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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 8 October 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Public Petition: Cross-border Area-learning Community to Provide Post-primary Education in North and West Fermanagh

Mr Speaker: Mr Flanagan has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leatsa agus leis an Choiste Gnó as an deis an achainí seo a chur isteach.

I present this petition on behalf of the people of north and west Fermanagh who are involved in a campaign, with the full support of all their local political representatives and the wider community. I welcome pupils, teachers and parents here today for an educational visit and to engage with interested MLAs on their campaign.

St Mary's High School, Brollagh, which serves the rural communities of Belleek, Garrison, Belcoo, Derrygonnelly and Boho, is currently threatened with closure by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and the proposal has been resisted by the local community on a number of occasions.

St Mary's Brollagh opened at a time when the vast majority of people in the area had no access to a decent standard of formal education and very limited access to post-primary education. That includes members of my own family and many other people in the area. Since then, the school has served the local community exceptionally well.

The local community, led by the work of the North West Education Action Group and its chairperson, Theresa Leonard, has overwhelmingly rejected the proposed closure of St Mary's Brollagh. The group has brought

forward an innovative and exciting alternative proposal involving the establishment of a cross-border area-learning community involving schools in south Donegal and north Leitrim. The people served by St Mary's Brollagh are from among the most deprived areas for access to services served by the Assembly. Closing the school and forcing young people to travel outside the area would further worsen that statistic and the quality of life of people there.

There is a realistic alternative to the closure of that school on the table, one that involves establishing a genuine and mutually beneficial partnership with other post-primary schools in the area — in Ballyshannon, Bundoran and Manorhamilton — which would deliver the best possible educational outcomes for the young people of the area.

The community has rejected the proposal for closure. We have brought forward a realistic alternative that enables the school to meet the main parts of both the sustainable schools policy and the entitlement framework. CCMS, with the support of the Department of Education, needs to listen to the local community and implement this cross-border model to help to retain post-primary education in north-west Fermanagh.

Mr Flanagan moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Education Minister and send a copy to the Chair of the Education Committee, Mervyn Storey.

Private Members' Business

Undocumented Irish/Immigration Reform

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

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the large number of people who have emigrated from across the island of Ireland to make a new life in America; notes the positive influence that Irish and Scots-Irish immigrants have had on the political, social, cultural and economic success of the United States of America; further notes with deep concern the continuing hardships endured by the undocumented in America; welcomes the bipartisan approach taken by American politicians to deal with the issue of immigration reform; and supports the call for the introduction of legislation to deal with immigration reform, including a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted to formally move the motion and bring the plight of the undocumented before the House once again. It has been a number of years since this matter was discussed here, and that was long before I was elected to this place. Some very welcome progress has been made in that time, but there is still a very long and difficult road ahead before the issue can be resolved fully.

One cannot think of the circumstances in which the undocumented in America find themselves and not have some sympathy for them. The most recent estimate of the extent of the problem was that there are 70,000 people from across the island of Ireland who are in America without the proper visa. That is roughly the same number of people who live in my own constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which demonstrates the severity of the problem and the urgent need to resolve it.

I, along with very many other elected representatives from across Ireland, am often asked to help individuals and families who are unable to return home, as they would not be allowed back into America if they left. That is particularly difficult at times of family occasions

such as weddings and births, and, for people from some other counties, on all-Ireland football or hurling final day — that is not an occasion that we, in Fermanagh, have yet to experience, but we will keep trying. The difficulties facing people are also evident on sadder days when, for example, people are unable to return home for the funeral of a loved one, such as a parent, sibling or friend. Such circumstances are deeply distressing for the individuals and families involved.

We should all be keen to resolve the matter. The most pressing aspect of the problems facing the undocumented is the absence of freedom of movement and people's inability to leave America and return home. Resolution of even that problem would greatly improve the quality of life of so many people in America.

There is no questioning the positive role that Irish and Scots-Irish immigrants have had on the American way of life. Of the 44 American presidents so far, 22 have claimed — or it has been claimed — ancestry in Ireland. Many other people who have left this country have set up hugely successful businesses or have contributed positively to the success of America in other ways.

My godmother — my mother's sister — moved to Florida before my mother was born, and they never actually met until I was born. Such stories are very common, particularly across rural Ireland, where a complete absence of any job prospects forced many people to leave the country to look for work elsewhere. It is concerning that we are in a similar position once again, with more and more people choosing to emigrate. We, as a legislative body and as elected representatives, need to be very wary and ensure that people leaving these shores for another country comply with the visa requirements of that country. We cannot have this problem starting all over again, whether in America, Australia, Canada or somewhere else.

Of course, there are other very pressing matters that American politicians need to get around the table to resolve; this is only one of them. The other problems include getting the federal Government back up and running, which may be a more pressing matter for Americans. However, the issue of the undocumented is vital and cannot sit on the back-burner. The recent successful attempts to get a bipartisan, cross-party Bill through the Senate was hugely significant, and it was welcomed by many people on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, a bipartisan approach needs to remain, and American politicians need to work together to sort out the problem, once and for all. They all agree that it needs to be resolved. The only way that it can be dealt with is by the two parties continuing to work together to find an acceptable solution. Getting Democrats and Republicans to work together can be a tricky enough job at times, and no sooner had Richard Haass arrived here to mediate in some of our problems than it was suggested that he may need to go back home to mediate there.

Campaigners who have been involved in the issue for decades know that there is still a long road ahead, but they are ready for the challenge. Very many people, some of them current and former Members of the House and of other institutions on this island, have been to the fore on the issue. They have been ably assisted by activists from across Ireland and America who have used their influence and access to American politicians to seek a resolution to this long-standing problem. I am not going to highlight one individual or one campaign group, because, if I did, it would be unfair to those whom I did not name.

In closing, I would like the message to go out from this place that the House fully supports and endorses immigration reform in America. If the motion is passed —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

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

Mr Allister: The Member's motion talks about something called the "undocumented": is that just fancy language for those who are in the United States illegally? Does it extend to include those who, perhaps, are there on the run, even from this country, for terrorist offences? Does the Member agree that the proper way to deal with those people is to extradite them to face the outstanding charges? Does he support that, or does he want to gloss over it?

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his usual positive and insightful contribution. I am afraid that he is in a tiny minority if he cannot see the actual problem. If he wants to create other things that he thinks are a problem, he is wrong. Those are not the problems that need to be addressed. The problem that needs to be addressed is the fact that around 70,000 people from this island are in America and are unable to come back here, because, if they did, they would not be able to return to America. That is

at the heart of the issue. No other campaign or whatever you want to put into the middle of this will divert from that. I ask Members to remain focused on the issue at hand and not to allow any diversionary tactics from a tiny minority to detract from that issue.

In closing, I want the message to go out from the House that we fully support and endorse proper immigration reform in America. If the motion is passed, a Cheann Comhairle, I kindly ask that you send a letter indicating such to the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, John Boehner, and outline that to him directly.

Mr Girvan: This subject could open up a lot of areas in which there is abuse. Visa requirements play a vital role in the security of one's borders and in ensuring that the right requirements are in place when people arrive. Many of us have visited the United States and are aware that an ESTA form has to be filled in. From that form, it is known where you are going and when you are supposed to leave.

I understand that the figure of 70,000 refers to people not only from Northern Ireland but from the Republic. People from Northern Ireland have made valuable inputs to building the economy in the United States of America and opening up the west. However, at that time, visa requirements were not of the same nature as they are today. Similar things happened in Australia, but it was occupied in a different way, with people being sent out there as a punishment.

Why are we dealing with such a matter in the House? I appreciate that a lot of people go to America to spend a year in a university, where they gather experience and, hopefully, bring that back to our own country to benefit us. Some people settle down and get a job, and some may end up getting married. That may well be something that can be dealt with through the ordinary immigration process, but we know what goes on in our own country, where people come in and use marriages of convenience as a loophole to get United Kingdom citizenship and all the benefits that that entails. It is important that America has proper rules in place to ensure that people do not just use a loophole to enter the country and then say that they cannot go back home because they will not be allowed back into the States. Those are the people who have broken the rules.

10.45 am

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Girvan: I will, yes.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Member acknowledge the significant contribution that Irish and Scots-Irish people have made to America and the positive social, cultural and economic influence that they have had through decades?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Girvan: Absolutely. I have no doubt about that. We know how people from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Ireland have been key to what has happened in America, and we know about the influence that they have had in building business there. People from here have had a key input into some of the major industrial developments in the United States. However, that does not take away from the fact that proper rules must be in place to ensure that people do not abuse the system by going over there and living on the legacy of the people from here who contributed to the economy of that country and to its democracy. I believe that that has been abused in the past. Terrorists from this country have taken the opportunity to go to America, and it has been impossible to get them extradited. We have not been able to deal with on-the-runs, as was mentioned. We have to ensure that that does not continue.

We cannot interfere with another country's rules. We can make requests, but we cannot dictate to another country what it should set as its requirements. It might be fine to allow open season for people from Northern Ireland and Ireland and to let them in, but any Mexicans who want to make their way across the Texas border will be hunted down and pursued. We have to be careful not to ask for special status because we come from here or to claim that, because half of America believes that it is of Irish or Ulster-Scots descent, it is all right for us to go ahead. We are not going to oppose what is being put forward on reform, but proper systems should be put in place to ensure that immigration and visa requirements are abided by and dealt with properly.

Mr Rogers: Given the importance of the issue of the undocumented, I welcome the opportunity to lend the SDLP's support to our exiles in the United States who are caught up in the immigration debacle.

The SDLP is concerned that the undocumented and those who encourage them to remain in America can be treated as criminals. For example, a mother who, when taking her child to school, gives a lift to the child of an

undocumented family living nearby would be committing a crime. Giving an undocumented family a lift to church would be a criminal offence. Employing an undocumented person is also a criminal offence that carries a severe punishment.

I welcome the motion, but many would ask why Sinn Féin is getting involved in the US immigration debate. The research shows that it has not asked many questions in the Assembly and has asked little in the Dáil. Some emigrants whom I know — friends and past pupils of mine who live and work in the United States — believe that the reason for Sinn Féin's lack of support in the past is the direct result of that party's close relationship with senior anti-immigration reform figures in America. That is a question for Sinn Féin.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he really think that someone who is stuck in America and is watching the debate wants to hear him engage in an attack on another political party on the issue? Is that really the way that the SDLP wants to conduct itself in the debate?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. This is not about attacking anybody; it is about the facts.

The SDLP questions the commitment of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in raising the plight of the undocumented and getting some positive commitment from the American Administration.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: Yes, I will.

Mr McKinney: Given what the Member has said, does he recognise that there appears to be a distinct difference in the approaches taken on the matter by the Tánaiste and the deputy First Minister? That was shown by the deputy First Minister's answer to the House last week.

Mr Rogers: Yes. Thanks for the intervention. I would add that, when I recently asked the First Minister a question about this, he said:

"we are talking about illegal immigrants rather than the 'undocumented'". — [Official Report, Vol 87, No 5, p31, col 2].

I find that an incredible way to treat our people. Yes, they are our people — unionist and nationalist. Americans do not see any difference in us when we cross the Atlantic; we are all treated as Irish. If anyone wishes to contradict what I have said about Sinn Féin during my contribution to the debate let them give me one example of Gerry Adams or Martin McGuinness speaking out publicly in support of the undocumented while visiting the United States.

I consider the SDLP amendment to be completely necessary as the motion is so outdated. What it calls for has been worked at and achieved by the Irish-American groups and through the powerful support of publications such as the 'Irish Voice' and the 'Irish Emigrant'.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: No, I will not give way any more.

Mr Flanagan: You asked for Sinn Féin to clarify something, and you will not give way.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Rogers: I assure all those involved in the cause that the undocumented in the United States and their families here in Ireland fully appreciate the tireless, never-ending work that has been carried out in preparation for and during the lobbying process. It is their dearest hope that those efforts will one day be rewarded. The heavy lifting has been carried out meticulously by lobbyists, especially by the Irish ambassador to Washington, Anne Anderson. Irish America now awaits action on Capitol Hill. We can best assist the hard-working groups and the undocumented by calling on the US House leadership to bring an immigration Bill to the Floor of the House for a vote.

I wish to remind Members that, as we debate the problems of our exiles in America, my South Down colleagues and I have been advised of yet another tragic case involving an undocumented young married man from County Down who has been locked away in prison. What joy could any Administration get from incarcerating a young, ready-and-willing worker in a state prison in America? That young man has been locked away from his wife and family since July.

There are believed to be 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States, including up to 50,000 undocumented Irish. From what I know,

each Irish person caught up in this debacle is working, paying their way and contributing in full to the fiscal demands of the US Government through their taxes.

Today, a massive rally in support of immigration reform will take place in Washington DC. Last Saturday, 5 October, was known as the National Day of Dignity and Respect in America, and major rallies took place in over 180 cities coast to coast. The rallies were organised in an effort to restart the push for comprehensive immigration reform led by a group of bipartisan lawmakers earlier this year. At every event on Saturday the call went out that it was time for both parties in Congress to put aside their differences and stop trying to make this a political game. On behalf of the undocumented in the US, the same principle should apply in the Assembly. Although our voice is small in global terms, we must do what we can to help our exiles in distress and ensure that an immigration Bill comes to the House of Representatives.

Mr Copeland: I must say that I am somewhat surprised at the motion tabled by Sinn Féin. The undocumented, as they have become known, and immigration reform in the United States are, no matter what we think or want, matters for the Government and the politicians in the United States. Therefore, what merit is there in this House using valuable debating time on an area where we can effect little change? One in five of our young people is unemployed, families struggle with rising costs and welfare reform looms before us. The Assembly must offer leadership where it can and make a difference, and I am not sure that we can do that in this case.

No matter what way you couch it, what we are dealing with here are illegal immigrants. The Ulster Unionist Party is against illegal immigration in all its forms. We should adopt a consistent approach to that, and I have no trouble in saying so.

During Question Time on 23 September, the First Minister was asked whether he had made representations on the issue during his recent visit to the United States. His response was this:

"I do not think that it is a job for me to make representations — it is for the Irish Government to deal with Irish passport holders — nor do I think that it would be right for me to persuade the Congress or Senate of the United States in these matters." — [Official Report, Vol 87, No 5, p31, col 2].

I must say that I echo that sentiment. Of course, some so-called undocumented illegal immigrants have made an important contribution to the United States, and I am sure that many in America recognise that. I also welcome the pathway to US citizenship that already exists.

