Some of our farms are open farms, and I do not want to see them becoming like building sites where there is a plethora of signs that say you are not allowed in. It is about striking a balance between allowing people to appreciate what is there and, at the same time, protecting them. That is what is necessary.

I see this really as a cross-departmental issue. I hope that the Minister of Agriculture has the support of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the other relevant Ministers who can make this a success.

I was told that the home is one of the most dangerous places to be, and I just want to mention in passing the novel idea of the hazard house in Ballymoney. Young people are brought to that dwelling to experience all the dangerous things in a home. I would love to see a hazard farm, not necessarily one covering 100 acres or anything like that, but a project, perhaps developed by the partnership, that would allow, particularly, young people and other farmers to come along to see the endless number of hazards that can exist on a farm. I have no doubt that that would contribute to saving lives.

This is an important subject for every Member of the House. Although we might wish to score political points occasionally, on this occasion, I hope that we are all with the Minister in setting a pattern that will transform an industry that is



so dear to all of us, whether or not we live on farms. If we do that, perhaps we will not have the tragedies that we have had in recent years, which have upset everybody, particularly the families and relatives affected. I hope that this debate will, in fact, provoke the development of a serious plan that involves investment to improve safety and, above all, to raise awareness of the subject. This is not a one-day wonder but something that needs to continue forever and a day.

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who secured today's debate. I welcome the fact that we are having this discussion, because we all welcome anything that we can do to raise the profile of awareness on farms and farm safety. It goes without saying that I share the concerns that have been raised by all Members about the ongoing number of fatalities and injuries on farms and the need to improve safety standards on our farms so that they become safer places for farmers and their families. All Members have recognised that responsibility for the promotion of health and safety rests primarily with the Health and Safety Executive, but farm safety is a key area of importance and a priority for my Department as well. I am fully committed to the challenge of improving health and safety standards and am striving to reduce fatalities and injuries on our farms.

I fully support my Department's involvement in the Farm Safety Partnership along with the Health and Safety Executive and key stakeholders. I also fully support the farm safety action plan that has been agreed by the partnership. The action plan covers a wide range of actions that are aimed at improving awareness and safety standards on all farms. All the indications are that, although farmers are aware of the dangers that are posed, there is a culture of risk taking on farms. We really need to focus on that. It is about how we change that mindset and change the attitude to taking risks. We have a lot of work to do on that. The ongoing Think SAFE campaign is very important, particularly given the fact that there are so many children on farms. We really need to drive home that message. DARD has already taken a range of actions to improve awareness, change attitudes and generally help to improve safety on farms, and it will continue to do so. I am, of course, actively considering what more we can do to enhance the ongoing efforts.

A specific target for my Department in the farm safety action plan is to lead on the delivery of a

health and safety awareness training course to 3,000 farmers and farm family members by 31 March next year. That is a challenging target, but I am absolutely committed to achieving it. Although uptake from the farming community has been slow, we are confident that the target can be achieved within the time frame set out. To date, over 1,000 farm family members have registered for the FarmSafe Awareness training sessions. To engage with more farm families, we are focusing on getting more established farming groups to register for the training sessions, which are available at 38 focus farms and at various community venues across the North.

In addition to promoting FarmSafe Awareness training at farming events, roadshows, farming conferences and meetings, my Department is taking actions to encourage the uptake of the awareness training, including the distribution of 250 FarmSafe Awareness DVDs to community groups, churches and women's institutes; a specific FarmSafe Awareness session to rural support networks, young farmers' clubs and other rural community stakeholders; and distribution of a FarmSafe Awareness leaflet to 38,000 farming households. As a further encouragement to farmers to act on the messages that they learn at the training, attendees receive a self-risk assessment form. They are encouraged to be proactive and complete their own risk assessment shortly after the training concludes. Further work is continuing to improve that process and help farmers to make risk assessment a routine part of their daily working life.

The work of the Farm Safety Partnership is ongoing, and it is about to review the outcomes of its action plan. I will encourage the partnership to maintain its momentum and take forward that important challenge. Although a target date of 31 March next year has been set for the current action plan, we do not intend to stop there. We will look beyond that date, and I believe that consideration now needs to be given to what further steps can be taken to enhance training delivery and to encourage farmers to change their attitudes and behaviour with regard to farm safety. I will be guided by the Farm Safety Partnership, and I have asked my officials who are involved with the partnership to report to me on what further actions DARD can take to improve the understanding of farm safety issues in the industry and to develop and enhance the existing action plan. I am also exploring the potential to repeat the farms and farm families social survey to update me on information on non-fatal farm accidents and to help us to build up better information on farm safety awareness

and training issues. As I have outlined, the Department is already doing a lot of work to help to ensure that farmers are better informed about safety on their farm. A key message to farmers has to be about thinking safe. Getting that message across will promote good practice and result in a reduced risk of accidents on farms.

### 5.00 pm

Capital funding from DARD is available under the existing rural development programme through the farm modernisation programme for items of plant, machinery and equipment that will contribute to the competitiveness of farm businesses by modernising holdings and improving production techniques. That is a small-scale grant programme with a maximum grant of about £4,000 for a farm business. Although the primary aim of the farm modernisation programme is to modernise farms, under the third tranche there are 37 items eligible for financial support that have the potential to directly enhance the safety of the working environment for farmers.

