

Official Report (Hansard)

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Contents

Assembly Business	1
Executive Committee Business	
Budget Bill: Royal Assent	1
Assembly Business	1
Ministerial Statement	
North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes	1
Private Members' Business	
Fostering Services	7
Oral Answers to Questions	
Agriculture and Rural Development	21
Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	31
Private Members' Business	
Social Housing: Affordable Homes.....	39
Executive Committee Business	
Police Act 1997 (Criminal Record Certificates: Relevant Matters) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014.....	61
Written Ministerial Statement	
Rivers Agency: De-agentisation	63

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 24 March 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order. In regard to the veracity of designations in the House, is it the Speaker's expectation that a Member's designation should accord with their public declaration of political aspiration? If so, can you tell the House whether the Member for South Belfast Ms Lo has yet redesignated as a nationalist?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member knows quite well that, on the day of the first meeting of the Assembly on 12 May 2011, the ruling was that the designation of all Members of the Alliance Party was deemed to be "Other". I have been notified about no change to the designation of any Member of the House since then. Standing Order 3(8) deals with changes of designation. I recommend that Members study it or seek advice from the Business Office. I will take no further points of order on this issue. We will move on.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent and will be known as the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members may be aware that the Business Committee met earlier today and agreed to changes to the order in which today's plenary business will be disposed of. A revised Order Paper and indicative timings have been issued.

In short, the motion standing in the name of the Minister of Justice will be moved as the last item of business. Questions to the Minister of

Agriculture and Rural Development will be taken at 2.00 pm, with OFMDFM questions following at 2.45 pm. I hope that all that is clear.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) met in special EU programmes sectoral format in Armagh on 6 December 2013. I represented the Northern Ireland Executive and was accompanied by junior Minister Jennifer McCann. The Government of the Republic of Ireland were represented by Brendan Howlin TD, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

The meeting began with a short presentation on the INTERREG IVa-funded Tellus Border regional mapping project. The chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) then updated Council on progress since the previous special EU programmes sectoral meeting in May 2013.

At the end of September 2013, the Peace III programme was 90% committed and the INTERREG IVa programme 93.7% committed. The importance of maximising full EU funding allocations was highlighted, and it was noted that, should all relevant approvals be obtained for projects currently under consideration, both programmes will be fully committed. It was noted that the 2013 target spend for the Peace III programme had been achieved. Although the INTERREG IVa target had not been met at the time of the meeting, it has also since been achieved.

Council noted that the INTERREG IV transnational and inter-regional competitive funding programmes were successful in providing an additional £9 million to Northern Ireland in the 2007-2013 funding period.

SEUPB's continuing efforts to promote the positive impacts of EU programmes, with two major conferences held in 2013, were welcomed.

Council was updated on the preparation work for the 2014-2020 INTERREG V and Peace IV EU programmes and advised of the intention to present the draft operational programmes to member states before formal submission to the European Commission. That will be preceded by public consultation and agreement of the Governments.

We received an update on the SEUPB draft 2014 business plan, the 2014-16 corporate plan and the provisional budget. Council noted the main priorities for SEUPB for 2014 and 2015: to achieve the objectives of the Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes; to ensure the effective implementation of the 2014-2020 programmes; and to enhance the business performance of the SEUPB.

It was noted that agreement had been reached on the reduced SEUPB staffing complement and the opportunities for identifying additional efficiency savings.

The chief executive of the SEUPB informed Council that the SEUPB annual report and accounts for 2012 had been certified by Comptrollers and Auditors General in both jurisdictions and were to be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The documents were subsequently laid on 31 January 2014.

Council noted that Ministers remain supportive of the concept of the Narrow Water bridge project, but, given regulatory and time pressures, the priority for the INTERREG IVa programme is to ensure full programme allocation and that moneys are spent in the eligible time frame.

Council approved Safefood's 2013 business plan and budget provision and the recommended appointments to the board of the trade and business development body, InterTradelreland.

The Council agreed to hold its next special EU programmes meeting in May 2014.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement.

As a result of the cuts to the European budget, which the Minister's party supported, there will

be less money for such programmes going forward. On that basis, what assurances can the Minister give the House that the application process will be simplified and speeded up and that the DFP bureaucracy that many community organisations have had to face will be a thing of the past?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right to identify that there have been general cuts. I welcome the fact that the EU budget is reducing. Although that is to be welcomed across the Union, it is not having the same level of detrimental effect on these two special EU programmes. INTERREG's spending envelope for the 2014-2020 period is likely to be in and around what it currently is, which is over €200 million. For Peace funding, €150 million was confirmed by the European Commission itself. That has been topped up further by a contribution of £50 million from the UK national allocation agreed as part of the economic pact in June last year.

I agree with the broad sentiment that, in a situation in which there is less money — this is a principle that I would apply not just to European funding but to all expenditure by Departments in this place — it should be subject to minimum bureaucracy. I do not accept the term that the Chairman used, "DFP bureaucracy". I make no apology, however, for ensuring that, in so far as is possible, the expenditure of public money is subject to a degree of scrutiny to ensure that it is spent appropriately. However, I do not want bureaucracy get to a level at which it impedes expenditure or results in money being unnecessarily spent on administration.

I do not accept the term "DFP bureaucracy", because, as the Chairman will appreciate, a lot of the bureaucracy — to use that term — flows principally from the European Union and the fact that there is usually a cross-jurisdictional element to a lot of this expenditure, which can only add to that level of administration. Let me put it on the record that nothing that I will seek to do in DFP — I cannot speak for other Departments — will build up or enhance the level of red tape and bureaucracy. I want to see it streamlined and slimlined.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Why do applications seem to take so long to proceed for INTERREG IVa and what can be done to speed that up? I appreciate that he mentioned an enhanced business performance programme for SEUPB, and I know that that needs major scrutiny.

Mr Hamilton: There is a bit of a theme developing. Assessing some of the tricky applications that are cross-jurisdictional do take time, just by their very nature, particularly because the process usually requires an economic appraisal to be carried out so that we can establish through that appraisal that the projects represent good value for money. I reiterate the point that INTERREG IVa, which the Member mentioned, involves significant volumes of public expenditure. We have to ensure that there is a level of scrutiny that is commensurate with the level of public money that is being spent on a programme. It is important that we do that.

As I said to the Chairman, notwithstanding my role in driving efficiencies and reform right across our public sector, more can be done and should be done, and I want to see more being done. I accept that there have been some concerns about the level of bureaucracy or the time, as the Member mentioned, that it takes to get applications from concept stage to the money being spent on the ground and finalised. Recognising that over the last INTERREG IVa period, a number of measures were put in place to help reduce the time taken to process applications. For example, SEUPB and accountable Department economists worked in parallel to agree final versions of each appraisal, rather than them doing it separately and at different times. DFP also introduced a delegated limit of £1 million for SEUPB for projects under assessment in the public sector collaboration theme. So, for projects under that limit, DFP assessment was not required, the aim being to speed things up. SEUPB also implemented a two-stage call with the aim of reducing assessment time. That process involves sifting out the lower-scoring projects in the first stage and bringing forward only those projects with the substantive potential for achieving the funding threshold on all relevant approvals.