The motion also highlights the contribution of the Scots Irish — Ulster Scots, if you prefer — to the political, social, cultural and economic success of the United States. That is particularly evident in the fact that 17 of the 43 American presidents were of Ulster ancestry, and the Ulster Unionist Party is proud of that. Indeed, I am shortly to meet the American consul to discuss the large numbers of people who find themselves disbarred from a holiday at Disneyland because of criminal offences allegedly committed over the past 30 or 40 years. Incidentally, the position of consul to Belfast is the oldest continuously running United States diplomatic posting anywhere in the world — not to London, not to Dublin, but to Belfast. I will come to the reasons for that later.

We believe that there is huge untapped potential in genealogy tourism. For example, Castlereagh is home to the only United States military cemetery on the island of Ireland, which, at one time, held the remains of Private First Class E Perkins, the first American soldier killed in the European theatre of operations. I think that it was Theodore Roosevelt who proudly said that the American revolution was born in the blood that flowed in the veins of the members of his family when they manned the walls of Derry in 1688, which is a big statement.

As I have outlined, the merits of the motion are, in my view, questionable. I do not think that they are relevant to us, and I do not see how the Assembly can play any part in influencing immigration reform in the United States. That said, we appreciate the help of Richard Haass in facilitating some of our own solutions. I am not sure that the US is quite so keen on a reciprocal arrangement for our help in framing its immigration policy. I think, sir, that we have troubles enough at home and so little time to adequately deal with them to become involved in the internal affairs of the United States Government.

America is famous for a large statute at the entrance to New York called the Statute of Liberty; its proper name is "the Statute of Liberty and Freemasonry", which is not widely known. Send us your huddled masses, but, please, make them go through due process and make them abide by the law in exactly the same way as everybody else is required to do.

Dr Farry: I support the motion but not without some caveats. I think that it is appropriate for the item to be discussed in the Assembly. We have, on occasions, advised other Governments, including one on this island, about actions that they should take, so I do not see a major breach in the approach that has been taken in asking the United States Government to do something. This is also an issue that is close to home, in the sense that those who are undocumented have family members who are our constituents here in Northern Ireland and elsewhere on the island. Therefore, it is of direct relevance to our constituents, whose lives are affected by the fact that their loved ones cannot come back home legally and then return to the United States. Therefore, they cannot attend family occasions, as Phil Flanagan outlined.

I also put it on record that, if anyone has been involved in violence, including terrorism, there should be extradition from the United States back to the United Kingdom. That process has not always worked. However, I believe that that is a red herring in respect of the wider issue. The vast majority of people who are undocumented have had no involvement whatsoever in events at home that none of us should be proud of.

11.00 am

This is not about us endorsing illegality. Once this issue is properly addressed in the United States, it is important that the situation that evolved over the past number of years is not allowed to develop again. We have a duty here to advise young people who want to work, initially legally, in the United States that, if they decide to overstay their visas, they will put themselves in grave trouble. We should not allow any young person to go into that situation blindly.

The fact is that there are some 10 million to 11 million illegals in the United States, including the undocumented Irish. If the United States pursued the legal process to deal with every one of those, potentially leading to deportation, its legal system would be clogged for centuries. The resources are not there to process that number of people. So, from the perspective of the United States, a pragmatic solution has to be found to address illegal immigration.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate his contribution to the debate. He spoke about the crisis of somebody in America, maybe when a family member died at home and they cannot come home. It is also

the case that many young men in America with medical problems will not, for fear of deportation, go to hospital. We know the case of John Thompson, from Garvagh, who lost his life just a few years ago. If he had sought medical care, he would be alive today.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Ramsey makes his point well, and I echo the aspect that he added to the debate.

The United States has a long and proud track record of immigration. It had very much an open-door policy until the 1920s and, since then, employed much more restrictive practices. There has been a long tradition of emigration from the island of Ireland to the United States, and that continues. As a liberal, I believe in open borders for people, goods and services.

Obviously, we want to keep our people in Northern Ireland and on the island. Although it is good for people to get wider opportunities to see the world, we should always remind ourselves that our first duty is to constantly work on improving the economy at home and creating more employment opportunities. I believe that the Executive are seized of that issue. Creating more opportunities for young people here is very much in our mind as we look to an investment conference this week.

Nevertheless, we have to address the situation as we find it. Those who tabled the motion are overgenerous in saying that there is bipartisan support for immigration reform. Lessons were learned on the back of the 2012 election about how people voted, which the president was certainly aware of. The Senate has now endorsed immigration reform on a bipartisan basis but the House of Representatives is clearly not taking up the issue.

Although border security is important for the United States, putting it first misses the point in that there are huge business, economic and social issues for finding a path of legality for as many people as they can. There are health and welfare issues, as well as issues about formalising unofficial employment. The Hispanic community, in particular, is the backbone of many services in the United States, and many sectors of the economy depend on unofficial immigrant labour.

It is fine to talk about trying to resolve this issue in isolation, which, in some ways, may be a simpler issue politically for some. I would not be unwelcoming of that eventuality, but we have to remember here that this is best done as

part of comprehensive immigration reform in the United States that addresses the needs of the entire community —

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

Dr Farry: — including the massive Hispanic community.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i bhfahbar an rúin. I welcome the opportunity to speak in favour of the motion. I remind Members that, as far as Sinn Féin and I go, my maiden speech was on the same subject. I feel very strongly about it. It is sad that some contributions have already been negative. That is a negative start to a debate on what people out there are looking for from the Assembly, which is support for reform. That is what it is about.

I can speak personally about this because I have family members who are now citizens over there, but I remember a time when they had difficulties. Therefore, I know the difficulties they experienced. Let us leave the legal side aside. When we get into that, we get into meanings and everything else. Let us leave that aside and talk about the human reality of what those people face. This is what I want to contribute to the debate. People do not see that side. Until you live it and experience it, you do not realise exactly what is going on. Not long ago, we had a meeting attended by a number of parties. Members sitting here now who have spoken or will speak in the debate supported those people making the case for reform in the States. I want to try to keep my comments positive. What we want to try to achieve is broad support from the House on the matter.

At the heart of the motion is recognition of the extent of human suffering and hardship that is being felt by many families owing to the current circumstances of many migrant Irish workers in America and the uncertainty that, for many, blights their very existence. Over the years, many people have left these shores for various reasons. The majority of them left primarily in pursuit of better employment and economic opportunities. Many of those souls have accumulated in the United States.

The people of this island have had a long, historical association with America. They have made a rich contribution to the fabric of that country economically, physically, socially and culturally. Their contribution has created a lasting and enduring bond between our

countries and their peoples. It is the closeness and familiarity that is created by that bond that continues to cause many people from here to gravitate towards the United States. Although those people continue to make a positive and meaningful contribution to the American economy, many have no formal immigration status there. It is estimated that some 50,000 to 70,000 undocumented Irish immigrants currently live in the United States.

I want to thank the Assembly Library team for its research paper. I will refer to a wee piece from it. It states that immigrants are entrepreneurial and create jobs in the United States and that they started 25% of the highest-growing companies between 1990 and 2005.

That is the contribution that immigrants have made to the United States. Part of that contribution was made by Irish people. For the vast majority, the very fact that they cannot come home creates significant difficulties for them. The opportunity to return home to visit relatives is never an option. People cannot come home for funerals, weddings and special occasions. I want to put on record my suggestion, which is to support freedom of movement. We are calling for that today, as well as supporting the motion. I am disappointed that Members are trying to score political points on the issue. People are in the Public Gallery today to watch us and look for our support. I hope that other Members who contribute and respond to the debate will support the motion fully. I will leave it at that. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, support the motion. From a very human perspective, we should all be compassionate to those who are separated — often because of the lack of economic opportunity here in their homeland. They have had to travel great distances to build a life and a better future for themselves. That is a matter of some regret. I ask that Members show some compassion when they vote on the motion. This is not an issue that affects only one community or the other, and the House should unite on it.

I pay tribute to the successive Irish Governments and, in particular, to the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste who made representations on behalf of the undocumented Irish over the summer months, and, indeed, to the senators and lobby groups, which Mr Flanagan referred to in his opening comments, that have worked tirelessly on behalf of the many people affected.

I think that it was Senator Edward Kennedy who said back in the 1960s that the issue around

immigration was disproportionate against the Irish at the time. In more recent months, President Obama, speaking about a White House report published earlier this year, stated:

"the report finds that the Senate-passed bipartisan immigration reform bill: Strengthens the overall economy and grows U.S. GDP: Independent studies affirm that commonsense immigration reform will increase economic growth. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that enacting the Senate immigration reform bill will increase real GDP relative to current law projections by 3.3 percent in 2023 and 5.4 percent in 2033 — an increase of roughly \$700 billion in 2023 and \$1.4 trillion in 2033 in today's dollars. A larger labor force; higher productivity and investment; and stronger technology, tourism, hospitality, agriculture, and housing industries are just some of the key ways that immigration reform strengthens the U.S. economy."

I think that President Obama finished by saying that immigration reform is common sense.

I ask the House to display some element of common sense and humanity in assisting those who find themselves in such unfortunate circumstances. Indeed, we know only too well the importance of the Irish vote when it comes to presidential elections. Those who suggest that what is said in the House will have no bearing on Irish America are deluding themselves. This affects people from right across our communities. We all represent people who have found themselves facing this set of circumstances. I ask —

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will indeed.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree with me that, despite the American Government's particular interest in Northern Ireland for many years, there has been a failure to recognise that something called the Troubles happened, when young people from both communities fled this country, not because they were on the run but because it was dangerous for them to remain in the areas they came from, so their only option was to leave, and that it is wrong that when those people are caught now, they are put into orange boiler suits and thrown in jail?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member's contribution was quite passionate. I am sure that he knows people who have found themselves in that situation. I recently spoke to a family whose son was detained for over two months, and they had no knowledge of his whereabouts. We know only too well about the decisions that families took to keep their young people, particularly young men, away from the violence that erupted here over 30 years. I, therefore, ask Members to take all those matters into consideration when they vote on the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: It was not my intention to speak in the debate, but I feel that it is important to reflect some of the issues raised by my constituents who live in the States at the minute. I think that John Dallat is quite right: during the conflict in Northern Ireland, many hundreds, if not thousands, of young people left because of the conflict and because they wanted a better way of life. It was not just Catholics in the Bogside who did so; it was Protestants from the Shankill Road and across Northern Ireland. Like Dolores Kelly, I encourage Members to support the motion. It is apolitical; it is a very humane motion that is trying to deliver, first of all, a bit of peace of mind to the many thousands of young people who find themselves in America, some of whom we know or are relatives of ours in some way.

I think that Members have missed the point. Some acknowledged the contribution that Irish or Scotch-Irish people have made in the United States. All those who went in the past, including those connected to the American presidency, were illegal immigrants themselves in different times and circumstances. They felt the need to cross the Atlantic, as did many people in Northern Ireland in particular, to secure employment. That was the main reason. It was not for any selfish reason but was to find sustenance to send back to their families, and young people continue to do that.

11.15 am

I was in America in March with Alasdair McDonnell and Alex Attwood, and we met senior departmental and state officials. This issue was high on the agenda because we felt that the onus was on us to put the message across and to give support to the families back home. As the Minister said, although he was speaking as a private Member, there are families in Northern Ireland that are desperate to see their sons and daughters, who may be coming of age, with parents getting older or having chronic illnesses. Some parents may never see their sons or daughters again.

Unfortunately, some families may have lost a son or a daughter, and they cannot come back home for the wake or funeral. We are also dealing with that context.

The SDLP has been very consistent over the years, and I acknowledge the role of a former colleague P J Bradley, who was very firm on the issue and is probably texting away at the minute to make sure that we get the right messages across. I acknowledge PJ's contribution. This has been a long, long journey for so many people across the island of Ireland. I say to my colleagues the unionist Members: this is not a religious issue. It is about decency. I referred earlier to a young man, John Thompson from Garvagh, who, like many others, made a significant contribution, was paying his taxes and so on, but did not have a green card. He was in America for seven years. How many more young people do we want to go down that road and be frightened that, if they go to a hospital or a doctor, they will be served with papers to deport them to Ireland?

People said that it is not an appropriate motion, but I think that it is. I think that the latest figures show that nearly 1,000 people a week are leaving the shores of Ireland because of the recession. It is no longer because of any conflict. Our employment figures in Northern Ireland are high and are worse than those in any other region. In some cross-border regions, including my constituency, unemployment is 3% higher than in any other constituency in Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, quite often, the wrong impression is given of the young Irish people who are in America? They are sometimes portrayed as a burden on American society whereas they are, in fact, a valuable asset, as Mrs Kelly pointed out. They contribute to the economy, create jobs, contribute to cultural and sporting life in America and, as such, should be given due recognition as citizens in America.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome Dominic Bradley's contribution. It is important that the Members opposite reflect on that.

The Bill that is going through its stages in America will give temporary legal status to immigrants who arrived without documentation before 31 December 2011. It is not for people

who are travelling but for people who, historically, have been in America leading up to that date. That will allow them to work and travel without fear, with the proper documentation. It will also enable them to live without fear of deportation, which so many face. If they are guilty of anything or there is anything on their character either here or there, they will not get those papers. It is about ordinary, decent people who have travelled to America to try to create a better opportunity for themselves and their families back home. We will do the decent thing today and give consensual support to the Sinn Féin motion. It is a worthy motion that will be well received by thousands of families not only in Northern Ireland but on the island of Ireland.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le gach ball den Chomhthionól seo a labhair ar an rún seo. I thank all Members who spoke to the motion. Ba mhaith liom críoch a chur leis an díospóireacht seo. My job is to bring this to a conclusion.

The proposer of the motion, Phil Flanagan, made a number of interesting points about progress being made but there still being a long way to go. He talked about 70,000 people from the island of Ireland who are directly affected by this in the United States, and he put that in the context of his constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which contains, roughly, that number of people. He talked about people missing family and community events and focused on the issue of freedom of movement. Another theme of his speech was the social damage that emigration does to families.

I commend Phil Flanagan for hosting an event, some months ago, in room 342 in this Building. Members of other parties attended; of course, they did. It was addressed by, among others, Fianna Fáil Senator Mark Daly; Bundoran Sinn Féin councillor Michael McMahon; and others, by video link, from the United States, including Kieran Staunton.

There was an intervention from Jim Allister, who wanted to know who these people are that we are talking about. Members explained that we are talking about real people from this community, many of whom are, in fact, employers. Phil concluded by calling on the Speaker to write to Speaker Boehner to the effect that this House is supportive.

Paul Girvan emphasised the need to comply with visa requirements. He did not want an open season. Of course, everybody can subscribe to that. He acknowledged that local

people had made positive contributions to the economy of the United States. When he talked about "local people", I thought about people from my community, such as Pat Donaghy from Carrickmore, who left here in the 1950s and formed a company called Structure Tone, which is now one of the biggest construction companies in New York. I also thought of Fay Devlin, who formed a company called Eurotech, in New York as well. They are major employers that do not fall into the "undocumented" category, but I am sure that many who have worked for them on the east coast of the United States do.