The items eligible for assistance in the scheme were drawn up in conjunction with industry stakeholders and with input from professional advisers from the Department and HSE. They include items such as cattle crushes, calving gates and sheep rollover crates that promote safer animal handling; cranes for handling bulk bags to reduce manual handling and improve the safety of transporting heavy loads; a range of fans to aid ventilation in farm buildings; and weed wipers, which help to reduce exposure to pesticides. Over the three tranches of the programme, £4.2 million of financial support for those safety-related items has been awarded in letters of offer to successful applicants. That is obviously a good outcome that I will come back to a wee bit later.

Although the simplified format of the farm modernisation programme has proved popular, with over £10 million already paid to farm businesses, it is not possible in this format and in the time constraints of the existing rural development programme to accommodate larger structural capital items such as reroofing old farm buildings, installing outside mixing points for slurry tanks or even constructing permanent livestock handling facilities that may further enhance farm safety. I have, therefore, asked my officials to develop proposals for a scheme in the next rural development programme that would support larger capital investment to improve health and safety. DARD is currently consulting on the draft rural development programme, and I am pleased

that that includes a proposal for a farm business investment scheme that would allow for much-needed investment in larger items, including those that will help to improve health and safety as part of farm competitiveness. That consultation is ongoing and will be open until 21 October. I obviously encourage individuals and organisations to submit their views on the proposed health and safety content of the new programme.

Subject to the responses to the consultation and to the agreement of the European Commission, the new RDP will incorporate the proposed farm business investment scheme. That has the potential to provide support to upgrade or replace buildings and equipment, including for health and safety; to improve animal husbandry and biosecurity; and to establish renewable energy technologies. That is a good prospect, and I hope that the scheme can be implemented as early as we would want. It is my intention to have the new capital support available very early in the new programme, not least given the importance that we attribute to addressing safety on farms. However, I am conscious that the new RDP provision remains some way off, and I am seized with the need to continue to support investment in farm safety equipment. So, I plan to extend the current tranche of the farm modernisation programme, subject to receiving the necessary funding. That will provide financial support for farm businesses that applied but just missed out under the first allocation of tranche 3 funding earlier this year. It will provide those applicants with an opportunity to access grant aid for items to help to modernise their farms. As I said, those include items that promote safer working practices on farms. So, once I know that the funding has been secured, I will be pleased to announce this extension to the scheme.

Of course, I emphasise that, as has been recognised here today, safety equipment is only one part of the solution. Recent tragic events only confirm my belief that health and safety practices must be incorporated into the day-to-day activities of the entire farm family so that there are real improvements in behaviour and attitudes to risky practices. We have already taken significant action to help improve the safety record on our farms and to reduce fatalities. However, I absolutely recognise that much more work is required by government authorities, stakeholder organisations and farmers themselves. Along with our partners in the Farm Safety Partnership, we will continue to engage fully with the review of the farm safety action plan and will consider what other actions can be taken forward. I will not be found

wanting in bringing forward any support that my Department can give in the time ahead. The message is clear: Think SAFE. Let us get a change in attitudes and put practical measures in place to assist farmers.

**Mr Frew:** I am heartened by the response that we have had to the motion today, not least the Minister's comments but also the fact that Members from every party — not just members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee or the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee — who come from a rural background or constituency have spoken well on the motion. I thank you all for being here and applaud you for contributing to the debate, which I believe to be a very important one. We all need to do more not just to save lives but to make sure that lives and livelihoods do not become broken. I am heartened by the response that we have had tonight.

I can compare the farming industry with one that I was steeped in for 20 years, which is the construction industry, which has been alluded to tonight. Over the past generation, mindsets and methods were forced to change in the construction industry. That is because the lowly apprentice spark was no longer allowed to stand on his toolbox to change a lamp; the brickie was not allowed to stand on a stepladder to form a row of bricks; and the plumber was not allowed to use a ladder to work at a high level. The symbols that everyone in this room visualises when the construction industry is mentioned are no longer used. On most sites nowadays, ladders and stepladders are banned, and you will hear the constant moan from artisans that common sense has been completely taken away from the construction industry. That could well be the case, but it is no less a feat because it has saved lives.

The onus has been taken away from the worker, and the responsibility has now been placed on the employer. If I go to do a job and cannot achieve it with the tools and machinery that I have, I put my hands up and ask someone to get me up to that height. I ask the builders to do something so that I can achieve the task safely. The onus was shifted from the person who held the tool to the person who employed them and the person who was running the job. Unfortunately, that cannot happen on the farm because it is only the farmer or the worker who are there. It is not his employer, and there will not be a health and safety manager about the farm as there is in the construction industry, so there are differences. However, there must be hope that we can change the mindset of the farmer.

It is a very lonely role in the farming community and the farming business. Most farmers nowadays do not have the capacity or the capital to employ people. It is usually just them or their family; their wife, daughter or son might work alongside them on the farm. There is a mindset that says, "This will not happen to me". People may think that something that happened last month was a tragedy and will not happen to them, but, in some cases, it does happen to them. That must stop. It is not just about deaths but serious injury or injuries that, in later life, have a devastating effect on that person's body in that they cannot cope or cannot work any more and they lose income and are in constant pain. It is about raising awareness; it is not just about throwing money at the problem. Throwing money at this will not solve everything. It will help, as long as the money is spent in the right areas, but it will not solve everything. There have to be awareness campaigns. There even has to be shock and trauma. We have seen the road safety campaigns over the years, and we have seen it in the construction industry. There should be a shock/trauma element to make people think that they must stop certain practices and do certain things to prevent a serious injury happening to them or their loved ones. If we can do that, we can go some way to solving what is, in most cases, a tragedy in our homes and for our families.