Ongoing work on the development of the next INTERREG programme for the funding period 2014-2020 is actively looking at the assessment process and other ways in which we can streamline it further.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement updating the House on the EU Special Programmes Body. With regard to the Narrow Water bridge, the Minister said that regulatory and time pressures are still a problem. What can be done to get that logjam relieved and is he committed to the project?

Secondly, with regard to another cross-border project between Donegal County Council and

Strabane council with regard to the riverine project at Lifford bridge, will the Minister update us on where that project is and how committed the Executive are to it?

Mr Hamilton: I will work in reverse. I am not aware of the details of the Donegal/Strabane project that the Member highlighted. I am happy to seek an update on that and pass it on to him.

With regard to Narrow Water bridge, at the sectoral meeting and the previous plenary session of the North South Ministerial Council, Ministers committed themselves to the concept of the Narrow Water bridge. It is unfortunate that, because of a myriad of problems, not least the huge funding gap between what was allocated to the project and the lowest tender price, it proved an unsurmountable problem. Unfortunately, given the very tight time constraints that there were in making sure that money for INTERREG was spent on time — the funding had to be spent by 31 December 2015 — and given the substantial funding gap and no likelihood of bridging it, if you will excuse the pun, I think that SEUPB took the right decision to withdraw that funding letter of offer to ensure that money could be spent on projects on time.

12.15 pm

Although I do not wish to dash the ambitions of people in that part of County Down or, indeed, County Louth, I think that it must be borne in mind that the money is not there now for that project under INTERREG IVa. There is nothing to preclude them from bidding for future schemes under, say, INTERREG V. However, there will be the caveat, of course, that money is limited for that as well and that they will be up against other projects that may be assessed as a higher priority and of better standing. It is unfortunate that the Narrow Water bridge project was unable to go forward under the scheme. However, I think that withdrawing the letter of offer was the right thing to do to ensure that the money was not lost to Northern Ireland or, indeed, to Ireland and could be spent on good, viable projects.

Mr Cree: I, too, thank the Minister for his report. I notice that both the Peace III and, indeed, the INTERREG IVa spend targets have been achieved. The Minister went on to say that it is important that the full programme allocations of money are spent within the eligible time frame. How can any shortfall in the programme be picked up? Is any flexibility built in to pick up any shortfall between the spend targets and the

actual moneys that are to be spent so that no money goes back or remains unspent?

Mr Hamilton: I presume that the Member is referring to situations such as that that Mr Byrne referred to, whereby a project that was earmarked to go ahead does not. The process that we used for the Narrow Water bridge project, although far from ideal, is an example of having committed to expenditure on a project and wanting to see those moneys spent on it. A lot of money will have been spent even to take a project to a certain stage. Therefore, for it not to go forward causes all manner of problems.

Obviously, it was the case with not only the Narrow Water bridge but the Maze peace centre that money had been allocated and was then withdrawn. Other projects had been assessed as being over the line, so to speak, in meeting the requisite criteria, but not enough funding was in place initially to fund them. Certainly, that was the case with the Peace III money that was not spent on the Maze. Projects that were further down the list initially were able to be brought forward to have money spent on them. Clearly, the closer that you get to that expenditure deadline, the harder it is to get that money out the door. Obviously, in this place, we know that it is more difficult to get money spent closer to the end of the financial year. Sometimes the project that it is spent on is perhaps not as good a project or as high a priority as it might otherwise have been.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his statement. A number of Members already touched on some of the issues that I was going to raise. A number of groups that carry out good relations work have expressed concern about the potential gap in funding in the time between Peace III and Peace IV. Can the Minister tell the House whether there has been discussion about how to resolve that?

Mr Hamilton: I have actually received some correspondence from various Members on that. I am not sure whether I have received correspondence from the Member herself on the issue of a gap, or a perceived gap, in funding between Peace III and Peace IV. The truth, of course, is that there is no gap in funding because funding is allocated not to organisations but to specific projects. Obviously, all projects that are funded through Peace III will end when that programme runs out. Although some of the work that organisations do might be picked up again in Peace IV and carried out by some of the same organisations through funding under that

programme, there is no gap as such. There may be a gap in time between Peace III and Peace IV, but I do not see it as an obligation on our part to bridge a gap, because no gap exists to bridge. They are discrete pots of money funding discrete and different projects.

Mr Weir: In his statement, the Minister referred to the meeting being updated on the preparation work for INTERREG V between 2014 and 2020. Can he tell the House which themes have been identified and are being considered for INTERREG V?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. The focus of future sectoral meetings — I include the anticipated meeting in May — will switch from Peace III and INTERREG IV to themes and priorities for Peace IV and INTERREG V. Development of the new programmes is being led by a steering group, under the SEUPB chairmanship, with members from sponsor Departments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Scottish Government officials will be involved in the INTERREG element.

Three initial themes emerged from a 2012 consultation: research and innovation; environmental protection and resource efficiency; and social inclusion and combating poverty. We need to scrutinise those themes. It is important to say that themes, whether there are three, four, five or however many, need to fit with the criteria, such as government priorities and how capable they are of absorbing the money that is set aside for them in the programme.

I have no objection to the three themes of research and innovation, environmental protection and social inclusion that were identified in and emerged from the initial consultation, but I think that this is an opportunity for us also to use some of the funds, particularly through INTERREG V, to focus much more on developing our economy. That has come out in consultations with other Departments in Northern Ireland. So the focus would be on, for example, transportation infrastructure, telecommunications, energy or themes from other Departments. I am keen to have those other emerging themes reflected in a further consultation that will be carried out on INTERREG V.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister said in his statement that the Peace III programme had achieved its target spend for 2013. If he has it, can he provide a breakdown of the community uptake of Peace III funding?

Mr Hamilton: I know that issues around community uptake and the perceived lack of funding, particularly on the Protestant side of the community — I do not think that it is a perception; it is more of a reality — have been a concern since Peace I, which predates the Member's and my time in this place.

When you look at the funding uptake figures for Peace I, you see that an estimated 56% went to the Catholic community and 40% went to the Protestant community. That has improved over time, with the uptake of Peace II funding being a little bit higher on the Protestant side.

For Peace III, it is estimated — it is only an estimate because it is still working through — that 54% of funding went to the Catholic community and 46% went to the Protestant community. So there was a slight uplift in Protestant uptake. It is worth noting that there are no set targets for one community to get this level of funding and the other community to get another level of funding. Projects are assessed to see whether they reflect the programme's overall aims and objectives.

I would like to point out that, after recognising that there was a problem with the uptake and the quality of applications from the Protestant community in particular, SEUPB carried out a lot of work, through the Peace III project, to seek out quality applications from all sections of the community. That has reaped benefits, particularly with good, solid applications from the Protestant community. The Member will recall successful applications by, for example, the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland for some interpretive centres and by the Apprentice Boys of Derry for the memorial hall in Londonderry. So there has been a marked increase in uptake and in the quality of projects from the Protestant community.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I thank the Minister for his statement. One of the areas prioritised for funding is young people. Can the Minister elaborate on any future funding for projects to address areas of high unemployment among our young people?

Mr Hamilton: As I said in the statement and in response to questions, we are still developing themes for targeting funding through the Peace IV programme. The hope or intention is to specifically target the UK Government's contribution or top-up of £50 million at meeting some of the objectives in the Executive's Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy.