Other Members wondered how relevant this is. Most Members, I think, attested to its absolute relevance. For those who are wondering about that, emigration to the United States has been and is massive from places, not least from my own County Tyrone. Many have gone to Philadelphia and New York.

Sean Rogers spoke next, and he started by talking about people not deserving to be criminalised for giving a lift to an undocumented person or for assisting such a person in any way. I was disappointed that Sean Rogers accused Sinn Féin of minimal involvement. I felt that he was being negative for the sake of it. It was the only really discordant note in the debate, and I do not think that it was warranted, because the evidence is to the contrary. Rather than cite it here and now, I will say that even a quick Google check on interventions by our party leadership over the decades in the United States would attest to that fact. The involvement of Seán Crowe, our TD in Dublin; the involvement of councillor Michael McMahon and of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness — all of them have spoken about this issue ad nauseam at the highest level in the United States. I will write, personally, to Sean Rogers with evidence of Sinn Féin's involvement in this debate, rather than it becoming a major theme in my reply.

Mrs D Kelly: Ad nauseam.

Mr McElduff: Aye.

The issue does not belong to any single party. It does not belong to Sinn Féin. It belongs to us all, and that is one of the reasons why I mentioned Senator Mark Daly in particular, who has made a brilliant contribution to this campaign, to date. My colleague from South Down, Chris Hazzard, is in Washington and is raising the issue with people of influence there where he can do so.

Michael Copeland said that we have enough of our own worries, but we have not abandoned our people who have emigrated either. It is not a waste of time, and I think that most Members agree. Stephen Farry felt that it was an appropriate item to be discussed, but wondered whether we were being too optimistic in describing the support of the Republicans and the Democrats in the United States as a bipartisan approach.

Cathal Boylan referred to the human reality and cited personal, family and community experiences. He reminded us that immigrants are often entrepreneurial, and he painted the scenario of people who wish to come home for family funerals. He also supported the call for freedom of movement.

Dolores Kelly paid tribute to the Irish Government at various levels and emphasised that Obama's support for immigration reform is acknowledged and crucial. She described it as being common sense and humanitarian. John Dallat wondered why people left, and then provided the explanation of economic disadvantage, effects of the conflict, and so on. Pat Ramsey said that for someone to go to a hospital or doctor's appointment only to possibly face the prospect of being sent home is too difficult for many families to countenance. Dominic Bradley said that it would be wrong to characterise young people who emigrate from here as a burden on any society; rather, they are often an asset.

The tone of the debate was generally good, although I was very disappointed with one discordant note that was completely unnecessary and certainly out of character from my knowledge of Sean Rogers to date. I felt that there was absolutely no need to end the common approach here. I welcome the fact that Members opposite have declared that they will not oppose the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the large number of people who have emigrated from across the island of Ireland to make a new life in America; notes the positive influence that Irish and Scots-Irish immigrants have had on the political, social, cultural and economic success of the United States of America; further notes with deep concern the continuing hardships endured by the undocumented in America; welcomes the bipartisan approach taken by American politicians to deal with the issue of immigration reform; and supports the

call for the introduction of legislation to deal with immigration reform, including a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented.

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

Royal Mail

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Attwood: I beg to move

That this Assembly considers Royal Mail to be a vital public service; notes with concern the added costs to Northern Ireland businesses and consumers if the universal service obligation and uniform pricing are withdrawn as a result of privatisation, which could result in reductions in the wages of the lowest paid workers and other multiple negative impacts on prices, services and standards, including the future provision of rural postal services critical for isolated communities, the elderly and other rural dwellers; and calls on the coalition Government to abandon their proposals.

I wish to acknowledge three things, the first being that the co-sponsor of the motion, Stephen Agnew, is not in the House today. He is overseas. However, we spent some time drafting and shaping the motion together. He sponsored the Communication Workers Union (CWU) meeting here last week and I know that he will fully support the motion and all those who speak in favour of it.

I also acknowledge the trade union and the workers. One thing that struck me powerfully at last week's meeting was the high level of wisdom and responsibility outlined by the trade union on behalf of the workforce and the acknowledgement that there are changed circumstances. We live in different times than was the case 20, 30 or 40 years ago, and the model of public ownership needs to be adjusted and changed. That can be done in a very successful and powerful way. That came across, not just at the meeting last week, but in the wider commentary around this proposal from the unions.

I acknowledge the workforce, whose argument is not about protecting vested interests or clinging to public ownership for its own sake; it

is about the best character and nature of public service for Royal Mail at this time.

11.30 am

Two weeks ago, John Dallat replied to the debate on the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) motion. All who were in the Chamber on that occasion will remember what happened at the end of the debate, when those in the Public Gallery who were representing the DVA workers from Coleraine stood and applauded. That was certainly the finest moment in the Chamber since the summer recess. Arguably, it was the finest moment of this mandate. For all the controversy and conflict that characterises this Chamber all too often these days, the Assembly spoke as one and showed its best authority on that occasion by standing in solidarity with working people and ensuring that devolution relates to the experience and challenges of people's daily lives. I trust that that spirit will inform this debate.

I will outline five arguments about what is planned and ongoing, and which may be confirmed by the British Government by the end of this week. We hope that, at the end of this week, it will not be the case that the flotation will be confirmed and part of the business sold off. I will make five arguments about why it is a deeply flawed and foolish enterprise by the coalition Government.

Royal Mail is more than a business with a profit and loss account. It is more than its great workers. It is more than a universal postal delivery service, six days a week at a common price. It is very much part of the fabric of our society. It is a societal element that, in providing a public service, creates cohesion. It includes people who might otherwise, for geographical or other reasons, feel a sense of exclusion. It encourages and enables business and trade, and it gives quality to the life of all aspects of our society. If the model that that service provides is part of the character and quality of the lives that we lead, it should be changed only after proper consideration and wisdom.

Why should the model not be changed in the way in which the British Government are imposing? First, it may have been an argument 10, 20 or 30 years ago that some models of public ownership were not all that they should have been. That argument does not prevail when it comes to this service because it is a model of public ownership that works, and is working better. It is a public service that, as the unions acknowledge, needs to further change and modernise.

Secondly, the most recent audited profits were in excess of £400 million, the pension deficit issue is being addressed, and there is proof that the service is adjusting to the changed market conditions and the changed nature of commerce, not least the growth in parcel delivery. All those factors demonstrate that that public service is adjusting, changing and modernising. They also demonstrate that it is a public service that should be retained in public ownership to ensure that that model, which I believe is the best model to manage services generally, is even more successful and sustainable in the future.

Thirdly, it is becoming abundantly clear that the British Government shaped the sale of the service to attract private investors. By luring in big corporations, especially corporate interest from outside Britain and Northern Ireland, to buy what is on offer, there will be a £1 billion shortfall in what the actual value of the service might be when it is sold. That demonstrates the true purpose of this exercise, which is to undervalue in order to attract investors, for whom, because the service has been undervalued, the price of shares will go up. At that time, the British Government will again step in and sell the rest of the business to the private investor world. That is what is driving this particular flotation: low pricing to encourage big investors to encourage the price to go up to enable the Government to sell off the residue of what remains. That is flawed logic and a flawed strategy, and it will come back in the face of the public service.

The fourth argument is that, on the far side of this, when this service is in private hands and is modelled to create profits, there is an inevitability about what the service will look like. To engineer and create further profit for a privately owned business, the new practices to cut costs will come in. You only have to look at the experience in London, where some of the service has been privatised, to see the practices of TNT around zero-hours contracts, pay rates and cherry-picking of the business. Looking at that, you will understand that, after full privatisation, you will see the full impact of what privatisation will mean, despite what statutory guarantees there might be at this stage. In that space, the universal service will be jeopardised, come under stress and get fundamentally squeezed and compromised. In that space, a six-day-a-week service at a common price to all parts of Britain and Northern Ireland will be compromised as sure as night follows day.

Why are the British Government doing this now? This is the fifth point. They are motivated by the need to get more balance with their internal budget, and they are sacrificing a successful public enterprise that, compared even with recent years, is more and more successful. The decision is driven by budget and, on the far side of the sale, it will be driven by profit.

All that will come home to this part of Ireland. Why? Because the character of Northern Ireland is different. One of the great wonders of this part of these islands is the rural and dispersed nature of our society. That is reflected and needs to be reflected in all sorts of public policy, including housing strategy, planning strategy or industrial strategy, although the experience of Stream last week indicates that is not necessarily signed up to by all. To deepen the rural, dispersed character and nature of our society, you need to maintain public services and, after privatisation of this public service, it will be our people in the rural areas —

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

Mr Attwood: — who will see first the excesses of what the British Government are now proposing.

Mr McQuillan: I declare an interest as a member of the Royal Mail pension scheme. I support the motion as an MLA for the largely rural constituency of East Londonderry, and I thank the Members for securing the debate. I apologise that I could not attend last week's event in Stormont held by the union.

The first paragraph of the Government's paper 'Royal Mail: Sale of Shares' states:

"The Government's primary objective in relation to Royal Mail and postal market reforms is to safeguard the universal postal service in the UK. The one-price-goes-anywhere, six-days-a-week universal postal service provided by Royal Mail is part of the social and economic fabric of the United Kingdom. Royal Mail is the only company currently capable of providing this service which is vital to consumers, businesses and the UK economy."

I begin, therefore, by asking the obvious question: why sell it off? Royal Mail is like any other public service and should be protected. It is a front line service for a vast number of the

population of the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland.

As a former Royal Mail worker, I have seen at first hand just how beneficial the postal service is, especially in rural areas such as east Londonderry. The Post Office provides local communities with a large range of services that would not be there unless you lived in a large town or city. The service is central to any rural environment, where people can be cut off and isolated from the rest of society. Royal Mail is a lifeline to many people, especially those who are elderly and live in isolated areas. Maybe the only person they see from day to day is the postman or postwoman.

The decision to sell off and destroy the postal service is shameful, and that is what the reforms will do. It is ironic that the Government are prepared to do that to an organisation that has only worked to the benefit of the general public, while billions of taxpayers' money has been and still is being pumped into banks and bankers still receive large bonuses. It appears to me that those who are hard-working and deliver an actual public service will be penalised by these reforms.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way and for acknowledging the valuable contribution to rural communities that the Post Office workers give. In the light of today's report that social services and home helps are only able to provide 15 minutes, the additional familiar face of the postman is even more important with such a decrease in other public services.

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

Mr McQuillan: Thank you. I could not agree more with the Member opposite. I agree with everything she said.

The universal service, along with universal fixed pricing across the United Kingdom, must be maintained for and by the public. It is a public service, and the public must therefore have a say. At the moment, it just appears to be the elite in London who are making the decision to suit their ideological standards. The privatisation of Royal Mail will have a tremendous impact on those living in some of the most rural and isolated parts of the United Kingdom; that is a fact. There is not enough money to sustain such a service if it is privatised. Such a service could be offered at an extensive cost that most people in rural areas on a low income would not be able to afford. If the Government can give us a

guarantee that universal service, along with universal fixed pricing, will be maintained, that may cause us to look at it differently. However, they have not, which is why we are discussing it today. I know that Ofcom has said that the Government have given a commitment up until the end of their mandate, but that is not good enough for me, and I do not think we should accept it.

The Government may have announced their plans to sell off at the end of this year, but it is not too late for Ministers to pause and reconsider the damaging impact of the sale. My other worry is that this is a trial run for selling off the Post Office network, and we cannot let that happen. Indeed, we should encourage the increase of government services and make sure that post offices retain their central role in the provision of pensions and benefits. I want to make it very clear that the sell-off will cost jobs right across the Province.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. A few moments ago he asked why the Government were proceeding with the move to sell off Royal Mail. At the weekend there was a report in some of the financial press indicating that the price at which Royal Mail shares will probably be offered, even at the upper end of the price range, will probably underestimate the value of Royal Mail by as much £1 billion. Therefore, we see exactly why the Government are selling it off: it is an attempt to bring in punters at a lower price in order to get more of them on board the gravy train.

Mr McQuillan: I certainly agree with everything that my colleague from East Londonderry has said. It leads you to wonder why Royal Mail is being sold off. We in Northern Ireland do not have the advantage that the south-eastern parts of the mainland have, being densely populated areas where there is a huge economic advantage — hence it is affordable — as well as the ability of the private sector to turn a profit in order to maintain an existence.

For generations, Britain has prided itself on helping those in hardship and those at a disadvantage. The move to privatise Royal Mail will not only hit those unfortunate enough to be in such a position. I support the motion and ask the House to support it.

11.45 am

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I will speak in favour of the motion. I thank the proposer of the

motion, who has articulated the points very well. I have to declare an interest: I worked in the postal service for a number of years, and I want to take the opportunity to thank the good people of Kingsmill, Whitecross, Ballymyre and Glenanne. I had the privilege of spending a few years on a rural run in my part of the constituency at that time. I know only too well the significance of the universal service obligation (USO) to people in rural areas.

I understand that, for business to grow and survive in today's climate, it must invest and modernise to meet the needs of an ever-growing technological age. The proposer of the motion mentioned that Royal Mail was a profitable company, with profits of over £400 million. In my time, I did not see very much investment in it. At its meeting last week, the CWU outlined how successful and profitable the company was. It is as if Royal Mail is being run down, instead of investing for the future. That is the point that union members were trying to make.

Most of my contribution will be on the USO and the impact that privatisation will have on the workers. Having been one of those workers, I know how privatisation will impact on the ground. I know that there are other Members present who have worked in the postal service.

I wish to talk about the rural areas. Without proper broadband provision or, in some cases, mobile phone coverage in remote rural areas, rural people and businesses are totally reliant on the telephone and a daily postal delivery to compete in the market. I am aware that many people travel to their nearest post office or sub-post office for transactions and everyday essentials, although not everyone is in a position to do that.

I will now concentrate on the universal service obligation. It says in the proposals that that will be protected for a period, and, at Question Time in Westminster, a Member said that the statute would not be changed unless it went before the House. However, clearly, somebody here is saying that there is another process that could be used to change the statute and the obligations — through the Committees. I would be very concerned if that were the case. Having spoken to some of the workers and to the CWU, I know that they have been told that jobs will be protected for three years and that there will be a 10-year agreement on postal service delivery and working with the Post Office network. I do not believe that that will be the case. If it were to be privatised, it would be cherry-picked, and rural people would lose the six-days-a-week delivery. That is what would

happen under privatisation. There is a proposal to go from six days to five, and I think that that would happen. Deliveries to rural people would be cut, there is no doubt about it. Having worked in the system and knowing how services are delivered in rural areas, I can say that there is no doubt that services would be cherry-picked. Even at present, the cost of getting parcels delivered is quite expensive. Some of the companies that undertake private delivery at the moment will not go to some remote rural areas. That is one element.