I commend the work that this Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have done with the Farm Safety Partnership. The farmer, on his own, does not have an employer putting pressure on him to think safe, so it really is for the farmer or the Minister to do so. The Minister must rely on everybody in between, whether it be the Ulster Farmers' Union, NIAPA or any of the organisations that can assist in any shape or form. The Minister should rely on those bodies to come up with reassurance and assistance to help her in her task of raising awareness. It is true that the farm safety awareness programme has delivered locally on 37 focus farms with 1,000 farmers attending. That is good, but we must do better. We must hit that target of 3,000. We, in the Committee, will not be found wanting when it comes to helping the Minister to achieve that. Straight after this debate, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development hopes to do a mini review of farm safety, with, of course, the acceptance and support of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which has the primary responsibility for safety. We hope to undertake that very soon. Perhaps, in six months' time,

we will have another debate on the same issue. It is so important.

Tom Buchanan proposed the motion. He mentioned the statistics, as did most Members who spoke. It is fair to say that the numbers are horrific. However, as many people said — John McCallister was one of them — when you look at each statistic and each life lost, there is a harrowing story to be told behind that. Families will never, ever recover. They will have to step out their doors and see where their loved one perished. They will recount and relive that moment over and over again. Not only that; those families are under severe pressure every day to earn a living because they have lost their loved one. We must support that and be aware of that when we sit in this Building.

Ian Milne welcomed the opportunity to speak in this important debate. He supported the motion. He said that there needs to be a will on everyone. I agree 100% with that: everyone must take responsibility to make it better. Joe Byrne, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, talked about the various schemes out there and the stats. He talked about the programmes that could be put in place when buying machinery or using certain materials. That is a very good point. As I said, health and safety on the building site and in the construction industry became an industry on its own. People saw that they could make great money from safety equipment. That is OK, but, if they would concentrate more on farm machinery, we could save lives. I do not care who makes money from the issue so long as we save lives. That should be the most important thing.

Sandra Overend talked about the suffering that families go through, the legacy left behind, the hurt and the pain and the remembrance. She said that prevention is always better than cure, and she urged the Minister to explore all funding opportunities, even from Europe.

I am running out of time. I urge the Minister to do all she can to draw down funding from Europe for this very serious and important issue. I support all her moves on farm modernisation. However, £4,000 of a ceiling is only a drop in the ocean when it comes to modernisation. It is not all about making profits and making your farm modern to make profits. It is also about safety, raising awareness and saving lives. Four thousand pounds just will not cut it.

We need to do something to extend that to make real differences to people's sheds, people's barns and people's roofs so that they do not have to go up onto the roofs to fall off them or be knocked down by the weather. Minister, I will assist you in any way that I can to support you in your efforts over the next couple of months and years on the issue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly expresses its concern at the number of fatalities and injuries on farms; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to build upon the good work of the Farm Safety Partnership by, as a matter of urgency, providing adequate funding for a farm safety investment scheme to help protect people working on farms and encourage real and practical investment in farm safety.*

**5.15 pm**

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### Newry Southern Relief Road

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who speak will have seven minutes.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I tender apologies from my colleague from Newry and Armagh Megan Fearon, who has another engagement. I welcome the Minister and thank him for being here. I welcome the announcement that he made on 27 September of £1.6 million for additional resurfacing in the Newry area. That is very welcome. Bessbrook has not been mentioned, but I am sure that it will get part of that.

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

The 'Banbridge/Newry and Mourne Area Plan 2015' includes a proposal for a Newry southern bypass as a long-term strategic road improvement to link from the A1 Dublin Road, a key strategic road, to the A2 Warrenpoint Road, a trunk road heading to Warrenpoint port. The Department's consultation document on proposals to expand the 'Regional Strategic Transport Network Plan 2015' includes the Newry southern relief road as a scheme that performed well in assessment. After representations, the Department agreed to undertake a local transport study of the southern side of Newry to assess the impact of the southern relief road and the possible lines of a new link from the A1 Dublin Road at or in the vicinity of Cloughoge roundabout.

In October 2006, Roads Service engaged consultancy support to assist its southern division to undertake a transportation study to assess a range of road improvement options to provide relief to traffic in the Dublin Road, Bridge Street, William Street, Abbey Way and Warrenpoint Road area of the city of Newry. That work included a review and assessment of the possibility of options to provide a new road link from the A2 Warrenpoint Road to the A1 Dublin Road, establishing the potential benefits, costs and impacts of a new road link. I am sure that anyone who has driven through Newry, particularly in Dublin Road, Bridge Street, Dominic Street and the Ballybot area in general

will immediately recognise particular problems in that area. Two years ago, I asked road traffic management to do a survey of traffic use on Dominic Street, which is a relatively small street in Newry. It was found that 5,000 vehicles a day use that road, and that is a lot of traffic for a street that was not built for it.