The Member will recognise that T:BUC focuses considerably on young people, including some of the barriers they face in getting into employment, the benefit of young people in employment making a useful contribution to society and the beneficial impact that can have on community relations.

On those themes, it is important that we focus on positive outcomes, as opposed to one sector getting a certain amount of money or another sector getting a different amount. In taking forward Peace IV and targeting some of the T:BUC themes, a lot of which reflect the needs of young people and young people's projects, I anticipate that a significant tranche of money will go in that direction, particularly into the areas of unemployment and skills that the Member talked about.

Mr Allister: This is a report on a meeting held three and a half months ago, yet there has been no explanation for the delay in reporting to the House, or any regret about it. The statement is also notably different in some respects from the joint communiqué that was issued after the December meeting. For example, it said of Peace IV and INTERREG V that the operational programme would be presented to the Executive "by early 2014". Has that happened? If not, what now is the timescale? If it has happened, will the operational programme be published? Can he confirm whether the proposition that Belfast should be included within the eligible area for INTERREG V has been agreed by the Commission?

Mr Hamilton: This moment will go down as the first time ever, I think, that I have heard the Member encourage cross-border activity to be reported to the House. He seems unusually enthusiastic after earlier criticising the united Ireland credentials of the Alliance Party. Perhaps his close proximity to the Alliance Benches and the reflection of Mrs Cochrane's jacket are encouraging the Member to go down a wholly uncharacteristic route. More than that, he is enthusiastic for European information to come to the House. That, again, is uncharacteristic for the Member. If some of the rumours that he will again run for the European Parliament are right, perhaps it will be a different Mr Allister and a different platform that he will be running on — one on which he will want to see European information brought forward.

The operational programme has yet to be agreed, although I understand that papers have been issued. Certainly, in the past number of days, I signed off on my element of them to go

to Executive colleagues. It is still only March and, therefore, by my reckoning, the calendar is still in early 2014. Agreement to include Belfast in INTERREG Va is included in that, and I very much support Belfast projects being able to avail themselves of INTERREG Va funding. That is not least because, if we go down the theme of research and innovation, with our universities being located in Belfast, there will be an opportunity for them to avail themselves of much more funding through INTERREG Va than might have been the case in the past. I hope that that gets agreement and proceeds.

Mr Ross: In reply to Mr Leslie Cree, the Minister referred to the withdrawal of Peace III funding for the Maze proposals. Will the Minister give us details of projects that are now likely to benefit from that withdrawn funding?

Mr Hamilton: There has been some discussion about the reallocation of the Narrow Water bridge and Maze/Long Kesh funding. The statement does not refer to them explicitly, but I am content to indicate that the Maze Peace III funding will go in four different but three main ways, the first of which is to Newtownabbey Borough Council. I should say that all of these projects remain subject to final departmental approvals but, to pick up on the point that I made to Mr Cree, these are the next in line for funding, as it were, and we are hopeful that they will gain approval.

12.30 pm

It is hoped that around £3.6 million will go to Newtownabbey Borough Council for its Voices from the Valley Park redevelopment, which is located not far from the Member's constituency. It is a project that I am reasonably familiar with, having had conversations with officials from the council, and one that I am supportive of. Hopefully, there should also be funding of £7.4 million to the Return of the Earls project, which is in the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area and looks at the development of shared spaces and community integration, and a £2.01 million allocation to the PSNI for its risk avoidance danger awareness resource (RADAR) project, which works with young people in interface areas. There will hopefully be some topping up of other schemes that were not allocated full funding previously. Now that there is funding available, they will perhaps be able to get 100% of their application as opposed to 75%.

As for INTERREG IVa funding and the Narrow Water bridge project, it has been well trailed in the press that we are looking at approximately

€20.8 million of allocation to railway-related projects. One is the Enterprise upgrade, which will take the bulk of the money — €14.6 million — and there is the upgrade of the Drogheda viaduct, which the trains go over, at around €6 million.

Mrs D Kelly: I do not know whether the Minister would characterise the failure to agree the business case as a crisis within the Executive or not.

The Minister referred to the Peace IV programme. Can he detail any of the lessons learned from the last programmes and where the main thrust of the funding will go in the next round? I am disappointed that we still talk about what the Catholic community gets and what the Protestant community gets when this is a peace-building programme and should, therefore, be about not a shared-out future but a shared future.

Mr Hamilton: Given the nature of the community that we have, and given the nature of Peace funding in that it is supposed to have helped us to develop capacity in peace-building in our community, I think that it is important that Members ask, as Mr McCrea did, whether the uptake of funding is being monitored closely by the SEUPB, particularly as the Protestant community side of things has been habitually under-represented. That monitoring should ensure that there is no reason for that to be the case, so that we do not see further slippage in allocations to the Protestant community, otherwise the very objectives of the Peace programme would not be met in and of themselves.

When the initial tranche of Peace funding was secured many years ago, I do not think that anyone thought that we would be standing here contemplating what Peace IV funding would include. I agree with the Member that there are lessons that we should be learning from previous Peace programmes. Perhaps they have not always achieved some of the initial objectives that were set for them, which may reflect some of the slowness of progress that we have made ourselves in this society. However, one lesson that I want to see learned in taking forward the Peace programme is that we focus much more on an outcomes-based approach. I agree that we should not be judging projects on the basis of which community they come from, but they should produce defined outcomes that are helping to build peace and, hopefully, prosperity in the community.

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

Private Members' Business

Fostering Services

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

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the recent Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority report on statutory fostering services and its recommendations; notes with concern the lack of a retention and support strategy for foster carers and the identified need for more investment to transform foster care to a modern, highly skilled, child-centred service; further notes the continued need to fully value the role of carers in looking after the most vulnerable children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans and programme of investment to meet the needs of fostering services.

There are over 2,000 non-relative and kinship foster carers in Northern Ireland who, each day, week, and year, provide much-needed love, support and kindness to the children and young people in their care. I want to pay tribute to the work and dedication of staff from the health and social care trusts in promoting, recruiting and supporting foster carers in their roles and tasks. I also pay tribute to the Fostering Network, which is the membership organisation for all foster and kinship carers in Northern Ireland.

On one level we are all familiar with fostering, but how often do we stop to think about the reality of providing a home for children who cannot live with their birth parents? We are often unaware of the level of skill, commitment and, sometimes, sheer tenacity that is required to help children and young people to settle in an unfamiliar home and to assist them to work through the range of feelings that come with no longer being able to live in their own home — feelings like anger, guilt and relief.

Although we put a range of support services in place, it is foster carers and foster families who are there at breakfast time when a child struggles to eat or does not want to face school, when they are upset or withdrawn, when they

are angry or when they cannot sleep. It is foster carers who work to build real relationships with children and young people that will last not just for the time of a placement but beyond it.

Fostering in this sense is simple and complex, private and public. Uniquely of our care services, it sits firmly in the public domain and yet operates in private family homes. Foster carers are not employees but not fully volunteers. They deliver the duties of a corporate parent, which is us — the Assembly and the Executive. They undertake a huge responsibility on behalf of us all, and it is essential that they are trained, supported, valued and remunerated.