In the last few seconds, I want to talk about the other element. At the moment, there is a well-paid workforce in Royal Mail, and it has a very good work ethic and ethos in delivering services for the people. If there were privatisation, there would certainly be job losses. There is no doubt about that.

Mr Elliott: Coming from a very rural area of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I understand and appreciate, as do many other Members, the value of the services delivered by postmen, postwomen and all who deliver the mail. It is not just the delivery service but the wider community aspect that is important. I appreciate having the opportunity to have input to the debate.

I cannot talk specifically about staff, as I am not as aware as Members who have declared an interest as a former employee. It will clearly have a significant impact. I heard that at the union event held last week in this Building, at which members of staff clearly outlined the problems that they envisage for staff throughout the service.

I understand the service that is provided by the Post Office and by the system. To me, the privatisation is a reduction in the provision of service. I have looked at other aspects of government agencies that have been privatised over the past number of years, and I realise, first, that the cost of the service has significantly increased in many areas and, secondly — this is a personal opinion, and others can disagree if they so wish — there has been a reduction in the service provided by the agencies and organisations that have now become private. We must remember that, when an area like this is privatised, the shareholders are then in control of it, and they want to make money out of it. They drive the change and drive the profitability of it, and that is something that we need to be mindful of. Is that what this is about? Is it about driving profitability for businesses and private investors who want to increase their profits every year, whether that is personal profits or business profits?

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. He has just outlined an important point. It will probably be the case that, tomorrow or the day after, assuming that the process is completed, the Government will announce that hundreds of thousands or maybe even a couple of million people have applied for Royal Mail shares. The Government will then sell that as a huge success for working-class capitalism. What they do not tell us is that, within two or three years, it is inevitable that the small shareholder will sell out at a small 10% or 15% gain, and the hedge funds, the big boys and the city men and women will then take the decisions that affect the Royal Mail, not the one and a half or two million punters who buy in at the early stages.

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

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker. I agree with Mr Campbell on that very point. We have seen that over and over again. It is not something new. We have experience of it from other organisations that have been privatised in this way, so we are very aware of it.

I have one major question: what other options have been considered? What have they tried to do internally in the postal service and Post Office to improve the service, to make it more efficient and to make it a better service for the wider community? I have been given no explanation of how they have tried to deliver on that or to change the system or to make the amendments that may help, first, the staff; secondly, the service; and, thirdly and most important, the consumer, the members of the general public who deserve the proper and efficient service that we all want to see.

I read in some of the notes from the Post Office that it is suggesting that the six-day postal deliveries will continue and will be part of the contract, but how long will that last? I recall when another service was privatised — BT — there was an indication that it would provide repairs and repair lines seven days a week. Now that does not happen. I know that, when your phone goes off, it will not come out and repair it at the weekends because it says that it is no longer an essential service and it does not have to do it. What I see here is the serious potential for a reduction in service, and, coming from the rural constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I believe that that will be very important, and it will be a downgrading of the

entire community service that is provided here by the postal service.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party and as the current chairperson of the recently established all-party Assembly group on postal issues. It has been established to consider the challenges and opportunities for postal issues here in Northern Ireland, and I am grateful to the Members who have shown their support for the group already, including the Deputy Chairperson, Pam Brown MLA. The all-party Assembly group on postal issues will hold two meetings next week, and I encourage MLAs to take that opportunity to meet key stakeholders around this important issue.

As many Members have said, Royal Mail postal services are absolutely vital on many levels. There is, of course, a need to continue to develop its business model and for investment, but it is not for the Government to sidestep their responsibility to make that investment. Although the public sector has a lot to learn from the private sector, it is just wrong to assume that the only solution to public sector reform is privatisation. It is welcome that the new Minister of Finance has set out an ambitious vision for public sector innovation in Northern Ireland.

The universal price and universal service — one price, six days a week, to anywhere in the UK — is vital to people across this community. It is a service for the people, and it should belong to the people. Although reassurances have been given that this vital service obligation would be protected under privatisation, it is a key concern whether that will be upheld outside public ownership. The Alliance Party, therefore, has consistently opposed the proposal.

I welcome the cross-party support on the issue. The Assembly will hopefully send out a united message today. It is also important for us to acknowledge openly that the process is now at a very late stage. I emphasise, therefore, that stopping the process will require united and immediate action. I want to hear more about the action that parties have taken on the issue.

My colleague and Alliance Party MP for East Belfast, Naomi Long, opposed the UK Government legislation to privatise Royal Mail — the Postal Services Act 2011 — and has continued to work on the issue since. Naomi has made representations to the relevant UK Minister, Michael Fallon MP, stressing Alliance Party concerns about the potential impact of privatisation on isolated communities, older people, businesses, staff and the Post Office in Northern Ireland if the cost and availability of

postal services cannot be protected. Minister Fallon's response has not convinced us, as a party, that privatisation is the best for cost of service and the availability of Royal Mail and postal services in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party also has significant concerns about the potential consequences of privatisation for the Post Office network.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member acknowledge that SDLP MPs have also taken part in the debates at Westminster and opposed the sale?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely recognise that; it is in line with the need for cross-party, united action on the issue.

As I was saying, the Alliance Party also has significant concerns about the potential impact on the Post Office network, which is a separate business but relies heavily on mail services. It has not seen delivery from the Government on their commitment to make post offices more of a front office for government services across the UK. My colleague Naomi Long MP presented those concerns to the UK Government Under-Secretary of State for Employment Relations and Consumer Affairs, Jo Swinson. It is my understanding that the National Federation of SubPostmasters is also calling for the proposed privatisation to be stopped until a fuller appraisal of its potential impact on its services has been conducted.

We also heard that city experts have suggested that the Government may have undervalued the business by as much as £1 billion. It is a profitable business that made £440 million last year, which only adds to the perception and concern that the Government's proposals have been hastily hatched and badly judged. That was certainly the opinion of the CWU at a briefing in Parliament Buildings last week. It highlighted the possible impact on wages and conditions for workers in the postal industry, which should be another area of concern for the Assembly.

The united message that the Assembly will hopefully send out today will be welcome. The Alliance Party believes that retaining Royal Mail in public ownership will give taxpayers an ongoing direct interest in the maintenance of universal postal services, help to safeguard Royal Mail's vital link with the Post Office and ensure that taxpayers get to share in the modernisation and increased profits that Royal

Mail delivers. The process is at a very late stage, but it is not complete. The Alliance Party has consistently supported postal services and adds its voice to the call of the Assembly on the UK Government to abandon this proposal and to make the investments and policy decisions necessary to maintain the Royal Mail and Post Office network that is so vital to the life of so many in this community.

12.00 noon

Mr Storey: I, too, support the motion. It should not go unnoticed outside the confines of the Chamber that, in a very short space of time, the House has been able to come to a place where it has an agreed motion on an issue of great concern. Nor should it pass our gaze that both of these issues emanate from decisions that are being taken by the Government at Westminster. We will come on to that in a moment or two.

I welcome the fact that we are having a debate in the Chamber today for a number of reasons. First, we should not lose sight of the fact that Royal Mail has provided a service to the people of the United Kingdom for almost 500 years. While history and sentiment are all well and good, the concerns and fears of those employed by Royal Mail, in particular, need to be taken on board and seriously considered. We, as a local Assembly, should be concerned about any plan that changes the nature and the operational ability of our public service. The Member who has just spoken mentioned that the current Finance Minister has recently made some comments about that. The House is well aware that, if the Minister of Education were to approve proposals in the House, the public service would be affected in that we would see the loss of teachers from our schools. So, we should not be partial on this issue. We should ensure that, in every case where we value the public service that is being given, we take all possible steps to mitigate any long-term effects.

We also have a duty to raise the concerns of the staff of Royal Mail. The reasons have been set out very well and very clearly by its union. I commend its members for the briefing that we had last week in the House and for the work that they have done and the information that they have provided for us. If we look at the end-to-end service that is being provided currently by other providers in regions in the United Kingdom, we see that it is abundantly clear that those workers are not being treated in the way that we would like to see the current staff of Royal Mail being treated. There are zero-hours contracts, for instance, and there is a differential in pay outside the city of London and in other places. Clearly, there is a duty on

us as public servants, as a legislature and as an Assembly to voice those concerns not only here but in the House of Commons.

That brings me to the comments that were made about what has been going on in the House of Commons. There have been a number of debates and questions. My party colleague and MP for South Antrim, Rev William McCrea, asked the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he could set out the safeguards to universal Royal Mail services in Northern Ireland. In April of this year, the Minister replied that the Government were committed to securing the future of the universal postal service provided by Royal Mail, which is so important to our communities, society and the economy. He went on to use as justification the Postal Services Act 2011. Does anybody believe that the Postal Services Act of 2011 is currently being delivered — excuse the pun — in a way that protects the service and those who deliver that service?

I see comments from the regulator, who has sent us correspondence over the past couple of days. We know that there is a limit to how far they can go in interfering on this issue. So, despite the promises that have been made and the assurances that have been given, they are not being delivered, in reality.

Finally, I concur with the point made by my colleague from East Londonderry. We need to ensure that this is not the first step in an attack on the Post Office. If it is Royal Mail today, it could very easily be our post offices in the future, despite all the guarantees and promises. For those reasons and many others, I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I will begin where Mr Storey left off. It is important to note that postal services were split into Royal Mail and the Post Office, which was the first step in organising the sale of the family heirlooms.

In the past few days we have seen what is happening. Well-intentioned people have been queuing up to buy shares for, say, £750, and we know that they can sell them in a couple of days' time for £1,000. That seems to be a handy profit, but let us think about it. What have they bought? They have bought shares in an organisation that they already own and for which they have paid money. Then, what do they do? They hand their shares over to the fat cats and the financial institutions for a paltry profit of £250. I am not against people investing in the Stock Exchange, but this is just about the most barefaced robbery I can think of.

The universal postal service has been with us since the days of the penny black stamp and the stagecoach which, a couple of hundred years ago, could deliver a letter to Dublin faster than, perhaps, it happens today, but that is a different issue.

Is this what we want? Do we want the postal service and Royal Mail to be handed over to people who are motivated entirely by greed; certainly not by the service that is provided to the public and most definitely not by the interests of the workers?

No one is against the modernisation of Royal Mail or the Post Office. It is interesting to note that it has been suggested that, some time in the future, the Post Office might be mutualised. That is a concept in cooperatives that I would not reject, but what was wrong with suggesting it for Royal Mail? Oh no; the opportunities for privatising Royal Mail are so lucrative that the concept of a cooperative was not even considered.

I was looking through the research documents which tell us that, according to the Postal Services Act 2011, the Post Office and Royal Mail would continue to be sister companies after Royal Mail is flogged off in a fire sale. Who really believes that kind of nonsense? Certainly, when the financial institutions get control of Royal Mail dare I say that it will be a case of the ugly sisters, with the fat cat investors posing as the fairy godmother.

This sale has particular consequences for the people of Northern Ireland, which is largely rural. Is anyone seriously trying to tell me that private enterprise motivated by profit is going to deliver mail to rural areas six days a week at a universal price? I think not.

Here, I must return to the future of the post offices, which of course are separate but, remember, are a sister of Royal Mail. Interestingly, a different route has been suggested, which I have covered. This is the work of a right-wing coalition Government that, down through the years, have denied people their pension rights. That is really what it is all about.

I will refer to what my colleague Alex Attwood said a few minutes ago. The Assembly is going to have to stop sitting on its hands. It is going to have to stand up for itself and for the people of Northern Ireland. I do not think that there will be any disagreement across the Floor on this issue. Just as with the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) workers a couple of weeks ago, there is an opportunity now for us to say that this is not Birmingham, Manchester or London

and that there are no real opportunities to make fat cat profits out of delivering mail in densely populated areas, because we are a rural community.

A simple solution might be to join up with An Post. We could paint the vans green. That would suit some people but cause palpitations in others. That is obviously not the solution, but the Assembly needs to speak up for those in Royal Mail.

Mr G Robinson: I support the motion, and I want to try to protect the jobs that I believe could be lost under privatisation. Any reduction in employment and service cannot be accepted, and would certainly not be of benefit to the community of Northern Ireland.

I want to acknowledge the sterling work that postal workers have done over many years, particularly the postmen and postwomen who provide an unstinting service, particularly to our elderly population in isolated areas. We all deeply appreciate the service that Royal Mail provides. Whether in our constituency offices or at home, it is, perhaps, a service that we take for granted. Only now, with privatisation looming, are we beginning to think of the impact that changes will have on our communities.

As a representative of a mainly rural constituency, I believe that it is essential to maintain the service that we have. Remember that the service has seen detrimental changes in recent years. What will happen to our rural post offices? I believe that there is a real possibility that they could all be lost, as private owners put profit before service.

We must also ask how privatisation will impact on postage costs. I believe that we could see a negative impact on the price of postage, denying generations who do not have access to e-mail or the skills or ability to easily stay in touch. Does a birthday e-mail have the same impact as a birthday card? For older generations, the answer is definitely no.

I am also concerned that a two-tier price structure could emerge in which those in rural areas may pay more for postage. There must be a system under privatisation that guarantees that the cost of posting a letter is the same in London, Glasgow, Cardiff, Ballykelly or Aghadowey. We must ensure price uniformity and equity of service.

Maintaining our current service and the daily delivery that is much looked forward to and depended on in isolated communities is the ultimate goal. Any form of privatisation will not

guarantee that. We must also not overlook the possibility of additional costs to business. At a time when every penny counts, rises in postage can and will harm the viability of our local firms and will negatively impact on possible expansion and employment. That is not acceptable.

I urge all Members to support the motion and to support individuals and businesses in coming years by guaranteeing a first-class postal service for Northern Ireland and the entire UK. I hope that we will see the same very welcome cross-party support for this motion as there was in the recent DVA jobs debate. We must protect this much-needed service in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister: Like other colleagues, I support the motion and the Royal Mail.

Several key issues come to mind when we look at this issue. First, there is the effect that the privatisation of Royal Mail might have in Northern Ireland. Demographically, the way that we live in Northern Ireland is fairly spread out. Privatisation could also have a big effect on other parts of the country, particularly the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and the more remote parts of the north of England. We have witnessed similar issues when debating the provision of other services, including water and roads infrastructure. Indeed, per head of population, our roads network is two and half times longer than in other parts of the UK. Providing the same level of service will be very testing. Mr Robinson made the point about the cost of providing that service. Yes, it might be guaranteed for a certain time, but the cost of providing it will put it under serious stress.