The feasibility study report published in 2009 concluded that, on the basis of the information available and presented in the report, the provision of a new road link between the A2 Warrenpoint and the A1 Belfast-Dublin key transport corridor was feasible and would be expected to provide significant economic benefits. That report also recommended that all options be taken through a wider consultation process to explore and assess the wider benefits with key stakeholders in the area. At the presentation of the report at a meeting of Newry and Mourne District Council in September 2009, when the current Minister was possibly still a councillor — I think he was — Minister Conor Murphy welcomed the findings of the feasibility study into the Newry southern relief road. The Minister said:

*"I welcome the positive findings of the report on the feasibility of the scheme and the transport benefits that a new road link, between the A2 Warrenpoint Road dual carriageway and the A1 Belfast/Dublin Key Transport Corridor, would bring to this area. This scheme would provide a new strategic transport link to support the economic growth of the city, improve transport links to Warrenpoint Harbour, increase road safety and contribute to a reduction in congestion within the centre of Newry. The report takes account of traffic demands on the main road network, in the southern part of Newry city centre, together with the constraints presented by existing development, the challenging topography and sensitive environment of the area."*

On that basis, the Minister asked Roads Service to proceed with further environmental and engineering assessments and to engage in a wider consultation process considered necessary to identify a preferred corridor for the Newry southern relief road.

The feasibility study prepared for Roads Service by consultants Scott Wilson provided a comprehensive assessment in which options for providing a strategic road link between the A2 Warrenpoint Road dual carriageway and the A1 Dublin key transport corridor were developed and costed. Several environmental and technical issues require further attention. There is the Carlingford shore special area of

conservation in the south and the Carlingford special protection area in the north. Environmental issues associated with tree ring features on the slopes of Fathom Mountain and with crossing Newry canal require detailed investigation. I will point out that Newry canal, which was opened in 1742, is the oldest inland waterway in Ireland or Britain. I just thought I would put that in for posterity.

The need for the road becomes increasingly urgent. In 2012, DOE confirmed that air quality at Trevor Hill and Canal Street was the worst in the North. At that time, DRD, under the present Minister, said that the southern relief road project's development was dictated by numerous factors, not just air quality. Air quality is one of a number of environmental factors considered at each stage in the development and assessment of a major road improvement scheme. DRD said that, in particular, the benefits identified in the scheme include an alternative route for heavy goods vehicles travelling to and from Warrenpoint port and a regional gateway to the A1 Belfast/Dublin dual carriageway, avoiding the congested urban network in the city of Newry. A southern relief road would be expected to provide a measure of relief to the Dublin Road, Bridge Street, Abbey Way and the Warrenpoint Road area of Newry.

Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade has said that delivery of the road would bring numerous benefits to the greater Newry area. A southern relief road will not only alleviate traffic congestion but have other financial spin-offs, including providing alternative access routes for the Albert Basin, increasing its development potential, freeing up land for development at the Greenbank estate and opening up tourist links between County Down, County Louth and south Armagh, as well as reducing emergency service vehicle response times and reducing air pollution in Newry city centre.

The Minister also represents our constituency of Newry and Armagh, and I urge him to take on board what I have said. I truly appreciate that he has a limited budget and many priorities. However, there is nothing wrong with being parochial sometimes, and I am sure that I have spotted the Minister going to Omeath for cheaper diesel. He can correct me if I am wrong. As I said, there is nothing wrong with being parochial sometimes, and there is no doubt that a southern relief road would bring great benefit to our constituency.

**Mr Wells:** I support the call for a southern relief road in Newry. I frequently travel from Kilkeel

to Banbridge, and I would not like to add up the hours that I have spent waiting in Kilmorey Street, waiting to cross the bridge into Newry or waiting to go through to the Quays shopping centre. It is the ultimate bottleneck.

To be fair to the Department, Newry has received some good road infrastructure news in recent years. The dual carriageway that links the Banbridge dual carriageway with the motorway that starts at Dundalk was completed, and that has greatly speeded up travel on that side of town. There has also been some progress on the Narrow Water bridge project, although we do not know exactly where we stand. First, that bridge is far from certain, and, secondly, even if it were built, it would not relieve much of the traffic that we are dealing with. It would certainly not relieve the large number of juggernauts coming through from Warrenpoint harbour.

One of the great successes of south Down is that, throughout the recession, Warrenpoint harbour has prospered. It has met great challenges, has overcome them, is in profit and is doing well. It is a fulcrum of economic development in that part of south Down. Its chief executive tells me that it is very frustrating for him that large lorries coming from Warrenpoint have difficulty accessing the port and getting away from it, particularly to markets in the Irish Republic and in the Belfast area. One is very mindful of the fact that, when you stand close to the Irish-language primary school — the nearest point, I suppose — you can see lorries spewing out fumes and getting absolutely nowhere. Not only is that an expense to the harbour authority and those who take consignments to and from it but it is leading to a reduction in air quality.

Over the years, I have asked the Minister to bring me up to date on the cost of the scheme. I think that the last figure he quoted was between £150 million and £200 million. I have no doubt that, today, he will bring us right up to date on the exact figure. Everyone must accept that that is a huge amount — there is no question about that — but I ask him to check a couple of funding possibilities. First, is there any way that cross-border EU moneys could be obtained? I accept that the scheme would link, dare I say it, one part of the United Kingdom with another part of the United Kingdom, in the sense that it would not transgress into the Irish Republic. However, being serious about it, I think that it could be argued that it would be a very important cross-border development. Obviously, a lot of the traffic to and from the southern part of Newry is going into the Irish Republic. Therefore, there may be merit in

trying to access European money, though I know that that is difficult. Secondly, if I may be the first to mention the elephant in the room, the A5 is on hold. That was a £400 million scheme, and I understand that there is still money in the kitty allocated for that. There may be a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, as it were, that could be used to start the scheme. I accept that it is expensive, but the cost would be spread over quite a few years. Thirdly, I wonder whether, when the economic conditions improve, a joint venture between us and the Irish Republic would be possible. Undoubtedly, this would bring great economic benefits to traffic coming from the Republic as well as from Northern Ireland. Those are the various models.