The relationship of the state to its children in care is exceptional. When the state decides to intervene in the life of a child, it starts a unique, long-term relationship that it must honour. Of the 2,807 children and young people in care in Northern Ireland, 2,111 live in foster carers' homes. They are cared for by non-relative and kinship foster carers. Fostering is now, without doubt, the backbone and linchpin of services for children in care. Seventy five per cent of all children in care will live with foster families, and that is why I particularly welcomed the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's decision to ask the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) to undertake the first ever review of statutory fostering services. I tabled this motion to consider its recommendations and the need for investment in this vital service.

This was a comprehensive baseline review, covering almost every aspect of fostering in Northern Ireland today. The vast majority of what I have to say reflects and is drawn from the comments of the review team in the report. The review generated 46 specific recommendations. I cannot possibly address all of them this afternoon, but it is an indication of a service that is under strain. I will highlight a small number of recommendations that I consider most significant, and I am sure that other Members will highlight other matters. I am keen to hear from the Minister how these recommendations are to be progressed and monitored.

During the review, the Health and Social Care Board indicated that the foster care service is under strain due to an increase in the number of looked-after children and the complexity of their needs, the challenges in recruiting and retaining foster carers, and the decrease in the number of residential care placements. It was clear from the report that, despite foster carers

being a scarce resource, a retention strategy was not evident in any trust. The report recommended that such a strategy was required as a priority and should include adequate remuneration, training, support to deal with challenging behaviours and respite.

The report also recommended methods to enhance the status of carers and recognition of the carer's role and capacity to meet the needs of children in their homes. This means properly reviewing the role of the foster carer, treating them as part of the team around the child and creating mechanisms to allow and value their input. I ask the Minister to indicate when a retention strategy might be expected. If the issues of valuing and retaining carers are not addressed, those who leave fostering will not be replaced at an adequate rate. Four new foster carers are needed every week in Northern Ireland just to keep pace with demand.

I am concerned that the review team queried the lack of basic data on the age, cultural and geographical distribution of carers and on the spectrum of provision, such as those providing long- and short-term care, the training needs of carers and the areas of expertise. Furthermore, no up-to-date figures were presented by trusts on carers who retire or stop fostering. As the review team noted, that makes it difficult to plan ahead and shows the need for a more robust infrastructure to support fostering and foster carers. We know, however, that the number of children coming into care has continued to increase and that foster care, kinship and non-relative, is a priority in Transforming Your Care. The need for additional investment in foster care and fostering services is highlighted in the report and has also been raised by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB). Without doubt, it requires a clear plan for action. The investment is not just the responsibility of health and social services but, as the ultimate corporate parents, the responsibility of the Executive.

Since 2008, the number of children in care has increased by 15%. That alone could add significant strain to services. However, in the same period, the proportion of children in foster care placements increased by 18%, and those in other placements decreased by 15%. The increase in those in kinship foster care placements has created an additional pressure in the system given that those carers will be assessed and approved for specific children. As a consequence, the number of social worker assessments required to generate the same number of placements has increased substantially. Although the increased number

of children living in kinship foster care arrangements in their wider family is to be welcomed, there must also be a recognition that broadening out the service to include promoting and supporting kinship care requires additional capacity from social work teams. A clear indication of the additional capacity and investment needed is the review team's concern at the 276 kinship placements that are not yet formally approved by the fostering panel. The very limited usage of independent fostering providers, of whom we have only four in Northern Ireland, is also highlighted. Only 6% of children in foster care are currently placed with independent fostering agencies. That is not the case in GB, where independent fostering provision represents from 25% to 50% of all placements, and research by Sellick in 2011 demonstrates the role of a mixed economy of care in driving up standards. In recent months, there has been a decrease in the number of independent providers, and I ask the Minister to ask his Department to consider undertaking a review into the role, use and funding of independent foster care provision as one element of addressing the strain on and capacity of fostering services.

All those issues impact directly on children who are at the heart of the service. Not enough carers means that too many children may not find the right carer to meet their specific needs. That could lead to placement breakdown and children having to move to another carer, which could cause adverse impacts. The report highlights placement moves as an issue of concern and, worryingly, indicates that some of those were due to financial pressures in the trusts. The review drew on research that shows that multiple moves have a negative impact on children's well-being, self-worth and outcomes. Financial pressure should not outweigh a child's welfare as a factor in determining a child's placement.

The report contains many other important issues that need to be taken forward. Perhaps it is best summed up by the call from the review team:

"Changes need to be made to transform foster care from a volunteer-based service, to a modern, highly skilled, child centred service that places foster carers at the centre of the professional network."

I ask the Minister to outline his Department's plans to ensure that that is achieved.

One child in foster care said:

"My foster carer is a light in an empty room".

That is why the report is important, and it is vital that we invest in fostering to enable it to become the modern, highly skilled, child-centred service for all those children who require a light in an empty room.

12.45 pm

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposers of the motion and welcome the opportunity to have this important debate.

I have no doubt that there is concern throughout society that the need for foster care arrangements outstrips the availability of places. The motion rightly refers to the need to value the role of carers who look after the most vulnerable children and the need for a support strategy for foster carers. However, I must point out that this is the second time that the issue has been brought to the Floor. I hope that we will hear directly from the Minister today about progress made and the actions that will flow from the report's recommendations. I look forward to his comments.

A number of the references that I had listed have already been made, and I do not want to repeat them. However, we should reflect on the total number of children in care in the North of Ireland, which is 2,807. The total number living in foster care is 2,111. Since 2008, there has been a 15% increase in the number of children in care. That is a substantial increase over a short period. There has also been an 18% increase in the number of children in foster care since 2008. We heard from the Member who moved the motion that 200 new carers are needed to keep pace with demand this year. That, the statistics tell us, equates to four new carers every single week.

It has been outlined that there are various subsections of carers: non-relative carers and kinship foster carers. Today, I want to focus on kinship foster carers. Between March 2011 and September 2012, there was an increase of 14% in kinship foster carers, and a decrease of 53, which is 5%, in non-kinship placements. That suggests that there is quite a high demand for kinship care places and arrangements.

This was the first ever review of statutory fostering services across the North. The report has made 46 separate recommendations for trusts, the health board and the Department on the delivery of fostering services. There is clearly a need for investment, basic information, a retention strategy, reflection on placement moves and the professionalisation of the

service. Those points are well reflected in the report.

I want to single out the role of kinship care. We are told that 80 children were adopted from care during the year ending March 2013. That is 28 children more than in 2012. Some 54 of those children were adopted by their foster carer in 2012-13, which represents 61% of all adoptions. During 2012-13, some 3,664 referrals were made to children's services, which is an increase of 6% on 2011-12. We can all suggest and pontificate about the reasons for that. It is also a rise of 34% on the figure for the year 2007-08.

However, the figures become less clear when we examine the issue of kinship care. A person will be considered a kinship foster carer if they have been requested by social services to care for a child who is either related to them or connected to them through friendship. All children in anyone's care will be subject to the procedures for looked-after children. However, research in a Bristol University report, 'The Poor Relations? Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out', reveals that outcomes for children in kinship care are better than those for children in other foster care. That is in spite of the fact that most children and young people being cared for by kin receive little or no support from anyone.

I think that is the key message in this debate today: there is little or no support by anyone. I urge the Minister to address, through due process, investment and strategy, the 8,000 to 10,000 kinship care arrangements that exist in the North of Ireland.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate and I support the motion. The case for improved fostering services here was greatly enhanced by the RQIA report, and the SDLP welcomes its findings.