12.15 pm

Northern Ireland has a population of between 1.7 million and 1.8 million. The size of the marketplace in Northern Ireland that the national Government is committing us to is very questionable, and the size and the locality of the rural setting of the marketplace would cause huge concerns about whether it is a viable way forward.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that there is an example that we need to pay attention to, which is the way in which the gas market was rolled out in Northern Ireland? You have access to the service only if you are near a large hub, because, as far as the companies are concerned, it is not financially viable to deliver that service to you.

So, you are excluded, particularly in rural areas such as in my constituency of North Antrim.

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

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I agree with the Member's point. We see that with other services. When farmers or landowners try to tap in and produce renewable energy, the cost of connection to the grid can be very problematic in more rural locations. He, like me, represents a large rural constituency. Of course the impact will be felt much more keenly in those areas.

Whether we like it or not, the Post Office and Royal Mail are inextricably linked. They might be separate in certain areas, but they are linked and do business together. There is provision for a 10-year guarantee for business, but we all know how quickly 10 years slip by. What happens to our post offices after that? With regard to Mr Storey's point, that will be most keenly felt in rural areas.

Many Members attended an event last week that was organised by the trade union. I warn the Government, and one of their own centre-right think tanks, the Bow Group, has been warning about the dangers of this and saying that it will have a huge impact in parts of rural England. That is why I warn the national Government that this is not the right way to proceed.

When you look at the amount of money that they are talking about raising, you see that it is not a huge sum of money bearing in mind the scale of our national finances. Nevertheless, we are going through all this turmoil and creating huge uncertainty about the future of the universal service delivery and how much it might cost in the longer term, and we are also creating huge uncertainty for our rural post offices in the longer term after the 10-year period runs out. It seems to be a very foolish and unwise way to proceed with this service when those services are all under pressure. Despite all the advances, many people still use those services. Very often, the only network that some of our older citizens use is the rural post office, and we could be endangering that very service in the years ahead. That would be a hugely retrograde step and something that we should guard against and do only when the evidence is there. The Government, quite clearly, have not made the case for it.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all who

participated in the debate. There was unanimity across all the speeches, and tremendous support for the motion.

The motion was proposed by my colleague Alex Attwood. He began by apologising for the absence of his co-sponsor, Steven Agnew, who is out of the country but who, no doubt, supports what we are about today. He attended the union briefing last week — indeed, he hosted it.

Alex Attwood acknowledged the contribution of the trade unions to the debate and their willingness to look at new models of public ownership. He stated that the workforce was not simply opposing change but seeking the best possible model. He appealed to us to adopt the same spirit in this debate as was prevalent during the debate on the DVA issues last week.

He outlined five arguments in opposition to privatisation. He said that Royal Mail was more than a business and more than its workers — it was part of the very fabric of society, inclusive of people, encouraging business and trade, and providing services for those most isolated. He warned that we should change that model only after careful and proper consideration.

He said that Royal Mail as it exists is a good model of public service, which is working, showing profits of around £400 million and able to deal with all its pension contributions. He said that it is a successful and sustainable model. He outlined the reasons why the British Government are shaping the sale in this way. He said that the shares were being deliberately undervalued to attract big corporates to enable the Government to sell off the residue.

He asked what the service will look like when privatised. He said that we will probably see zero contract hours introduced, services cut, cherry-picking of services and the universal obligation compromised. He asked why the British Government were doing this and said that it was purely to balance their budget.

He investigated the effect that the change will have in Northern Ireland. He made the point that the character of Northern Ireland was different; that we live in a rural society with a dispersed population and need to maintain public services at the highest level to ensure that those in rural areas who are part of that dispersed population are not left out in the cold or isolated.

The second speaker was Adrian McQuillan. He is a former employee of Royal Mail. He also

spoke strongly in favour of the motion. He said that the Government paper made a commitment to safeguard the universal obligation to a six-day postal service. He said that that was already being provided by the service, and that privatisation would in no way enhance that. He said that Royal Mail was a front line service, providing a wide range of services to the public. He said that it is a lifeline, as Mr Attwood also said, especially in rural areas, and he said that it was "shameful" to sell it off. He also warned about the impact that privatisation of Royal Mail might also have on post office services in future. Many other speakers reiterated that point.

Cathal Boylan, who is also a former employee, made the point that, rather than privatisation, further investment is needed in the Royal Mail for the future. He referred to rural areas. He said that many in Northern Ireland do not have an internet connection or mobile-phone signals, so for that reason, they depend more and more on postal services for communication. He also referred to the universal service obligation, which he was concerned about. He, too, thought that services would be cherry-picked in the future and that rural areas would be left wanting. He also mentioned that the people in the current workforce have good, well-paid jobs and that they work hard and provide an excellent service. However, he predicted that, under privatisation, there would be job losses.

Tom Elliott also spoke in support of the motion. He compared the proposed privatisation of Royal Mail with that of British Telecom. He said that, in that case, privatisation led to a reduction in service provision. He also said that, in the future, shareholders would be in control and would drive the profitability of the company and shape services to suit profitability, which would, no doubt, lead to a reduction in services.

Gregory Campbell intervened by making the point that smaller investors would gradually be squeezed out by the bigger, corporate investors. Tom Elliott asked what alternatives had been considered. He compared the situation with that of BT and mentioned the fact that, inevitably, services in those circumstances are downgraded.

Chris Lyttle also supported the motion. He said that Royal Mail services are vital on many different levels. He said that privatisation was not the only option to improve public companies. He was concerned about the universal service obligation. He asked what other parties, apart from Alliance, had done to stop privatisation. John Dallat answered him and said that Margaret Ritchie, MP for South

Down, and Mark Durkan, MP for Foyle, have been to the fore in the campaign against privatisation.

Mr McQuillan: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Yes.

Mr McQuillan: I want to clarify that and put it on record that the DUP also voted against privatisation at Westminster.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is good that, in fact, there is that unity of purpose in the debate.

Mr Storey also supported the motion. He welcomed the debate and the Assembly's concern. He said that valued public services should be protected, and not just in the short term. Mr Dallat said that the Assembly should, in this case, stand up and be counted, just as it did in the debate on the DVA.

It is difficult to cover all the contributions, but I hope that I have given a flavour of most of them. I will conclude by, once again, thanking all Members for their support. George Robinson and John McCallister also spoke in the debate. Both emphasised their strong support for the motion.

I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly considers Royal Mail to be a vital public service; notes with concern the added costs to Northern Ireland businesses and consumers if the universal service obligation and uniform pricing are withdrawn as a result of privatisation, which could result in reductions in the wages of the lowest paid workers and other multiple negative impacts on prices, services and standards, including the future provision of rural postal services critical for isolated communities, the elderly and other rural dwellers; and calls on the coalition Government to abandon their proposals.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Student Governors

1. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline whether he intends to retain student governors in further education colleges. (AQT 181/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I thank the Member for his question. We are considering that in the round. We need to be conscious of student governance, alongside the wider governance issue in further education, particularly as colleges move to become multimillion-pound businesses. Student participation in the governance of colleges can be taken forward through a number of different approaches, including student representation on boards of governors. There are other aspects to it, such as sabbatical posts, which could be extended into the further education (FE) sector, and the creation of student councils. All those are under discussion, including with the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland.

Mr McKinney: Is it not important that boards of governors reflect a younger person's perspective? Will the Minister consider capacity building and training for students in that role to enable them to develop better governance skills?

Dr Farry: I am happy to consider the Member's point about capacity building. However, it is important to bear in mind that boards of governors are not simply there to represent a series of different sectoral interests and to try to fashion a common position from the different dynamics. Members of the boards are there as individuals who can take a collective view on what is in the best interests of not just their college but the sector and the Northern Ireland economy.

Teacher Training

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given that he has appointed a team to review teacher education in Northern Ireland and his ambition for a more shared and integrated approach, which has

merit, to explain why he has gone on a solo run on a shared and integrated outcome and whether he agrees that it would be better if this were coordinated in a comprehensive way with the Minister of Education. (AQT 182/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question, his interest and, indeed, his endorsement that there is merit in moving towards a more shared and integrated system.

We have appointed Pasi Sahlberg, who is an international figure, and four other individuals, all of whom have international standing, to take forward stage 2 of the teacher training review. In doing that, we have had discussions with my colleague the Minister of Education. He has clear responsibilities for the nature and content of teacher training and for setting the numbers. As the Minister for Employment and Learning, my responsibility is to resource the different providers and institutions. The current situation is not sustainable. We have consulted on and discussed those different aspects, and we will continue to do so regularly.

Mr Attwood: I note that the Minister has not denied that he is on a solo run, but I will put that aside for a second.

Given that you say that you wish to have agreement on the future shape of teacher training in the North of Ireland, do you accept that you will not have reached the threshold of agreement that you aspire to if, at the end of the process, a teacher training college rightly decided that its autonomy, location and role are important and need to be protected?

Dr Farry: First, the Member should know well the nature of Ministers' relationships with and authority over their Departments and colleagues, because he was very keen to ensure that others in the Executive and the Assembly understood that point. I hope that he is not shifting his position as he moves to the Back Benches.

I assume that the Member is referring to the situation pertaining to St Mary's. Again, it is disappointing that the SDLP is taking a very particular approach by representing one particular institution rather than looking to the best interests of the entire sector and the future of the Northern Irish education system as a whole. The fundamental point in all of this is that whether you are talking about St Mary's or the system as a whole, it is not financially sustainable today, and that will continue to be the case. Therefore, we have to make some changes to ensure that we have an affordable

system that provides teachers who are fit for a much more diverse and shared society, as we hopefully move in that direction.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Michael Copeland is not in his place.

Dress Code: Colleges and Universities

4. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what instruction is given to colleges and universities, which do not have a uniform, on what clothing is suitable. (AQT 184/11-15)

Dr Farry: The acoustics here are very weak, and I barely caught that, but I gather that the Member was asking about standards of dress in colleges. Those are matters of detail for the colleges themselves, and I suggest that the question is probably a prelude to discussing various symbols that might be associated with one section of the community or another. I stress that the colleges control that, but all the colleges have commitments on equality and good relations, which will be reflected in the manner in which they address issues that may cause tension in the workplace or the learning environment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, it is useful to ensure that the microphone at your desk is pointed towards you. I know that Paul has made his adjustment now, but I say that for the benefit of other Members.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. He said that each college must put this in place. I thought that those directives came from the centre, because one college in my constituency gave an instruction about the wearing of football tops, yet no direction was given to another section of the community that seems to feel that it is perfectly all right to attend college wearing GAA tops.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. If he wants to write to me with the specifics, I will happily take a look and raise those matters directly with the colleges concerned.

Colleges will be able to take advice from my Department or the Equality Commission, and the Member is right to say that we need a standard approach so that everyone understands the parameters and what behaviour is acceptable. However, in Northern Ireland, we are evolving away from talking about neutral workplaces where any notion or

celebration of culture or identity is removed towards more shared workplaces where people can express opinions and their identity within different parameters. That has to be done in a carefully balanced way, and those are live debates across the sector. However, we will take on board any comments that the Member wants to direct to us.

Zero-hour Contracts

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he is aware of the continuing problems faced by people who are in employment and to outline what discussions he has had with employers and trade unions about zero-hour contracts. (AQT 185/11-15)

Dr Farry: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am conscious that this subject is on our formal list of questions for oral answer later, but I will proceed to address the question unless advised otherwise.

We are conscious of the issue of zero-hours contracts in Northern Ireland. Given the nature of the labour force survey and the sample size, it is not possible, at this stage, to give a reliable estimate of the number of zero-hours contracts in Northern Ireland, but our impression is that they are used less than in other parts of the United Kingdom. It has been said that universities are among the more common employers that use zero-hours contracts, but none of our universities in Northern Ireland uses zero-hours contracts. That is one snapshot from one sector that gives some meat to our suspicion that the problem is less serious here. We have commissioned research to try to get a firmer basis and are taking into account what is happening in other jurisdictions before we take any policy decisions on changes or legislative action in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I draw Members' attention to the fact that if it is very clear that a topical question is similar to one that is listed for oral answer, I will not in future call for an answer to that question, because if other Members from other parties have taken the trouble to lodge a question, we should have the courtesy to allow that to happen. In these circumstances, I am taking the opportunity to make it clear that, from now on, the Speakers will normally intervene to prevent that.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I understand and accept what you have said.

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline what consideration he has given to the introduction of legislation, through the employment law review, to appropriately regulate the use of zero-hour contracts and protect the rights of workers?

Dr Farry: The issue is not, formally, part of the current public consultation that is under way and closes at the beginning of November. Nonetheless, we in Northern Ireland could take forward a free-standing consultation that could tie in to any future employment Bill that may come before the House. I stress that, given that this is a legislative matter, the House will need to take a decision on the way forward. We are looking closely at any policy changes that might happen in Great Britain. I think that the one area that people might zero in on — if I can use that term — as a cause of particular concern is exclusivity. There might be circumstances where a zero-hours contract benefits a person. Most concern, though, has been expressed around employers saying that a person on a zero-hours contract can work only for that one employer, which denies them other work opportunities. That has, perhaps, emerged as the single, strongest aspect where concern has been expressed, and we might come back to the House on that matter.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received an apology from Michael Copeland, and I thank him for that. Mr Ross Hussey has also sent an apology and given an appropriate explanation. We will move on.

Mr Gardiner: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am here.

Colleges: Courses

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he takes to ensure the fair distribution of higher level courses across all campuses of our regional further education colleges. (AQT 187/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. We have six excellent FE colleges, as well as our universities. It is for the colleges to develop their own curricula and prospectuses on the courses that are available. On the particular issue of higher education in further education, we distribute what is, essentially, a maximum student number (MaSN) figure for further education. That changes each year, based on relative performance. The Member will note that, in recent years, we have been in the position of increasing the MaSN figure for the colleges across Northern Ireland. Indeed, there

may well be additional future changes in that regard.

Part-time higher education falls outside MaSN, and that is an area of particular growth. We are committed to seriously increasing the number of foundation degrees that are offered in Northern Ireland, because they are of particular use in developing high-level vocational skills. Employers are central to the development of the curricula in that regard.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his response. Of the FE colleges' budget, 98% comes from the taxpayer. Given that fact, will the Minister investigate why the Newry campus of the Southern Regional College, with 32% of the catchment population, has 75% of higher education foundation enrolments, and Portadown and Lurgan, with 32% of the population, have only 25%?