Some have suggested that there could be a toll bridge. Experience shows that it is highly unlikely that any private investor would build this massive project with any realistic prospect of redeeming the cost through tolls. We all know the success of toll bridges in parts of the Republic's motorway system. However, it is noticeable that, in other parts, where the traffic projections were clearly wrong, the Irish Government now pay money to private contractors to make up the shortfall. The only successful ones are at the Boyne and on the Dublin ring road; the rest lose money. I cannot honestly see how anyone could redeem such a huge amount through tolling. However, if the Minister has a crystal ball and can advise me otherwise, I would be very interested. People would not pay a toll; they would simply continue to congest that very busy part of Newry.

It is important to keep this up to date. The area plan recognises that we need it. Frankly, I see it as the last piece in the jigsaw of Newry's development. I hark on about this, but I used to say that I was elected before some people in the room were born. Looking around, I do not think that that is the case today — Mr McCallister may claim otherwise, but I doubt it — but I recall that, when I was first elected in 1982, Newry was in South Down. It is not untrue to say that there was practically sagebrush blowing down the main street. The town was a basket case economically. As a result of the work of people such as Mr Haughey and Gerard O'Hare, Newry has been pulled up by the bootstraps, and its economic output has increased enormously. That is a remarkable testimony to indigenous entrepreneurs working hard to revive their economy. Having done that, Newry deserves support, and the southern relief road would be the last piece in the jigsaw of its ultimate regeneration. Of course, there is also the canal basin redevelopment, which really would make

Newry an exemplar to the rest of the country for what can be done.

I support what Mr Brady is saying and am sure that others will join me in that. I have my doubts about whether the Minister will announce today that he is about to cut the first sod or is planning the cutting of the ribbon. It may be slightly further off than that. However, I would like to think that, as a result of today's debate, he can give us an indication that progress is being made on achieving this much-needed project.

### 5.30 pm

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo ar bhóthar faoisimh theas an Lúir. I am glad of the opportunity to participate in today's debate on the southern relief road at Newry. At the outset, I state that the SDLP strongly supports the provision of the road. Indeed, I raised the issue with the previous Minister several times in the House and just last year during the debate on the investment strategy.

Our party locally has conducted a vigorous postcard and petition campaign in support of the road. The Members who spoke highlighted the importance of the project for tourism and for the economy, and I very much agree with that. The project will benefit south Armagh, the city of Newry and south Down. The traffic congestion in Newry is a problem, especially with huge lorries coming to and from the harbour at Warrenpoint. That traffic congestion creates a problem and puts people off coming to shop and to do business in Newry. The project is supported by the greater Newry vision group, and I think that all parties represented here have signed up to that greater vision. The Minister, as a local representative, will be aware that the proposal is well supported in the business community and the wider community in the greater Newry area.

The road can be constructed in a way that respects the built heritage and natural environment of the area. Mr Wells referred to the importance that the road will have to the harbour at Warrenpoint. It is a busy harbour, and, as I said, there is much traffic to and from it. The road would add to the competitiveness of Warrenpoint harbour, in so far as it will increase access and egress times from the harbour and, therefore, make it more competitive in relation to other similar harbours North and South. The relief road would be a key strategic road for future economic and

tourism development in the region and, indeed, the whole east coast of Ireland.

I assume that the Minister will tell us that the feasibility study report, which was published in August 2009, concluded that the provision of the new road between the A2 Warrenpoint Road and the A1 dual carriageway is feasible and would be expected to provide significant economic benefits. That was one of the significant outcomes of the feasibility study.

The Department for Regional Development's strategic transport network plan has included proposals for the Newry southern relief road. As we know, Newry has a proud history at the heart of the island's economy, and Mr Wells outlined how local people — some of whom he mentioned in his speech — were instrumental in advancing the economic viability of Newry and making it into a prosperous city. I will mention the contribution made by a local co-op with Work in Newry (WIN). Having viewed the dire unemployment figures and economic prospects, that group was instrumental in ensuring that the economy of Newry was revived and that the city became a vibrant force once again.

That group and other local groups are very much in support of the project. I hope that the Minister can give us an update on a preferred route for the road and tell us when he expects to announce that. I also hope that the Minister is lobbying among his Executive colleagues to obtain the necessary support for the project. It would be good if the Minister were in a position to tell us when some sort of announcement will be made about the future of the road. As I said, there is tremendous support for the project in the city of Newry, south Down and south Armagh, and I think that it is one that deserves the type of resources needed to bring it forward. I hope that it will become a reality in the not-too-distant future.

**Mr Rogers:** I support the motion. The draft 'Banbridge/Newry and Mourne Area Plan 2015' includes a proposal for the Newry southern relief road to link the A1 Belfast to Dublin road with the A2 Warrenpoint Road. Although the scheme has performed well in the DRD's assessment, it has been deemed not affordable at the moment. Minister, I do not know whether this is take two or take three, but we have sat on opposite sides of Newry and Mourne District Council discussing the issue in the past. It was important then, and it is even more important today.