The role of Health and Social Care (HSC) in situations where, for whatever reason, parents cannot continue to look after their children remains critical. The trust's role as a corporate parent must be exercised to the benefit of vulnerable children and young people who have been removed from their immediate family environment, which is often a very turbulent experience. There is clearly a need to attract families and individuals to register for fostering, and, as the proposer and the Health Committee Chair pointed out, there are four foster families needed each week to keep up with demand. As of March 2013, there were just over 2,800 looked-after children here. Seventy-five per

cent of those were in foster care placements, which represents an increase of 131 from September 2012.

The RQIA report has found that the number of children being taken into care is rising and that finding placements for foster carers who wish to retire continues to present a real challenge. That is highlighted by the fact that, between 2011 and 2012, only half of those who requested an information pack entered the fostering process. Uptake does not always match demand, and it might be worth interrogating that statistic to see what the problem is.

The SDLP recognises that efforts are being made to recruit new foster carers but echoes the concerns of the report that no regional strategy exists to retain current foster carers. Once again, is that part of the problem? One of the reasons why the retention of foster carers is crucial is that it would create a pool of experienced carers that trusts in their totality could draw on, increasing the overall expertise in fostering services immeasurably.

Two further problems unearthed by the RQIA report were information sharing and communication between trusts and the health board. While the Health and Social Care Board has set out six high-level outcomes in its vision for the future of fostering services here, knowledge of those outcomes and Health and Social Care Board strategy was not evident in trust employees. Again, is that part of the problem? That needs to be rectified by the Department if a coordinated and consistent approach is to be applied on the matter.

The motion today reflects directly on the RQIA report in calling for the transformation of fostering services into a modern and highly skilled child-centred service, as articulated by the proposer. There is much that needs to change if that is to be achieved. The concerns of foster parents must be addressed. They have indicated that they sometimes feel under pressure to take children, who may have had two or three previous carers and present unique difficulties in terms of appropriate care. Taking care of a child can often present intricate problems — that is the case even when you are just a parent — and the trust as a corporate parent should have a responsibility to help foster carers to respond to a child's problems and to provide constant support.

Foster carers have also expressed concerns that forward planning can pose a significant problem. For example, an issue that otherwise would be one of the most simple things for any

ordinary parent to participate in is signing agreements of consent for school trips. Foster carers have indicated that clear guidance is not given in that situation, and that, too, must be rectified by the Department.

The issue here where we strongly agree with the motion is support. When a foster carer admirably steps forward to take care of a vulnerable child, both parties need appropriate and sustained support to ensure the best levels of care. The uncertainties that are often expressed by foster carers need due care and attention. The SDLP notes that the RQIA review found that training, in the first instance, for foster carers was good but is concerned by the lack of a support strategy. Such a strategy would especially help first-time foster carers who may lack experience in the broad scale of issues that may arise with any child or young person.

I will also touch on kinship care. That can be very beneficial for the child, as they often already have a strong and positive relationship with the prospective carer.

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

Mr McKinney: Foster carers provide an invaluable service by looking after some of the most vulnerable children and young people here, and they deserve a robust support strategy.

Mr Gardiner: Whenever we talk about foster care in Northern Ireland, we need to remember that there are four times as many children living in kinship care as there are living in foster care and that that number is on the increase. Only one third of the children who are being looked after by relatives are in formal kinship care arrangements. In 2001, the number of children being looked after by relatives was 5,200. More recent figures suggest that that figure has risen to as high as 10,000. Half are being cared for by a brother or sister, 41% by grandparents and just 1% by other relatives. The problem that I want to focus on is that kinship care families are more likely than average families to experience poverty. That helps to reinforce the vicious circle that leads to those children being in kinship care in the first place.

Informal kinship carers often have to operate in an atmosphere where they do not have formal legal rights for the child's welfare. For example, they may not have the right to consent to medical treatment for the child. Where normal kinship care arrangements are in place, the

health and social care trust, acting in place of the parent, can delegate the authority to the carer.

The other point that we need to remember is that informal kinship carers often have to operate in the context of very complicated and difficult family circumstances. Very often, the informal kinship arrangement increases the stresses and tensions in the wider family. Thus, the child can be brought up in an atmosphere of stress. That can be damaging to the child's emotional and intellectual development.

Foster carers are paid a maintenance allowance of between £114 and £168 a week, depending on the age of the child that is being cared for. In an informal kinship arrangement, the carer might be able to claim child benefit for the child but only if the parent is not already doing so. Financial support, therefore, becomes a matter of negotiations within a wider kinship unit. That is a far from desirable situation, because there are no guarantees of a financial safety net for the child.

So, my appeal today is for those children who are in informal kinship arrangements. There are so many of them in the context of the total number in care. Remember that there may be as many as 10,000 of these vulnerable children. That compares with 1,900 approved foster families and with 717 informal kinship care arrangements. We need to establish a formal safety net for those situations, and we should make that a priority. I support the motion and congratulate the Member who brought it to the House.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I will speak in support of the motion and express my gratitude to Michelle McIlveen and Jim Wells for getting this important motion to the Floor this afternoon.

The motion is very comprehensive. It acknowledges the contents of the RQIA report while voicing concerns about the future of a modern foster care service for children. Equally important is how the authorities have valued the role of our carers for vulnerable children until now.

It is unfortunate that, for whatever reason, Northern Ireland has so many young people needing care in one way or another. This time last year, it was estimated that 2,807 youngsters needed care. That means that, as other Members said, there is a need for four new foster families each week to provide care for those vulnerable children.

That is a very big ask.

1.00 pm

Let me put on record our thanks to the vast majority of our families, who do sterling work in raising, educating and making good citizens of our children in general, despite the ever-changing and sometimes dangerous society that our young people face, the latest craze being the social media and internet facilities. I also commend all those who foster young people, including, as has already been mentioned, kinship care and others who bring children into their homes to live alongside their families and provide a good home and all the opportunities open to them all. There are also voluntary and statutory groups throughout Northern Ireland that deserve enormous credit for the work that they do with young people who, for whatever reason, find themselves outside the environs of a warm and loving family home.

I welcome the RQIA report and its 46 recommendations for our health and social care trusts. We sincerely hope that those can be implemented at an early date, alongside the recommendations assigned to the Department. The motion asks for a support strategy for foster carers and for investment to transform foster care into a modern, highly skilled and child-centered service. It is vital for the Department and trusts to offer nothing but the best provision and facilities to all our foster carers, like our carers for the elderly and people with a learning disability. All too often, those fantastic dedicated people are taken for granted. They do exemplary work for very little remuneration and save the state millions of pounds a year. That must not be allowed to happen to those who work in fostering.

So much has been said recently about the journey that we are all on with Transforming Your Care. I am slightly disappointed that very little is said about the family and childcare issue in Transforming Your Care, other than number 49 in the summary of key proposals, which states:

"Promotion of foster care both within and outwith families."

That is a pretty short statement on such a huge and important issue. I sincerely hope that its brevity is not a sign of a lesser acknowledgement of the subject.