Dr Farry: I understand the Member's point, and I am happy to address those issues with Brian Doran, the director of Southern Regional College. Ultimately, the decision on placing courses is for the colleges. They do so in reflecting demand and how they can best engage with employers. To give one example of good practice: Southern Regional College has worked closely with Norbrook Laboratories in developing apprenticeships. The move now to have a level 4 apprenticeship is a clear sign of how colleges are working with employers to push the boundaries of what can be offered in the FE sector. That is something that is very much in the best interests of Northern Ireland. However, I will certainly reflect the Member's specific comments to the director.

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

2.15 pm

Colleges: Capital Investment

1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much capital investment the regional colleges have received over the past 10 years. (AQO 4734/11-15)

Dr Farry: We are back to the FE sector. Over the past 10 years, my Department's officials have been working closely with the colleges to oversee substantial levels of investment in their estates. The further education sector has been upgraded with a series of new, state-of-the-art campuses equipped with the latest technology

and industry-standard equipment. That investment was crucial to enable further education colleges to support economic and workforce development as set out in the strategy, 'Further Education Means Business'. The investment has been delivered through conventional procurement and public-private partnerships. The focus remains the provision of a fit-for-purpose education estate that supports the delivery of a modern and dynamic curriculum and which delivers education and training that enhances the skills and employability of Northern Ireland's workforce.

A total of £262 million has been invested in the FE sector over the past 10 years. Major projects include: North West Regional College's refurbishments and newbuilds in Derry and Limavady; Belfast Metropolitan College's E3 campus at Springvale; South West College's campuses at Enniskillen and Cookstown; South Eastern Regional College's £4 million construction centre in Newtownards; Northern Regional College's £12 million campuses at Larne and Newtownabbey; and Southern Regional College's £4 million upgrade to its Newry west campus. The remainder of the budget was used across the sector to address health and safety deficiencies and to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

In addition to the departmental capital input, £124 million of private sector investment has been generated through public-private partnership projects in the FE sector. Those are the Belfast Metropolitan College's Titanic Quarter campus; South West College's campuses at Dungannon and Omagh; and the South Eastern Regional College's campuses at Lisburn, Newcastle, Ballynahinch and Downpatrick.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Does the Minister agree that the Southern Regional College has been under-represented in the allocation of capital investment over the past 10 years?

Dr Farry: The short answer is yes. We are looking forward to receiving business cases from the Southern Regional College very soon in relation to further investment. That relates to the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon areas. That is certainly a priority for me and my Department for further capital spend, and I hope to be in a position to make some announcements in the next months.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we continue, I inform Members that questions 9 and 14 have been withdrawn.

Mr Storey: The Minister will not be surprised that I want to raise the issue of the lack of capital investment in the Ballymoney and Ballymena campuses of the Northern Regional College. Will he tell the House when he believes he will be in receipt of a business case? Will he give the House an assurance that, in the outcome and outworkings of that business case, the Ballymoney campus will not be the sacrificial lamb to any proposals that would take the college out of the borough?

Dr Farry: I can reflect that the Northern Regional College area has not had the same level of capital investment as some parts of Northern Ireland in recent years. It is my intention to rectify that in future spending. We are expecting a business case from the college shortly to take forward a number of projects. That will include the Ballymena campus, as well as a revised proposal for the northern part of the college area. Obviously, Coleraine and Ballymoney are in the mix in that situation. I assure the Member that no decisions have been taken; we will see what is in the business case. I am happy to continue the discussions that I have had with the Member and his colleagues about future provision in the area. It is important that we find an outcome that works for the people of the area, rather than simply discussing one location or another. The ultimate prize is to ensure that we have skilled young people who are capable of taking up jobs in the local community.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister touched on this, but I would like him to be a bit more specific: will he outline how he is encouraging and facilitating collaboration between the regional colleges and the business community to support progression into business-related opportunities?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I draw attention to the fact that we are undertaking a major review of apprenticeships and a review of youth training. We want to ensure that what is happening with the FE sector in particular is relevant to the needs of the business community. Also, the foundation degrees that we are promoting as a Department are very much informed by the needs of employers. In that respect, they are different from the more traditional bachelor's degrees that are offered by universities and, to a small extent, the FE sector.

I also emphasise that we are going through the process of a revised further education strategy for Northern Ireland. FE Means Business, which is the current strategy, dates back to 2004. I am pleased to say that, on the back of that strategy, we have seen a major change in how the FE sector has been positioned vis-à-vis business. The purpose of our revised strategy will be to further consolidate that growth and make sure that the FE sector really is developing to its full potential for the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Allister: Given the deficit in the north Antrim provision, does the Minister have any comment to make about the fact that, year on year, his Department is spending over £8 million on educating over 4,000 students from the Republic of Ireland free of charge? Does the Minister not think that the Northern Ireland taxpayer might expect the priority to be to make provision for those whose parents pay their taxes in this jurisdiction rather than free provision for others?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. It is an issue for not just the Northern Ireland taxpayer but the UK taxpayer, given the nature of the subvention that comes here. I am fully aware of the situation. It is worth drawing to the attention of the House that probably about three quarters of that spend derives from the Donegal-Derry corridor, which probably reflects the lack of equivalent FE provision in the north-west of the island. We are required under European Union directives to treat the citizens of other European Union jurisdictions as we would treat our own. We have no choice in that matter. We derive huge benefits from the European Union, so that goes with the territory.

The ultimate answer lies in encouraging the Republic of Ireland to invest in its own systems, particularly in the north-west region. Discussions, whether with the Education Minister or the Taoiseach, are ongoing on that matter.

Higher Education: Omagh

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the case for increased higher education provision in Omagh. (AQO 4735/11-15)

Dr Farry: South West College's allocation of full-time higher education places has increased from 186 in 2008-09 to 542 in 2013-14. That significant increase is the result of my Department's annual review of college

allocations and the additional full-time places that I made available.

The review of each college's allocation is based on established, current and projected demand for higher education in each of the college areas and the colleges' alignment with the Department's strategic priorities. South West College has been the best performing provider of higher education and further education across a range of metrics, including the provision of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and foundation degrees. For that reason, in July 2013, I awarded 43 extra places exclusively for STEM foundation degrees at South West College. Following a request from the college, I have been able to give approval for an additional 25 places. That further demonstrates my commitment to increased places in higher education in the south-west.

My Department is committed to carrying out further reviews of college allocations in the future and to providing additional places when extra resources are identified. It is the responsibility of the senior management in the regional college to apply its allocation of full-time higher education places across campuses and curriculum areas, and, in doing so, to balance local demand and departmental priorities. However, my Department does not place a cap on part-time higher education places. Expansion of that provision, therefore, offers colleges another route to increase higher education opportunities.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister's very positive response. I acknowledge that DEL has worked positively with and responded very well to the requirements of the FE college in Omagh and other campuses.

I ask the Minister to assess the case for the extension of higher-level apprenticeships to that area to encourage inward investors to show perhaps greater interest in Tyrone and Fermanagh west of the Bann.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question, and I am happy to confirm to him that South West College is already piloting for us a higher-level apprenticeship at level 4 in ICT and has just started a higher-level apprenticeship at level 4 in engineering. I should also say that Northern Regional College will join in the higher-level engineering apprenticeship. That is an indication of the direction of travel that we are trying to achieve with the wider review of apprenticeships. We want to see the

apprenticeship model being extended to higher skill levels, and we believe that, as the skills profile of Northern Ireland needs to change to meet the differing needs of employers, apprenticeships offer a very attractive route for employers and for young people and, indeed, others. So, I am glad to say that South West College has been very proactive, and we have joined in partnership with it to facilitate that.

Mr Buchanan: Will the Minister agree that the lack of increased provision in Omagh is a huge hindrance to the excellent strides already being made by the college and, if not addressed, has the potential to cause detrimental consequences for future development?

Dr Farry: I stress to the Member that South West College is a very progressive college. It has been incredibly successful in what it has done. Indeed, it is now respected throughout the UK as being a STEM centre, so it has really established a strong track record in that regard. If there are particular issues about the allocation of courses and additional opportunities, I will certainly reflect that back to Malachy McAleer, the director. It is important to stress that higher education in FE is moving forward and is moving forward particularly well in the south-west area.

Mr Byrne: I very much welcome the Minister's statements on South West College. Are the Minister and the Department giving any consideration to establishing a rural university network? Perhaps South West College could be a hub for such a development.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He will probably be aware that project 10, as it is known, of our higher education strategy relates to how we can create better access to higher education for people who live in the more rural and remote areas of Northern Ireland. We are currently in a policy formulation area to see how best we can take that forward. It is important that we ensure that we have access, particularly for students who may well be accessing higher education on a part-time basis. We are giving active consideration to that, and, obviously, South West College would be a logical partner for us in that regard.

Community Family Support Programme

3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the community family support programme. (AQO 4736/11-15)

6. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has for the expansion of the community family support programme. (AQO 4739/11-15)

Dr Farry: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 3 and 6, and I request an additional minute for the answer.

A pilot of the community family support programme, involving 44 families, has recently been completed. This has confirmed the effectiveness of the initiative, which has had a number of very positive outcomes: three parents have moved into employment; four young people have returned to school or entered training programmes; and a number of mothers are volunteering in the community. Following a competitive tendering process in September 2013, five lead organisations and a range of partners have been awarded contracts to deliver the upscaled programme to at least 720 families across Northern Ireland. This is part of the Delivering Social Change initiative under the Executive, and this phase of the programme will run from October 2013 to March 2015. The programme is now operational, and the new providers are in the process of recruiting families.

The programme will be delivered in five contract areas based on the health and social care trust areas. The main providers are the Upper Springfield Development Trust in the Belfast region; Network Personnel in the northern and southern regions; Dairy Farm Training and People 1st in the south-eastern region; and Customized Training Services in the western region. The initiative is designed to help families make life-changing decisions to enhance their prospects and become full participants in society. The programme will also support families with a high level of need to develop their capacity to reach their full potential. Families will receive help from professional support workers to enhance parenting and life skills. The 26-week programme will include a family learning component to address the health, social, economic, educational, employment and training issues that impact on their daily life. The programme will also support parents of young people not in employment, education or training — NEETs, as they are widely known — to re-engage with employment, education or training. In that way, it is hoped that they will help to prevent younger family members falling into the NEET category. Community family support programme providers will work in partnership with statutory agencies, such as the

health and social care trusts and the Youth Justice Agency, to support families.

2.30 pm

Mr Lyttle: I wholeheartedly welcome the Minister's investment in families to ensure that our young people have equal opportunity for education, training and employment. What does the Minister think are the key factors to the success of this particular intervention?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I should stress that this is a good news story not just for my Department but for the Executive. It comes as part of a wider Delivering Social Change initiative that seeks to invest more in social programmes alongside economic programmes and, increasingly, to join the two up. In particular, it is a success because it works alongside other agencies. It is coordinated with the wider family support hubs that are also being taken forward with the Department of Health in the lead.

In working with families we adopt a whole-family solution. It is not simply about working directly with young people but about working with the whole family and looking to the underlying family dynamics that create problems. That is why we see solutions that benefit not just young people themselves in terms of improved outcomes but other family members. I have certainly been pleased at the feedback that we have received about that in some of the testimonials, including in the Member's constituency of East Belfast, where people have talked about their life being turned around by the initiative.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his response thus far. Minister, you mentioned that this is a good news story, and I certainly agree with you. Will an interim evaluation be carried out? This is the sort of scheme that Northern Ireland needs, and it is great news that 720 families will now be involved. It is something that we could extend in the future, and I am sure that there would be quite a lot of support in the Chamber for it.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and his endorsement of the programme. We are keen to see whether we can extend it further. Within the rules on procurement and taking into account our delivery partners' capacity, subject to additional resources being identified either in my Department or centrally, the programme could be upscaled further. Given that we are moving from a pilot of 44 to

rolling the programme out across Northern Ireland and addressing 720 families, you can see the extent of the upscaling that we are doing. The programme has been in operation only since the beginning of 2013, so we are seeing remarkable and quick progress with it.

Mr McKinney: In the context of that reply, will you indicate whether the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has indicated whether funds from the social investment fund could be used to expand the programme?

Dr Farry: Financial support is coming from OFMDFM as part of the Delivering Social Change investment. Exactly how funds move around from one place to another is not something that I am qualified or in a position to answer, but it is fair to say that funding is being made available for it. We are not looking around for the resources. There has been a commitment, both from my Department to the pilot and from OFMDFM to the upscaling to date. We will have further discussions to see how we can upscale further. As we see real progress being made, the Executive and my Department will respond by ensuring that we get best value for the money that is available in Northern Ireland. That is not about keeping it in our own pockets; it is about spending it in the community and making a real difference.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. He indicated that the support programme was working with other statutory agencies. Will the Minister indicate whether it also works alongside the United Youth programme and whether he is in charge of that programme and its budget?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his searching question and the temptations that he puts in front of me. Let me say that the community family support programme is a free-standing initiative that predates United Youth and is separate from it. I have placed on record my initial concerns around United Youth. Discussions are proceeding behind the scenes between advisers and officials across the relevant Departments. A major design meeting will be held tomorrow morning to take things further. There are issues with how we design the programme to ensure that it has the best impact for all the outcomes identified in the statement made by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in May. However, I am pleased to see that progress has been made.

Unemployment: West Belfast

4. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on efforts to tackle youth unemployment in West Belfast. (AQO 4737/11-15)

Dr Farry: From April 2013 to date, the employment service has helped 375 young unemployed people from West Belfast to find employment. In addition, since I launched the youth employment scheme last September, 95 employers have signed agreements to participate in the scheme in West Belfast. To date, 331 positions have been advertised in the area, with 181 young people availing themselves of the scheme. Some 58 young people have also commenced temporary employment opportunities under the new First Start initiative, which was established as a direct response to the economic downturn and as part of the Northern Ireland Executive's economy and jobs initiative.

Steps to Work remains my Department's main adult return-to-work programme. It provides a wide range of assistance to help people find employment and is available to all age groups, including the 18 to 24 bracket. In addition, the Training for Success programme provides a guaranteed training place for all unemployed young people in the 16 to 17 age group.

Across West Belfast, employment service staff continue to work in partnership with Belfast City Council to deliver jobs and opportunities. They also collaborate with Libraries NI to deliver successful job clubs, which help young unemployed people address barriers to employment. With a total budget of more than £25 million, the Executive's Pathways to Success strategy is exploring new approaches to addressing the barriers faced by young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training. They include a collaboration and innovation fund; the local employment intermediary service (LEMIS); the community family support programme; the learner access and engagement pilot programme; and the education maintenance allowance (EMA) for young people participating in projects under the strategy.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo.