As other Members have said, the creation of such a road would have significant economic

benefits for the whole south Down, south Armagh and Newry area. Narrow Water bridge is merely a tourist bridge, but the relief road would take heavy goods vehicles off the streets of Newry, reduce traffic congestion and attract even more shoppers to the city. Heavy goods vehicles would also have a direct route to Warrenpoint port, increasing trade in the port area. Warrenpoint port currently ranks third in Northern Ireland, significantly behind two other east coast ports. As Mr Wells said, Warrenpoint Harbour Authority has ambitious plans for the development of the port, including its becoming a visiting destination for cruise liners next year.

The road would also act as a gateway to the development of tourism in south Down. There are ambitious plans for the development of Warrenpoint, Kilkeel and Newcastle as part of a south-east-coast master plan. However, we must get people to turn off the main A1 and into Mourne country and St Patrick's country. There is also great potential with the development of the Cooley and Slieve Gullion tourism area.

We see similar schemes when we travel around Ireland, England and the rest of Europe. I listened to Mr Brady say that we had the engineers, and so on, around to construct Newry canal in 1742. What is holding us up today? Where there is a will, there is a way. I hope that Mr Kennedy, along with his Executive colleagues, finds that will.

**Mr McCallister:** Colleagues present are conveniently all from the constituencies of South Down and Newry and Armagh, so I do not expect the Minister to announce anything but good news. I always get a bit anxious and worried when Mr Wells reminds us that he was elected in 1982. It is high time that he was retired, but, thankfully, he still has had a contribution to make in the past few years. I agree with some of what he said about Newry.

I do not live that far from Newry. The changes that have happened there over the past 25 or 30 years are enormous. The city's regeneration and vibrancy, the drive of the Newry business community despite some very difficult times, and the enthusiasm of different groups in the city are all to be commended.

As with other major towns and cities, one of the hugely limiting factors in Newry is congestion. Travelling into, or parking in, the city has become so difficult that it could start to stifle business there. Travelling into and around Newry is very difficult at times, particularly for those coming from the Warrenpoint side. The traffic also has a detrimental effect on the



potential growth of the harbour at Warrenpoint. We should be mindful of that, because the port is an economic driver there. It is hugely important to the south Down economy, as well as to the wider Northern Ireland economy, as the trade that goes through the port is vital to us. The southern relief road would have a huge impact and bring advantages for both Newry city, in relieving congestion there, and Warrenpoint port. It could make a huge contribution.

I know that the Minister has visited Warrenpoint harbour on numerous occasions and will be familiar with it. We will have to bear that in mind, along with all the other things that a project such as this could do for south Down and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

**Mr Wells:** I thank the Member for giving way. I do not want to disappoint him, but although I have been around this Building for a very long time, I started very young, and I am certainly nowhere near retirement age.

The Member and I have both attended meetings in Warrenpoint where Newry and Mourne District Council has unveiled exciting proposals for cruise liners to be brought into Warrenpoint. The water depth is sufficient, and I know that the harbour authority is very up to it. However, does the Member accept that it will be very off-putting if we bring lots of wealthy tourists into south Down and then when we try to take them anywhere beyond that immediate area, they will get logjammed in Newry in their bus going absolutely nowhere?

**Mr McCallister:** I agree with that.

The only reason why the Member is not so near retirement age is because the Government keep moving it.

I agree with the serious point that he made. I think that bringing that type of tourism into Northern Ireland and south Down would be hugely beneficial. I remind him of the successes that there have been in Belfast with bringing in cruise ships. That is having a huge impact, and it is something that I would like to see and encourage in south Down. It could have a huge impact and be very valuable for the economy, both locally and in the entire surrounding area. The impact that it would have across the board on business would be enormous. So, it is a project to which we are all very committed.

I look forward with great interest to what the Minister has to say. He may perhaps shed

some light on whether, at this stage, he has spent the A5 money about 10 times over. Certainly, he will have had demands for it to be spent. Does he still have the A5 money, or has it gone back to DFP? We might need to make sure that Simon Hamilton is as enthusiastic about the southern relief road as I expect the Minister to be.

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Members who have remained for this important debate.

One of the consequences of attending the debate is that I will not be available for the opening of Markethill Livestock and Farm Sales in my constituency this evening. However, I take the opportunity to place on record my congratulations to Mr Hampton Hewitt and everyone concerned. I wish them well in that relocation, given the importance of that business to the local economy in mid-Armagh and further afield.

I asked my officials to take note of issues so that if I do not have time to pick up any of the points that Members raised, I can write to them following the debate. I have, of course, listened with care to Members' comments, and it will come as no surprise at all to you to hear that I am a very strong supporter of the southern relief road and project.

I am very familiar with the peak-time traffic conditions in the city of Newry, especially on Kilmorey Street, William Street, Bridge Street and Dublin Road in the southern part of the city. I also understand the benefits that a southern relief road might be expected to provide.

The expanded strategic road improvement (SRI programme) makes specific reference to the Newry southern relief road in a list of schemes that performed well in the assessment but that were not affordable in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) budget to 2015. I inherited the situation in which only a feasibility study had been undertaken, albeit that the findings were positive, as we expected.

As Members recall, the study assessed a range of options for a new road link between the key strategic A1 Belfast to the border dual carriageway and the A2 Warrenpoint Road dual carriageway, which is a trunk road leading to Warrenpoint harbour. Much has been made of the need for improvements to that road for the harbour traffic, and I accept that entirely.