At the moment, there is a consultation out on the Foster Placement and Fostering Agencies

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014, which, I understand, is due to end on 7 April. As I understand it, that, among other things, will enable trusts to remove barriers, which will enable those wishing to be foster carers to have a speedier process, with, of course, the necessary safeguards. It is unfortunate that the time lag for prospective foster carers is so elongated and painfully slow. We know that safeguards and other enquiries must be made, but please ensure that no undue delay holds up the process. Get those youngsters into a good home as soon as possible.

We support the motion.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion, and I commend my party colleagues for bringing it to the Assembly.

Foster carers play a very important and special role in Northern Ireland. It often goes unnoticed just how great a sacrifice and dedicated a service foster carers provide daily in supporting vulnerable children and young people. Those children rely on foster carers to meet their daily needs, and, today in the House, we should formally recognise the commitment and care that they provide.

As of March last year, there were 2,807 looked-after children in Northern Ireland, with some 75% in foster care placements. The fact that, between 2008 and 2013, the proportion of children in foster care placements increased by 18% from 57% to 75% shows the ever-increasing need and demand for foster carers across Northern Ireland.

Sadly, the reality is that there remain children across our country who are born into troubled homes and who are in need of love and support from foster carers. The demand for foster carers outstrips supply. Foster carers make great personal and financial sacrifices to provide care for these children, who rely on the love, care and support that these dedicated foster carers give so freely.

The benefits of foster care are wide-ranging and cannot be bought. They are often realised by children only in later years. Foster carers offer children and young people a safe and secure home where they are valued, properly cared for, respected and taught the difference between right and wrong.

I spoke to a family who foster a child, and they outlined to me the benefits associated with being a foster parent. They spoke of their pride at being able to give a child an opportunity to experience family life that that child may not

otherwise have had. They spoke of how it can enrich their own family and be very fulfilling personally. However, they also talked of the challenges that being a foster parent can often present. They spoke of how challenging behaviour and managing it can sometimes present difficulties. They also mentioned that it is a long-term commitment that can often involve sacrifices, that it does not always meet with expectations and can sometimes have effects on their own family.

One major factor that is mentioned in the RQIA report is the feeling that the complete foster care structure needs to be transformed from a volunteer-based service to a more modern, highly skilled, child-centred service that places foster carers at the centre of a professional network. Having a more professional structure in place would help to deal with the ever-increasing issue of allegations. It can be challenging for trusts to deal with allegations from children if there are no clear guidelines in place for children and foster carers.

There are many positive recommendations in the report that would benefit both children and foster carers. I trust that the Minister will take many of those on board. Given the ever-increasing number of foster carers and vulnerable children here, now is the time to put in place the right infrastructure to support and develop the role of foster carers and, ultimately, ensure the best outcomes for those children. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion. We all recognise the service that foster parents provide because it is such an important — but often unrecognised — role. The children who are looked after are often very vulnerable, and the role of the carer is vital to the child's development.

Here in the North, three quarters of children in care live with foster carers. Over 2,000 households are involved in fostering, caring for almost 2,700 children. The Fostering Network indicates that four new foster families are needed each week. The RQIA chief executive said:

"Foster carers do an important job and can make a vital contribution to the lives of children who are looked after by the state. Increasingly, the HSC trusts are relying on kinship carers – those who may be related to or have a prior connection with the fostered child."

Children and young people in care are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Therefore, their protection is paramount. The trusts, foster care agencies and others involved in care must strive to achieve the best outcomes.

The number of children requiring foster care continues to rise. As of 30 September 2012, there were 2,676 looked-after children in the North, an increase of 6% from 2011. Of these, 75% were in foster care placements, including kinship care placements. As of 30 September 2012, a total of 2,073 households were involved in foster care, providing 2,837 placements.

It is so important that children and young people are consulted and involved in the decisions that affect them. Supporting relationships and developing positive contact is important. There also needs to be consistency in the contact with social services. Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) says that 47% reported having one to three social workers since they came into the care system, while a further 42% reported having four or more social workers. During the review, all of the young people who were interviewed for the Extern project group said that they did not know much about the decisions that were being made on their behalf and that they were not kept informed.

Kinship care is also such an important part of the care system. This is the care of children by a family member or family friend. This can often happen when an emergency occurs, and it prevents the children going into care. The main aim of kinship care is the preservation of the family, and it keeps the children close to the family and their community. Between 8,000 and 10,000 children are estimated to live in informal kinship care, and the number of children living with relatives or friends is increasing. However, often because of these informal arrangements, there can be an economic impact on the families involved. It is so important that these families receive economic aid.

Scotland introduced a fostering and kinship care strategy in 2007 and regulations in 2009 to enable local authorities to provide an allowance to kinship carers. With kinship care, family and friends may take a child due to a variety of circumstances. These could be due to parental factors, for example, domestic violence, abuse of alcohol or substance abuse, mental or physical illness or, indeed, the death of a parent. Children in kinship care can experience more stability, feel safer, have a greater sense

of belonging and experience better life outcomes in their own family circle.

I mentioned the importance of economic aid to kinship carers. For many of these families, life can be a struggle. Importantly, research shows that kinship carers do not receive adequate support. The fact that children are being looked after in an informal kinship care setting does not necessarily mean that their needs and issues are any less than those of children who are being looked after in formal arrangements, and it is important that this is recognised.

Currently, we do not have a specific kinship care policy. The Department has developed a strategy, and, in 2010, draft standards were developed. These standards take the form of placing the child or young person at the centre of the fostering process and making their welfare, safety and standards paramount; providing services on a regional basis; providing services that are consistently effective, efficient and capable of achieving a high level of output; and equity of service provision for all young people and carers.

Finally, with the advent of Transforming Your Care, it is important that fostering and kinship care are recognised as important elements in the framework and that the Minister recognises the opportunity to improve and enhance these services and provides the resources to do so.

Mrs Cameron: I thank my colleagues Michelle McIlveen and Jim Wells for tabling this very important motion on fostering services. As we have heard, as of 31 March 2013, there were 2,807 looked-after children in Northern Ireland, with 75% of them in foster care placements. It has long been known that, for these children to have the best outcomes possible, the optimum placement is within a foster family as opposed to a group home. A foster family can offer a child so much by way of a normal family environment and provides the child with a base with the opportunity to build strong relationships with carers.

We also know that children who come into foster care do so for a variety of reasons. Some are in care for relatively short periods as a form of respite care for the natural family unit, and others come into the system on a temporary basis to allow the situation at home to be worked on so that the child can be returned to the family unit. Others, unfortunately, will be in care for a long time.

Regardless of the reasons for the child needing to be looked after, without foster carers who open their hearts and homes to these

vulnerable children, our system would be in trouble. According to the RQIA report, we need four new foster care placements each week to sustain levels of demand. In the absence of these new carers, trusts have to increasingly rely on kinship carers to fill the void.

Sadly, the lack of foster carers and poor retention rates mean that children can experience a high turnover of carers, which is not a positive experience for the child. Children have indicated to the RQIA that this turnover causes them insecurity and that they would ideally like to have more say about their care. Foster carers tell us that placements are less likely to break down when the adequate advice and information about the child is given to them. Foster carers, although rarely motivated by financial compensation, indicate that they often are not provided with enough financial resources to care for the child in their care.

1.15 pm

Often, children who have suffered abuse or have had to take on the role of carer themselves have a range of issues relating to their experiences. Foster carers are often expected to deal with extreme behaviour, and they report that they often feel that they do not get support from social workers. There is a lack of continuity with social workers, as well. We must, therefore, listen to what foster carers and the children that they look after tell us. Good policy is based on evidence and experience, and it is imperative that the Department listens to children and foster carers alike to fully meet the demands of those in the system.