I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I appreciate all that information about the steps taken to provide youth opportunities. Does the Minister not agree that what is required in

greatly deprived areas such as West Belfast are proper, paid, government-sponsored positions, offering real jobs rather than temporary placements for benefit payments?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. It really touches on the two angles from which we come to the issue of getting people into employment. We must invest in people's skills, particularly those of young people, and in the employability skills that enable people to search for a job and sustain one. Then we have the issue of how we create job opportunities that people can access. That involves collaboration across a host of Departments. Ultimately, most job creation in Northern Ireland in future will be through the private sector. We already have a very large public sector. Although I do not suggest that that sector should be shrunk, we must nonetheless recognise that we have an imbalance, and it is through the growth of the private sector that we are likely to see the biggest leaps in employment opportunities over the coming years.

Mr Attwood: Can the Minister give his personal commitment, if not a cast-iron guarantee, that, when it comes to work programmes for those young people unemployed in West Belfast or any other constituency, he will not adopt the Tory proposals outlined by the Prime Minister last week, which see young people penalised by daily signing-on, questionable work activities and other punitive measures? Will you give a guarantee that, on your watch, you will not introduce such punitive measures against our young people?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, it is something that is of grave concern in the community and in the House. I do not believe that the proposals outlined make a terrible amount of sense. Even the notion of making people sign on every day becomes pointless and nugatory for the benefit that is derived. Other schemes come close to humiliating young people for not being able to access work. If we were to follow suit, there would be implications for additional staffing. That said, it is important that we study what is happening. If there are parity requirements, the Executive will need to make a judgement as to whether we want to breach parity because we feel that what is being put forward is inappropriate and we want to do something different. However, we will take that decision into account when we fully understand the implications and the financial aspect.

If something similar were to be adopted, two Departments would work in partnership. As the

Member well knows, benefit conditionality is a matter for the Department for Social Development. That means that people have to fulfil certain conditions to get access to benefits. It would fall to my Department to take forward any additional programme. This was a major item of discussion at our Executive meeting last week, and further investigations are taking place. However, it is safe to say that, across the board in Northern Ireland, people do not see the relevance of the programme or how it makes a huge amount of sense. The Executive are stressing that we want to address unemployment through job creation and not through punishing those who find themselves unemployed.

Mr Spratt: Although the question referred specifically to West Belfast, youth unemployment is a major issue in other parts of the city — in South Belfast, which is my constituency, and, I suspect, in North Belfast and East Belfast. Will the Minister widen out the figures and statistics for West Belfast to the other constituencies?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I am happy to write to him with the full equivalent statistics for each of the four Belfast constituencies. The programmes that I outlined for West Belfast are available across Northern Ireland, which obviously includes all of Belfast. The Member is right to say that every constituency has to deal with unemployment and lack of skills, which is why we are making that commitment available. We are pleased that we have had a positive uptake for our schemes, but there is still a long journey. Overall, however, youth unemployment in Northern Ireland is falling, and, although we still have a serious situation, compared with elsewhere in Europe we are in a more promising situation.

Management and Leadership Development Programme

5. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on his Department's management and leadership development programme. (AQO 4738/11-15)

Dr Farry: In April 2013, I introduced a 100% funding arrangement across the suite of management and leadership programmes. It recognised the importance of management and leadership skills to the Northern Ireland economy and the difficulties that many companies here are experiencing in the current economic climate. The 100% funding

arrangement will initially run to the end of March 2014.

Jointly with Invest Northern Ireland, the Department has developed an online diagnostic tool to identify and signpost available management and leadership development support. The leadership and management skills assessment tool then refers the user to relevant departmental and Invest NI events and programmes. The departmental programmes signposted by the tool are offered through my Department's management and leadership suite, which comprises the management analysis and planning programme, the management and leadership development programme and the INTRO graduate programme.

The management analysis and planning (MAP) programme addresses the overall management and leadership capabilities of a whole organisation through the completion of a diagnostic report by an independent business consultant. The management and leadership development programme offers a range of accredited interventions aimed at the individual manager. The INTRO graduate programme is an entry into management-level initiative designed to speed the development of graduate managers. The suite represents 29 separate interventions covering all management levels in microbusinesses, SMEs and social economy enterprises.

Since April 2013, 72 companies have signed up to the MAP programme, and 700 individual managers have signed up to the development programme. Almost £1.5 million of funding has been committed to Northern Ireland managers since April.

2.45 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will start with topical questions.

Domiciliary Care

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the recent comments by the British Minister with responsibility for care services, Norman Lamb, that 15 minutes of domiciliary care was, in most cases, completely inappropriate, and the report by Leonard Cheshire Disability that stated that short visits simply do not allow enough time to

deliver good quality care, whether he agrees that domiciliary care in the North of Ireland needs to be reviewed urgently, especially in the case of the elderly who rely most heavily on short care visits. (AQT 191/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Short care visits can meet the needs of elderly people. However, we should not look at 15 minutes of care three or four times a day as some sort of template that everyone has to work off. It can be the case, but that is not always the case.

In a single week in September, health and social care (HSC) trusts provided over 250,000 hours of domiciliary care with an average of 10.4 hours for each service user, which indicates visits of considerably more than the 15 minutes. Fifteen minutes may be suitable for some people because they do not need an increased level of care. However, it will be woefully inadequate for many others. We can do more on that front.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. I am not quite sure if he covered it, but I think that the question was whether he will conduct a review of the needs of the elderly in such circumstances. Can he give a percentage breakdown in respect of the current operation of 15-minute domiciliary care visits?

Mr Poots: The Member may not be aware that, last year, the Patient and Client Council published a report entitled 'Care at Home: Older People's Experiences of Domiciliary Care'. The Patient and Client Council is independent of the Department, and it found, in a survey on levels of satisfaction with quality of care at home, that 87% of people rated that care as good or very good. I am concerned about the other 13%. It is good that 87% think that the care is good or very good, but let us see where the failure is in respect of the other 13%.

Whether we need to carry out a review or look at how we can best meet the needs of people, including encouraging more people to take up the offer of direct finance, where they can choose their own time and the hours that people come in, there is a course of work to be done.

Suicide Prevention Strategy

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timeline for the new suicide prevention strategy. (AQT 192/11-15)

Mr Poots: The suicide prevention strategy is a course of work that we have been looking at. We have made good progress. We had a very significant conference in Belfast last year, which gave us good information to work off. It is a course of work that we will continue. It is important that we continue to focus on suicide, because 300 suicides a year is far too many. We did not accept that death rate during the Troubles and we would not accept it on our roads, so why should we accept it with people taking their own lives?

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. In the absence of a strategy, how can he justify the current tender process?

Mr Poots: Work is ongoing. We spend just over £7 million a year on suicide prevention so that organisations like Lifeline can provide a 24/7 helpline service for members of the community. We have had experts over to look at the work that we are doing on suicide in Northern Ireland. They indicate that that work is cutting edge on a worldwide basis. Unfortunately, 300 suicides a year is far too high, but it could be much worse. Much of the work that has been done has reduced the levels of suicide from what might otherwise have been the case in Northern Ireland; that is something that we should look at.

Child Sexual Exploitation

3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following a recent Assembly debate on child sexual exploitation, to outline the terms of reference for the inquiry. (AQT 193/11-15)

Mr Poots: I do not have the terms of reference as yet. We are working on that. We will hopefully get to that point over the next few days and certainly over the next couple of weeks. I have indicated that I will bring the terms of reference before the House in the form of a statement.

Mr F McCann: How will the independent panel be selected?

Mr Poots: I have people who are currently scouring for a suitable person or persons to carry out that work. Independence is absolutely critical. Child sex abuse is a vile thing; an awful thing. I simply ask people to put themselves in

the place of a victim of abuse, even for just 24 hours.

Equally, turning a blind eye to abuse is never right; it is a heartless and sickening thing to do. Where there is evidence of failings, whether in residential care or people's homes, it is incumbent on us to tell the police and the social services of child abuse that is taking place. It is incumbent on us to cooperate with those services. The public should not be in any doubt that there should be zero tolerance for any failure to report child abuse. That is why I met the Chief Constable yesterday. I indicated that the police had not done their job as well as they should have in taking the message to the public that there is zero tolerance for child abuse, and for those who cover it up. I am wholly opposed to any individual who would cover up child abuse. It is wrong, and it was wrong in Cardinal Daly's instance. I note that many of the Member's colleagues made comments in reference to Cardinal Daly. I challenge Martina Anderson, Martin McGuinness, Sue Ramsey, and others who called for the cardinal to go, to step up to the mark today.

Maternity Cover: Belfast Trust

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Belfast Trust has recruited cover for the two sexual health consultants who are on maternity leave and whether this has had any impact on waiting times. (AQT 194/11-15)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. One applicant attended an interview and was offered a post as a locum. They were expected to start at the beginning of September. Unfortunately, they declined the offer because they were offered a post in the south of England. The trust re-advertised the post in May. Unfortunately, there were no applications. Therefore, all the clinics are currently being delivered by the consultant in post, who is taking on additional activity.

Currently, there are four full-time consultants in the Belfast Trust and one part-time consultant in the South Eastern Trust. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) recently undertook a review of specialist sexual health services in Northern Ireland, which is due to be published in the near future.

Mr B McCrea: Can the Minister tell me whether he has sought any specific advice on the impact of the general lack of investment in sexual health and tackling sexually transmitted

disease, and whether that is because he has a personal moral stance on the issue?

Mr Poots: Yes; I have a personal moral stance on the issue, which is that, if people are ill, they need help. That is something that all of us should take responsibility for, irrespective of someone's sexuality, colour, creed or religion. Healthcare in Northern Ireland is free at the point of need. By the way, I am proud of that moral stance.

It is really important that we look at and address sexual health. I welcome the fact that the RQIA is carrying out the work that it is doing. We should pay attention to its report. I think that there are opportunities for us to have a better sexual health service, including pregnancy advice, and so forth. There may be opportunities to bring those services together to do things in a more efficient and less stigmatised way. I am happy to look at all those issues.

Social Services Staff

5. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will join in praising the social services staff who have the responsibility for supporting our children, not least those children who are victims of sexual exploitation, and will he give those staff the support that they require. (AQT 195/11-15)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right. Many people who work in social services are put in extremely difficult circumstances and situations, and they do their best. They do not always get it right, but they do their best. It is important that people always do their best. That is why it is incumbent on us all not to allow these things to pass under our notice without doing our best. We should always ensure that children, who are our most valuable resource, receive the protection, care, support and help that they need.

Given the issues that are prevalent at the moment, I have to say that Áine Adams was let down by the RUC, by her uncle Gerry Adams and, to some extent, by the PSNI. I welcome the fact that there was a conviction in that case. I welcome the good work that was carried out by the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service in bringing Liam Adams to justice, but when it comes to the other issue of the cover-up of the crime, the PSNI has questions to answer. It needs to answer those questions publicly, and that is why the ombudsman needs to look at the PSNI's work to date. It was a very unusual set

of circumstances. The PSNI should ask the ombudsman to look at its work. If it does not, I will. I will look for independence to be applied in this case so that no one — and I mean no one in the public — has any sense that anybody is above the law. I do not care —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: — whether it is a man in the street —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, Minister.

Mr Poots: — a cardinal or a president; no one is above the law.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Minister that the question was about support for care workers. You are completely and absolutely off the topic.

Mr McGimpsey: The issue in question is a criminal offence, on which, I am sure the Minister will agree, this House must be resolute. When it comes to cross-border cooperation on health, it is an issue on which we should also expect Dáil Éireann to be resolute so that the two of us can present a common approach to this dreadful crime. Is it not unfortunate that the developments south of the border would appear to call into question that House's resolution to deal with this issue in partnership with us?

Mr Poots: I welcome the cooperation that we have had with the Republic of Ireland on child sexual crime in recent times. We had a major conference in Armagh that dealt with that issue. I want to ensure that there is maximum cooperation between us and the Republic of Ireland on this matter. Borders and walls should not stand in the way of protecting children. We must all stand together in the fight against those who would seek to cause harm to our children and young people. Whether they are in care homes or schools, outside care homes or schools or, indeed, in their own homes, we must ensure that we stand against those individuals who would cause them harm.

It is known — social services personnel will bear it out — that individuals who act against a child seldom do it to just one child. There is qualitative evidence to indicate that they will do it in multiples of cases, perhaps 75 times. So to know that someone is abusing a child and to not do anything about it leaves many other children to be the subject of that abuse.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends topical questions. We will now move on to questions for oral answer that have been listed for the Minister.

3.00 pm

Western Trust: Savings

1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is required by health and social care trusts after recent correspondence indicated that the Western Health and Social Care Trust had to find £4.6m savings. (AQO 4749/11-15)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question — if I can find it here. Apologies, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

A key objective for my Department and for health and social care organisations is to live within available resources, while also ensuring that services are delivered in a safe, sustainable and effective way. In that context, health and social care trusts are progressing work to assess the pressures that they are facing so that proposals can be agreed that will enable each trust to achieve financial break-even in 2013-14. The trusts' plans are in draft form as there continues to be focused and purposeful engagement between my Department, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the trusts. Once agreement has been reached, the plans will be finalised for my consideration.

Mr McAleer: Can the Minister confirm the exact amount of savings that are to be found across all the trusts, and that this will be impact assessed?

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland has managed to live within its means in healthcare over the past number of years. We will seek to continue to do that. I found many of the things that were being proposed unacceptable, so that is something that we will give consideration to. I continue to have discussions with the Finance Minister in relation to monitoring rounds. Nobody should be under any doubt that health and social care is under considerable pressure to meet public expectations within its budgets. Transforming your Care will help the situation, but it will take time to roll out. Therefore, we need to continue to carry out necessary work to ensure that we get to the point where we can live within our means.

Mr P Ramsey: Further to the question regarding the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the savings, does the Minister appreciate that there is a unique situation in the north-west? The trust has increased costs due to the high proportion of agency and locum staff, as they are unable to attract and retain consultants. Will the Minister give us a view on how that unique and considerable position is appreciated and acknowledged?

Mr Poots: The Western Trust has many consultants who have been with it for a very long time. However, I accept that it can be more challenging in some services. When jobs are offered in the greater Belfast area, many consultants will take up those opportunities. We need to ensure that we can provide the correct level of service. For example, I know that the Western Trust desires to have at least one other consultant in its emergency departments. I see that as being of significant benefit.

One of the reasons why we were looking at a potential link-up with the Causeway Hospital was to create a more attractive proposition for consultants across those two sites, to enable them to have the skill-based quality of life that they could enjoy in a very nice part of the world, while maximising their skills in what the hospitals have to do and have to offer. We just have to continue to pursue that course of work. Obviously, many people desire to live in the north-west, so we need to provide them with healthcare in an appropriate way. We will continue to do that.