The study took account of the Government's five main objectives for transport: environment,

safety, economy, accessibility and integration. The report concluded that a southern relief road would be feasible; would create a more strategically connected road network; would provide a measure of relief to traffic in the city; and could be expected to demonstrate value for money. At that time, construction costs in the range of between £100 million and £211 million were indicated. That remains the case. Those costs reflect the challenges presented by the topography and constraints of the area through which the proposed road would pass. That area includes the Newry river and canal, which was opened in 1742. If you wait a moment or two, you will hear me going back slightly further than that. It also includes the steep slopes of Fathom Mountain, the Belfast/Dublin railway line and the environmentally sensitive areas in Carlingford lough, which are downstream of the location.

#### 5.45 pm

Traffic surveys undertaken in 2007 indicated traffic levels in excess of 24,000 vehicles per day on parts of Bridge Street. That included a significant proportion of heavy goods vehicles travelling to or from Belfast and Dublin to the port at Warrenpoint. Also, at that time, Newry traders were benefiting from visitors from the Republic of Ireland who were attracted to shop in the city by the relative currency values. Peak traffic demands in excess of the available road capacity led to delays and congestion on the local and strategic road network. Although we no longer have the same volume of southern shoppers, peak demand continues to exceed capacity. In that respect, the feasibility report concluded that the provision of an alternative route for strategic traffic would create a more strategically connected road network, while providing a measure of relief to traffic on the Dublin Road, Bridge Street, William Street, Abbey Way and Warrenpoint Road areas of the city of Newry. The report went on to make clear, however, that it should be recognised that the significant volumes of local traffic would continue to create delays and congestion in the city, particularly during the morning and afternoon peak periods.

Recognising Warrenpoint harbour as a key stakeholder for the Newry southern relief road, the feasibility report also concluded that significant disruption was experienced by heavy goods vehicles going to and from the port, which pass through the city of Newry, and that the provision of a new road would create an alternative route for that traffic and provide relief to traffic delays and congestion. I am also aware that the feasibility report noted that the future expansion of the port was largely

influenced by the efficiency of the transport links to and from the port.

The traffic modelling reported in the feasibility study indicated that over 5,000 vehicles per day may be attracted to a southern relief road, with more than 22,000 continuing to use Bridge Street. Nevertheless, the traffic and economic assessments that have been undertaken indicate that the proposed scheme would be expected to provide value for money with transport benefits, including safety benefits, exceeding the costs involved in providing the relief road.

The feasibility study recommended consultation with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and identified the need to undertake an article 6 assessment under the terms of the European Union's habitats directive. That assessment would test the likely significance of the proposed scheme on the two Natura 2000 sites within the wider study area; namely, the Carlingford shore special area of conservation in the Republic of Ireland and the Carlingford lough special protection area in Northern Ireland. I can confirm that that has been progressed.

This is quite technical, but it is very important. Environmental issues associated with tree ring features on the slopes of Fathom Mountain, which is likely to be affected by the proposal, are the subject of a more detailed investigation, which includes consultation with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). I am advised that NIEA believes those features to be potentially significant early 17th-century sconces, rather than the more recent tree ring landscape features. I need hardly remind Members of what sconces are, but they are rudimentary artillery fortifications comprising small circular earthen banks. They date back to November 1600 and the latter stage of the nine-year war of 1594 to 1603, which involved hostilities between the High King of Ireland, Hugh O'Neill, and the forces of Baron Mountjoy. Of course, Members will be very familiar with all that.

Should the NIEA assessment prove correct, this would represent a category of site that has not been previously identified in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, my Department is continuing to work with the NIEA with a view to determining conclusively the precise origins of those features. A solution is likely to come at some cost whether the site is excavated and recorded by archaeologists or the line of the proposed road is moved.

A more detailed technical investigation of the specific options for crossing the Newry canal was also recommended, given the sensitive nature of this important heritage feature. It is expected to require at least the provision of a bascule, or lifting bridge, to allow the passage of tall ships on the canal. The width of the Victoria lock already limits the size of ship that can enter the canal and it is expected that any bridge would maintain a navigation channel that matches the width of the sea lock. My Department will continue to consult with NIEA on how the impact of the proposal on the canal might be mitigated and an appropriate design developed.

Future progress remains dependent on a number of factors, including the development process and the proposal clearing the statutory procedures, which will involve formal public consultation. It must continue to have a satisfactory economic appraisal and, given other competing priorities, progress to construction will be dependent on the funding made available in future Budget settlements.

Members will know that I am a strong supporter of this project. I have asked officials to move the scheme forward and proceed with the various environmental and technical investigations relating to the tree ring features on Fathom Mountain and Newry canal, which will assist in identifying a preferred corridor for the Newry southern relief road.

I welcome all the contributions to the debate. Mickey Brady set out the case. Jim Wells mentioned the importance of the harbour authority and other funding opportunities including from the EU and from tolls. All those things will be explored. Dominic Bradley and Sean Rogers expressed strong support for the proposal. Road building is a lengthy and detailed process. John McCallister recognised the economic driver of Warrenpoint port. There is substantial political support, and I know that there is substantial community and business support for the road. There are technical issues, which are important environmentally and otherwise. We will continue to progress the matter as quickly as possible.