I note that the Minister has already shown his commitment to the issue by moving on a number of initiatives and strategies in the area. I welcome the recent consultation on fostering service regulations that will allow the interested parties to mould the regulations and ensure that they are robust and fit for purpose. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo agus ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá leis. I want to speak in favour of the motion and say a few words about it. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and would like to thank the proposers of the motion for tabling it.

The work that foster carers carry out is not recognised in wider circles. I want to put on record the work that they do, and also kinship carers. I also want to mention a few things

about an experience that I have had in my constituency. I want to bring that to light and ask the Minister, when he is bringing forward a strategy, to talk to other Departments.

A family in my constituency has been fostering children for a long time. The family put in for the boiler replacement scheme, but the funding package that it gets for fostering put it over the threshold. I know that that may not sound a lot to some people, but those are the kinds of anomalies across Departments that you should consider in your strategies, Minister. You should maybe talk to other Departments to try to ease that, as it is somewhat of a burden. It is an experience that I have had, and I would like the Minister to look at that issue.

I certainly welcome the review and its 46 recommendations. The recommendations mention the likes of capacity-building and creating a modern, skilled professional service. However, that will not come without investment. Minister, I would like you to touch on how much additional investment you will seek from the Executive to ensure that the issues that are addressed in the recommendations are fully carried out and that people are given that additional investment to ensure that we introduce that modern, highly skilled service.

The final point that I want to make is in relation to the placement issue that was brought up as part of one of the recommendations. Surely, at the end of this, it is about a stable life for the child. That is one of the key elements that I would like addressed. I would also like the Minister to touch on some of the recommendations and how he proposes to bring them forward. I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, I too am pleased to support the motion, and look forward to the Minister outlining his plans and the programme of investment to meet the need of fostering services.

All Members of the House will be all too aware of the difficulties that many people in our communities experience. Very often, people believe that fostering comes about as a result of something terrible happening in the home or child cruelty, when, quite often, it can be because of parental illness or hospitalisation. There needs to be greater education across the community as to why and how fostering happens.

I recently tabled a question to the Minister about caseload management by social workers, and, of course, one of the key recommendations deals with the length of time

taken to assess people's suitability as foster parents. I hope that the Minister will address that very early on. I believe that it is the key to unlocking the availability of foster parents. That is not to say that there should be any shortcuts. Children are the most precious gifts and treasures that we hold, and it is right and proper that people who want to be foster parents go through a strenuous assessment process. Nonetheless, the time taken is much too long.

Very often in social services, we find that we come to crisis intervention rather than trying to get in earlier, when perhaps parents could be more involved. It is right that people should feel that they can ask for help early on when a crisis is evolving in their home and not be judged for doing so. There is work that we all need to do, but there are also many practical measures, which Members highlighted in their contributions. Indeed, the point was made that some of those measures are cross-departmental, so I hope that the Health Minister will address some of them in his response.

I pay tribute to the foster parents who have provided a home for children over many years and acknowledge their work on behalf of all of us. I also want to set that against the context of the outcome for looked-after children. Foster homes have a much better outcome than some other homes, situations and environments that children are often placed in. There is a great need to listen not only to the concerns of foster parents but, as Mr Brady mentioned, to the voices of children and young people and their experiences of care and, indeed, to the professional services, particularly those in social work.

It is another case of needing a joined-up, coordinated effort. Some of the measures are fairly practical, and I do not believe that they will create a financial burden. Nonetheless, in providing professional help and support, I hope that the Minister has set aside additional finance in the budget for the incoming year to meet the needs of foster parents and families.

Mr Beggs: I too welcome the debate and the RQIA report, which is very constructive. It has highlighted the need for further support for foster parents and recognised the vital role that they play. All parents, especially foster parents, play a critical role in the development of a child or young person by providing a safe and loving home in which that child or young person can develop. If someone does not have a safe and secure home, many aspects of their lives can be adversely affected. Their ability to engage in education or to form relationships with adults or other young people becomes strained, so it is a

vital service. We must commend all foster parents for their work.

I note that the report states that, overall, the quality of foster care is good, and the comments about carers are generally positive, so that must also be acknowledged. Nevertheless, there is always room for improvement, and there are quite a number of suggestions and recommendations in the report. We have to welcome the fact that the RQIA is taking an independent look at this aspect of our caring service to come up with something fresh about how things might improve.

Why have our trusts and the Health and Social Care Board not identified some of the fairly basic aspects that are highlighted, such as trusts having a regular audit of foster carers, looking at their skills, training needs and expertise? I would have thought that that is a no-brainer. Does that need to be a recommendation? It implies that there are gaps, and, if there are, I welcome the fact that the issue is being looked at. It also highlights the age distribution of the carer population, because, unless we have an even age group at some point, there could be a critical shortage of foster parents. I am glad that that has been highlighted and, hopefully, can now be addressed.

The RQIA mentions another thing that I view as important:

"a mechanism for foster carers to report any deterioration in relationships between them and the child's social worker".

If that relationship breaks down, it can adversely affect the child. It is important that there are mechanisms in place to correct it should personality issues arise.

The retention of foster parents is an essential issue highlighted in the report, which refers to the need to provide:

"access to competent relevant professionals in managing/treating complex behaviours."

Some children and young people who have had difficult experiences may be difficult when trying to settle into a foster home, so it is important that support is available to their foster carers.

The idea of an exit interview with all foster carers leaving the service is a good one. Lessons can always be learned at that point. Anyone leaving the service would be freer to indicate what their difficulty was or why they were leaving.

One recommendation states:

"Trusts should ensure there is appropriate support in place for children and foster carers to deal with emerging concerns."

Another states:

"Trusts should ensure that all essential information ... is shared with the foster carer prior to placement, or in the case of an emergency placement, within 72 hours of the placement commencing."

Why has it not been? The fact that this is a recommendation implies that it has not been the case. I would hope that foster parents were aware on every occasion of all relevant and essential information.

Kinship care is a growing and increasingly important area as more and more people step forward to provide support to members of their family who need fostering support. I am pleased that that is recognised in the document. The number of kinship carers in Northern Ireland has been growing. As my colleague Sam Gardiner said —

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

Mr Beggs: — many such arrangements were informal in the past, but it is important that this area is recognised and appropriate training and skills given to those who carry it out.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): In December 2013, the RQIA published a report on its review of statutory fostering services, which was commissioned by my Department. It made 48 recommendations, of which 10 were for my Department to take forward, 16 for the Health and Social Care Board, 21 for the health and social care trusts and one jointly for the Health and Social Care Board and trusts.

The number of children in care continues to rise, with fostering the preferred caring option for three quarters of the 2,807 currently in care. Fostering can provide anything from short-term care of just a few weeks to long-term placements, as well as respite breaks for children, some of whom may have behavioural problems or a disability.

Between January and December 2013, the number of foster care households in Northern Ireland gradually increased from 2,105 to 2,230. Of the total number of children and young

people in foster care, 1,031 were in kinship care. This compares with 467 in 2009, which means that the number of kinship carers more than doubled from 2009 to 2013.