Mr Beggs: The original question was about the savings that the trusts are making. Does the Minister accept that, when health service staff are advising vulnerable families that their respite care is being cut in half, cuts are clearly being made? They are short-term cuts that will endanger the health and well-being and even the stability of some families who are caring 24/7.

Mr Poots: I am not sure whether the Member was listening or paying attention earlier, but it is clearly the case that we are providing more domiciliary care and more support to people than before. I would be concerned if people who needed that care were being told that they are not getting it. I encourage anybody, and any Member, who has issues on that front to raise those with the trusts, challenge them and ensure that they meet people's needs. That is what MLAs are there for: to support their constituents in these times. If there is a case,

the Member needs to make it very clear to the trust that it is not acceptable.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister outline the background to how the contingency plans from the trusts emerged?

Mr Poots: We have the finances, and the trusts are made aware of the savings that they have to put in place. At the end of the fourth month, in response to the emerging overall financial position, the Health and Social Care Board requested all trusts to provide contingency plans to include a detailed build-up of the factors leading to any projected deficit and to detail trust proposals to break even, including the potential impact on performance targets. In reference to the original question, those plans were received in late August.

The Health and Social Care Board and departmental staff reviewed the plans and noted a wide range of proposals that would be considered high risk for achievability and that would have a significant impact on performance and service resilience. The HSCB's conclusion and our conclusion was that those plans were unacceptable, as they would create service continuity concerns and impact on waiting lists and times for elective care and social care. The trusts were therefore asked to submit revised contingency plans on 27 September. Those plans are undergoing scrutiny by the Department and HSCB colleagues. So people need not get too perplexed about those plans as yet, because I do not intend to have our services diminished.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we move on, I notify Members that questions 3, 8 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Health Service

2. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why he has not legislated to protect the health service from privatisation, given that this proposal was endorsed by the Assembly earlier in the year following an SDLP motion. (AQO 4750/11-15)

Mr Poots: I set out my intentions in response to contributions to the debate on 28 May and again in response to Mr Kelly's question of 17 June. Those intentions have not changed. I will continue to use all the options that are available to me, including the independent sector, to drive down waiting lists and provide the best possible care for our citizens. I will not introduce legislation that would prevent me from responding in a flexible manner to any healthcare issues that might arise.

Transforming Your Care set out a compelling case for changes to our health and social care system, and that has been widely accepted by those who work in the sector and by the community that they serve. We need to make the changes that are required to improve patient experience and care, and we need to do that in a transparent and sensitive way. I remain committed to doing so.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he taken any advice from colleagues in other regions of the UK where privatisation has been introduced, given that it has generally considered to have been a failure there?

Mr Poots: The Member and I are on the same sheet. We have no intention of privatising the health service. On occasions, private services may be used. I suppose all of you will have used a general practitioner in your time. General practitioners are private providers of healthcare services, and there is no drive to change that or to do away with it. I recall older people lying in beds in the long wards in the Royal Victoria Hospital and elsewhere getting geriatric care, but if you look at what is being offered to such people in private nursing homes today, you will see that they are in a considerably better place. So the private sector has a role. However, let me be abundantly clear about this: the principle of the health service is that it is free at the point of need to everyone who needs it. So no matter how rich or how poor you are, you can get that service. Let us ensure that that remains the case by ensuring that we have an efficient and flexible service that can respond to the demands and needs of the public while ensuring that we can live within our means. The most important thing here is that we continue to uphold the principle that the healthcare service is free at the point of need, which is something that I am wholly committed to.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the cost if the Department were to take over full responsibility for the healthcare services that independent practitioners currently provide?

Mr Poots: For social care, 48% of spending is within the independent and voluntary sectors. The vast majority of residential and nursing care home services in Northern Ireland are provided by the independent and voluntary sectors. Through targeting additional funding in recent years, we have made a significant reduction in waiting lists and waiting times for

assessment and treatment for elective care in the independent sector. In doing that, we spent around £53.7 million with independent sector providers, and that allowed us to procure 71,000 assessments and treatments. Was I not to reduce waiting times or was I to allow waiting times to creep up? It is about making sensible and rational decisions that ensure that we can provide good-quality care to those who need it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Rosaleen McCorley is not in her place. I call Mr Adrian McQuillan.

Occupational Therapists

5. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions have been taken to improve the services provided to the community by occupational therapists. (AQO 4753/11-15)

Mr Poots: Occupational therapists use a variety of activities and equipment — for example, specialist seating and wheelchairs — and adaptations to enable recovery after illness or injury and to support independent living and health. A number of actions have been taken over the past few years to improve the services provided to the community by occupational therapists, including introducing direct access to the service. Access to community occupational therapy (OT) has been simplified so that patients and families can self-refer to it, as well as being referred by health and care professionals.

We developed standardised access criteria across Northern Ireland to ensure a consistent approach across trusts. The commissioning plan direction for 2013-14 includes a performance standard that, from April 2013, no patient will wait longer than nine weeks from referral to commencement of allied health professional treatment. I look to the Health and Social Care Board, working with the health and social care trusts, to ensure delivery against that standard and, where that is not the case, to ensure that action is taken to bring performance back in line with the standard as quickly as possible.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned nine weeks. Is that the recommended timescale for completion of the occupational therapy assessments for those seeking disabled facilities?

Mr Poots: We introduced the nine-week performance access standard for all patients being referred to community OT progressively.

We moved from 26 weeks, which was an intolerable period, to 13 weeks, and now to nine weeks. The target includes those who are referred to community occupational therapy because they wish to apply for disabled facilities grants. Those grants are important to people who have a massive trauma, such as a stroke, that causes them to have those adaptations carried out quickly. Therefore, that is the timescale for the OT referral to be made, and actions will be carried out as quickly as possible thereafter to ensure that people receive the services that they so badly need.

Mr Copeland: Minister, several times during previous answers, you made reference to domiciliary care and the changes that that will bring. Do you agree that it also must cause us to re-examine and revitalise the role of reabling occupational therapists? How many additional occupational therapists have been employed since you became Minister?

Mr Poots: Reablement is critical. For example, it was far too easy for an elderly person who had a fall to end up in a residential care home. Reablement will often get those people back on their feet and allow them to resume a normal life. It may be that adaptations to a household can make all the difference for someone like that. Therefore, it is essential that we have the appropriate occupational health response. That is why we have set out to challenge the waiting time that used to be the case.

All MLAs will have come across someone needing adaptations but who were being confined and not able to have them done.

That is why we set out to reduce the 26-week wait to nine weeks. I appreciate greatly the support that I received from occupational therapists to achieve that. I work closely with allied health professional services and their representative bodies to identify their needs and the appropriate number of occupational therapists.

3.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I declare an interest as a former occupational therapist. Will the Minister commit to making a statement to the House, perhaps in the new year, on occupational therapy services in particular, outlining how that target has been reached and whether any further investment will go to occupational therapy, and refer to child development clinics, where there is substantial waiting time between an initial meeting with an occupational therapist and the commencement of treatment?

Mr Poots: When I became Health Minister, one of my earliest meetings was with a number of allied health professionals. They outlined the services that they can provide. It struck me immediately that those services can have a major impact on people's lives, perhaps reducing their need to go to hospital and to visit doctors and consultants. Allied health professionals, across the range, provide excellent value for money. That is why we produced an allied health professionals strategy, and I believe that, as the trusts start to implement the strategy, it will lead to improved care. We should apply pressure on that to ensure that the trusts implement the strategy as fully as is practicable in each area.

Transforming Your Care

6. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the nature and timeline of the further consultation on the revised strategic implementation plan for Transforming Your Care, which referred to "further consultation" regarding older people. (AQO 4754/11-15)

Mr Poots: In my statement to the House on 19 March 2013, I advised Members of the outcome of the consultation exercise on the proposals in 'Transforming Your Care: Vision to Action' and confirmed that there would be no major service change without further specific consultation where appropriate. The Health and Social Care Board-led consultation on the criteria against which statutory residential homes will be evaluated is planned to take place between October 2013 and March 2014. The views of residents and their families will be central in the consideration of the future role of statutory residential homes for older people. There will be a further period of public consultation once the trusts have assessed statutory residential care provision against the final agreed criteria.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Following the chaos that ensued earlier this year with announcements from the trusts about residential care homes, will he assure us that he will ensure that that will not happen again? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: It is very much in my interest to ensure that it does not happen again. When I heard that there was a proposal to close all the residential care homes, it came as a surprise to me. However, I have argued consistently that people are in a residential care home because there has been a needs assessment that has identified that those people need some form of support and care, which is why they have

arrived in a residential care home. Therefore, I think that it is appropriate to look not at a facility but at an individual in a facility and support that person's needs. If that person's needs are best supported in the residential care home where he or she currently lives, we should seek to support them in that home.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware of my views on Westlands residential home. Will he outline what is being done in other parts of the United Kingdom on wider residential provision?

Mr Poots: The trusts have policies, and we see a different perspective between existing residents and the broader population. As we consider the issue, we need to separate out the group of individuals who are currently in care homes and are content there and the broader number who tell us, in consultation after consultation, that that is not the type of care that they want and that they want to be with their family. Some people who are currently in a care home want to remain there, and we need to respect their wishes.

Those who call for admissions to be permitted to all homes overestimate the demand for new admissions to the homes. In the entire Western Trust area, for example, throughout which admissions still freely occur, only 17 people were admitted to a statutory home over 2012-13. That is around a fifth of the older people who were placed in an independent care home, which was around 80%. So, even with some trusts not taking new admissions, there is a lot of capacity across the sectors. The new model of provision is not peculiar to Northern Ireland. Indeed, Northern Ireland has more statutory provision than the rest of the UK. In England, for example, over-65s cared for in residential homes account for around 8.3%, and, in Scotland, they account for 11.7%. No comparable data are available for Wales on the people in adult care homes or placement homes in local authorities.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister has refused to comment on the non-admission policy to statutory residential homes in some trusts such as the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, but does he not agree that continuing a non-admission policy makes the new consultation process meaningless? It seems that there is closure by stealth and that, after the public furore last time round, there is actually no change.

Mr Poots: It may be that, at the conclusion of the public consultation, they decide to remove that. That is something that people can discuss

during the process. I should remind the Member that we are in a transitional period. We want to get to the point where older people who require more care are given more support in their home or in supported living facilities where they have more independence. That will mean some reduction in the provision of residential care, but we need to ensure that residential care, where that is necessary, is available for our elderly population. They must always be treated with respect.

Mr Dallat: I listened carefully to the Minister, and I am encouraged by what he said. He will understand that there is an emotive history of evictions and things like that. For the record, perhaps for the last time, will he give a guarantee that no elderly person will be forced from their present residential home and sent somewhere that they do not wish to go?

Mr Poots: It is not my intention to evict any elderly person who is currently in residential care. I want to ensure that all elderly people are treated with dignity and respect, that they are treated as adults in the decision-making process and that people do not talk down to them. We all have a vested interest in ensuring that we take care of the elderly because, all being well, we will be elderly ourselves some day, and we will want to be treated with the respect that I just outlined.

Marie Stopes

7. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in bringing the Marie Stopes clinic within regulatory control and accountability requirements. (AQO 4755/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast was registered by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) on 5 July 2013, in accordance with the provisions of the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and related regulations. Having been registered, the Marie Stopes International clinic in Belfast is subject to a minimum of one inspection a year by RQIA. In common with RQIA's procedures, additional inspections would be carried out if issues of concern were identified from an inspection. RQIA requires the clinic to have a written statement of purpose and patients' guide, and arrangements for regular review of those documents.

Inspection, prior to registration and annually, is against the Independent Health Care

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The regulations cover the care and welfare of patients; the number, qualifications and experience of staff and their fitness to perform their work; professional practice; records; staff views; complaints; fitness of premises; financial viability; and notification of events. Inspection also covers areas such as the nature of the built environment; record keeping; employment and regulatory arrangements for staff; and the procurement, storage and dispensing of medicine.

Mr Allister: One year on, is it the case that, given the limitations of RQIA's role, neither the Minister nor the Assembly can know how many abortions have been carried out in the clinic, how many people have been referred to GB for late abortions and how much money the agency has made out of the killing of the unborn? Does the Minister agree that, if we had true accountability, we would know the answer to those questions and that it is a shame that the pro-abortion minority in the House has allowed that situation to continue?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is for the Minister to decide how to respond, but a supplementary question should be a single question.

Mr Poots: I have raised a number of issues with officials about receiving statutory assurance that the law is being adhered to and that the RQIA is fulfilling its statutory duties. My officials are engaging with the RQIA on the matter. I want the maximum level of assurance, and I am looking at a range of powers.

The Member knows very well that this matter is dealt with under the criminal law. The Justice Minister indicated to the House that he would bring a paper to the Executive on ensuring that the law on abortion is upheld. I look forward to seeing that document, and I want it to be delivered to the Executive at the earliest possible opportunity. Many of us, rightly, opposed the fact that we had an organisation that had the ability to carry out these services in an unregulated way. I regard that as wholly unsatisfactory.

Mr Wells: Can the Minister update the House on the consultation on the guidance on the termination of pregnancy?

Mr Poots: I brought that matter to the Executive, and we have not yet received the detail of the responses. I regard abortion and termination of pregnancy as a very sensitive issue. For some people, a termination of

pregnancy is the worst thing possible, and they are put in desperately difficult circumstances when they want to have a child but, for some reasons, on occasion, must have a termination. That is a devastating thing to happen to a couple who are expecting. Others think that termination of pregnancy can be used as a form of contraception; that is not what we are or should ever be about in Northern Ireland. There are many means of contraception, but termination of pregnancy should never be one. I read in one of the papers — I hope that it is not accurate — that there is a belief that the law in England allows for termination on the basis of gender. I assure you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that, when I was privileged to have my children, I was glad of every one of them, irrespective of whether they were a boy or a girl. It is despicable that that could ever be the case, and I will wholly resist that ever happening in Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his interesting answers. Can the Minister explain why there is such a delay in proposals from the Department of Justice on the issue? It seems to me that that is at the heart of the matter.

Mr Poots: I cannot speak for the Justice Minister or his Department, but I assure the Assembly that I will fully cooperate with the Justice Minister in bringing forward regulation that will ensure that the law as it stands in Northern Ireland is upheld in a Marie Stopes clinic or anywhere else. It is important that we have law that is applied fairly, appropriately and consistently, irrespective of where people happen to receive treatment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Minister.

Adjourned at 3.29 pm.



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