*Adjourned at 5.53 pm.*

# Written Ministerial Statement

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

## Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Bright Start: The Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare (A Strategic Framework and Key First Actions)

*Published at 10:00 am on Wednesday 25 September 2013*

**Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):** At the start of December last year, we launched a three-month public consultation on the Childcare Strategy. We received dozens of written submissions from a range of individuals, groups and organisations, and from our own Assembly Committee. We also heard the opinions of the people who attended the public events organised by us and the events organised by the main childcare stakeholders. We have heard from people in rural areas, and those in towns and cities. We have heard the opinions of childcare providers and specialists; the views of parents; and the views of the children themselves.

Consultation has made us all the more aware that many people cannot access the type of childcare they want. It has made it clear to us that many people here need more information about the types of childcare available if they are to find the form of care that meets their needs and the needs of their children. Finally, consultation has brought home to us the extent to which many people here struggle to meet the costs of childcare.

Based on the emerging priorities from the consultation process, *Bright Start* has been developed, including a range of key early actions to help us deliver our vision for childcare.

*Bright Start* sets out the strategic direction of the Childcare Strategy and lists a number of key first actions that will be put in place to address the main priorities identified during public consultation, including:

- a shortage of childcare provision, notably in rural areas and for the key age group 4-14;
- support for children with disabilities;
- a lack of information on childcare provision;
- the high cost of childcare services; and
- the need for clear, departmental accountability for the Childcare Strategy.

*Bright Start* states that the long-term vision of the Childcare Strategy is to create a joined-up sustainable service, supporting development needs and positive changes for children. These key first actions attempt to address the provision of childcare services and the cost, quality and accessibility of those services.

The performance of these actions will be monitored and this process will allow further engagement to take place with key stakeholders to enable us to publish the final Childcare Strategy in 2014.

The key first actions are as follows:

We will create or sustain some 6,000 new affordable school-age childcare places –childcare for the 4-14 age group. We will achieve this through a combination of new provision and support for existing childcare providers. Across the region, we will pilot a new approach to wrap-around care in the schools estate based on initial funding to create a minimum of 2,000 places. This could potentially rise to 3,000 places dependent on demand. We will also support the expansion and creation of 3,000 affordable places within a social enterprise model in areas in the 25% most deprived wards.

To address further the needs of rural areas, we will support, on a phased basis, a Rural Childminder Start-Up Package creating up to an additional 1,000 childminder places in rural areas. We will reinforce the above programme through supporting locally based transport schemes in rural areas, servicing networks of childminders in rural locations.

We will fund two further phases of the DHSSPS-led pilot – Improving Outcomes for Disabled Children – already underway through the Childcare Fund – which provides small capital grants enabling registered childcare settings to adapt to cater for children with a disability reinforced by training provision.

We will implement a range of improvements to the Family Support Website ([www.familysupportni.gov.uk](http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk)) to enhance it as a central source of information on childcare and providers operating at local levels.

We will develop a social media application (App) to provide better search functionality, more information channels and ultimately better and more accessible information at the touch of a button for parents.

Within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising, we will seek to promote both of the above through a publicity campaign which will also explain the benefits of registered childcare and the risks of unregistered childcare so that parents can make informed choices.

Again, within the framework of the Executive's position on advertising, we will seek to promote the financial assistance available to the many parents who find the costs of childcare a challenge, with the explicit aim of increasing uptake. This may involve an awareness-raising campaign and associated practical advice for the two forms of financial assistance currently available through the tax and benefits system to help parents with the affordability of childcare.

We will support a training programme to improve and enhance skill across the workforce.

We will work with other programmes to ensure good quality training of unemployed people as a pathway to work in childcare.

We will seek to align and promote existing initiatives to enhance the skill base and support continuing professional development in the childcare sector.

We will support initiatives to encourage greater diversity in the childcare workforce – with particular reference to males and individuals from ethnic minority communities.

We will establish a Childcare Strategy Management Forum that will meet quarterly to scrutinise and review how the early actions are being implemented. Departments with a policy interest in childcare – OFMDFM, DE, DHSSPS, DSD and DEL – will participate on the Management Forum. Local and stakeholder opinion will be represented through the Childcare Partnerships.

Conscious of public demand that a single department take the lead for childcare policy, we will agree a department that can fulfil this role and chair the Management Forum.

These first actions have been developed in line with priorities that have emerged through responses to the consultation document *Towards a Childcare Strategy* issued in December 2012. The consultation process sought views from the public, the childcare sector, parents and children in relation to childcare needs, priorities and issues. Views were obtained via a range of consultations, public meetings, workshops and written responses from stakeholders.

The first actions have also been informed by research reports and studies undertaken by the childcare sector in recent years and OFMDFM commissioned research involving parental and childcare provider surveys to statistically analyse childcare needs and parental preferences and to provide a robust evidence base to prioritise and target actions in specific thematic areas.

The first actions build on what already exists (by way of capacity, interventions and physical facilities) and aim to better join-up and improve this provision. We envisage that these actions will be implemented together, as a package, in order to maximise their impact on the accessibility, quality and affordability of childcare provision.

Some of the first actions are pilot projects designed to further refine and test uptake by parents, with a view to potential expansion thereafter. Other actions are designed to improve information in relation to childcare in order to improve parental choice and accessibility of childcare and therefore are permanent interventions.

Childcare is a critical enabler to help parents into work, move families out of poverty and help to break the cycle of inter-generational deprivation. Good quality childcare, which provides positive experiences and promotes children's opportunities to develop, is also potentially a building block for a stable and prosperous future for individuals, for families and for communities.

We are delighted, therefore, to be able to launch today *Bright Start: the Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare (A Strategic Framework and Key First Actions)*





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