Many more children and young people coming into care have a greater complexity of need. When a decision is made to bring children into care, it can take an unacceptably long time for the care proceedings process to conclude — sometimes over a year, which, in the life of a very young child, is far too long.

The RQIA report on statutory fostering services acknowledged that the range of supports provided by trusts for foster carers was generally good but found that there was still room for improvement. Hence the 46 recommendations, which the Health and Social Care Board and trusts are in the process of responding to by way of a comprehensive action plan. The board will report quarterly to my Department on progress.

A number of the RQIA recommendations relate to the recruitment and support of foster carers.

I note that the motion refers to the lack of a recruitment and support strategy for foster carers. My Department, the Health and Social Care Board and the trusts continue to work together to find new ways of recruiting, supporting and retaining foster carers and to improve fostering services. We are acutely aware that we have an ageing foster carer population. We have a regional adoption and foster care service, which helps to recruit, support and provide learning and development opportunities for all foster carers and adopters. Its website helps us to recruit foster carers for specific children.

1.30 pm

The regional adoption and fostering task force, which includes representatives from the relevant voluntary organisations and the statutory services, was established to set the strategic direction for looked-after children in foster care and those children who may be or have been adopted. The task force reports to the directors of children's services in the trusts and the Health and Social Care Board. To date, its work has included developing fostering and adoption policies and procedures, agreeing a training pathway for foster carers and commissioning a number of pieces of research on foster care.

Under Transforming Your Care, there are proposals to put in place professional foster

care schemes for the most difficult to place children. The HSCB is working with the trusts to review fostering services in the light of that TYC commitment, which will consider, among other things, the regional consistency of foster carer fees. Whatever we do in any future strategy, it is clear that we need an eclectic mix of carers, some of whom will view foster care as a vocation, others who will see it as a career. Recruitment needs to be balanced to allow a proportion of new entrants to grow into the role, while having targeted recruitment to attract experienced foster carers who, with the necessary supports, will be better equipped to meet the assessed needs of specific children who may require long-term placements.

The Health and Social Care Board and trusts work in partnership with others, such as the Fostering Network, which is funded to provide a dedicated helpline for foster carers and runs annual recruitment campaigns. The British Association for Adoption and Fostering receives funding to provide advice, consultancy services and training for prospective foster carers and professionals in Northern Ireland and has produced a number of publications on fostering, adoption and looked-after children issues. Crucially, because of their UK-wide coverage, those organisations help to maintain links with developments in fostering in other parts of the UK. The HSC trusts have developed partnerships with voluntary organisations to provide specific fostering schemes. For example, as referenced in the RQIA report, the Belfast Trust has a partnership with Barnardo's, for services to adolescents, and with Extern, to provide services to kinship foster carers. All the trusts can and do engage with the independent sector to purchase foster placements on a needs-led basis. A regional mentoring and advocacy service delivered by VOYPIC is accessible by all trusts.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. I declare an interest as a former registered foster carer. Would the Minister acknowledge that there is a difference between the services provided in each of the health trusts, or has that gap significantly closed?

Mr Poots: I acknowledge that there are differences. The health and social care trusts have a degree of independence in how they do things, but we wish to see clear policy issues carried out across Northern Ireland in a comprehensive way. So, where we have policy gaps, we wish to close those.

I have referred to the significant growth in kinship care, which, because of the close family links between the carer and the child, requires a

different kind of response. It is for that reason that we published minimum kinship care standards in May 2012, which specify the arrangements, services, support and procedures needed to ensure that the unique needs of kinship carers and the children they foster are met.

For young people leaving care, my Department continues to support the Going the Extra Mile scheme, which aims to promote continuity and stability of living arrangements in post-care life for young people aged 18 to 21 who currently reside with foster or kinship carers. That has been a particular success, with 241 young people availing themselves of that scheme. Concurrent planning has been piloted in Northern Ireland for a limited number of suitable children and has proved effective in securing early permanence in lifelong placements for those children. At an early stage, children are placed with carers who are also potential adopters for the child, that is, concurrent carers, to enable social services and the court to consider and agree a permanent placement for that child. If the court makes the decision that the child should return to their birth family, concurrent carers will facilitate the child's return. However, if adoption is deemed to be in the child's best interests, the child will be adopted by their carers. Through the concurrent planning process, permanency is achieved for children much quicker and earlier. That is known to have long-term benefits for the child.

My officials are considering a draft of the Foster Placement and Fostering Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014. Those regulations will allow independent fostering agencies to approve foster carers once they have been assessed, and they will also bring fostering agencies within the scope of inspection and regulation by RQIA on behalf of my Department. To support the regulations, minimum fostering services standards will be developed to ensure that the welfare of children who are placed, or who are to be placed, with foster carers is safeguarded and promoted at all times. The RQIA report helpfully identifies a number of key matters that are to be addressed in those standards, including best practice support, training and allowances. Work on the standards is about to start, and, when developed, the draft standards will be subject to public consultation.

Work continues on the Adoption and Children Bill, which, among other things, will make provision for the introduction of a special guardianship order, the aim of which is to provide greater permanency for young people who, for the remainder of their childhood, are

unlikely to return to their birth parents. This is an alternative to foster care, and, like adoption, it offers children and young people a permanent family under the law.

I referred to the length of time that it takes to conclude care proceedings in Northern Ireland. Following a joint DHSSPS and DOJ scoping exercise on the operation of the family justice system in Northern Ireland, we will establish a care proceedings pilot later this year to further identify the causes of delay in care proceedings and solutions for dealing with it. The aim is to ensure that the length of time that is taken to conclude decisions on care proceedings is reduced for all looked-after children, regardless of which HSC trust is responsible for their care or which court is hearing their case.

Someone asked about the investment, so I can say that investment in fostering services over the past three years has steadily increased. For example, in 2010-11, the investment was £12.5 million; it rose by half a million pounds to £13 million in 2011-12; and in 2013-14, we have invested £19 million in fostering services. Some of that is a result of more children being identified as vulnerable children, and a lot of it has to do with the media profile of media people who have been involved in paedophile activities.

Careful consideration is needed of how we can bolster current funding arrangements. That will be done through the ongoing work to develop a future strategic statement for looked-after children, the majority of whom are in foster care. We will need to consider the extent to which our new strategic priorities for looked-after children will need to be underpinned by additional investment. We also need to consider the extent to which other departmental strategies, programmes and funds to support them can be targeted at foster carers, given the value of the work that they do. For example, there may be scope for the Executive's childcare strategy to more imaginatively support foster carers. We will also need to consider the extent to which our benefits and employment systems support individuals, such as those who are in kinship care arrangements. Importantly, work with other Ministers is under way on the early intervention transformation programme as part of the Delivering Social Change programme. Supported by private philanthropy, we are investing £30 million in early intervention, the aim of which is to support families and to intervene earlier to reduce the risk of children coming into care in the first place.

I will respond to some of the issues that were raised. We were asked how we would ensure that the service changes to become a modern, highly skilled child-centred service. That work has already commenced. We are doing that through a package of measures. The RQIA review of statutory fostering services was commissioned by the Department. The HSCB and trusts are all working hard to progress its recommendations through a comprehensive action plan.

We are almost at the end of a formal consultation on the draft placement and fostering agency regulations, which will allow independent fostering agencies to approve foster carers. We are also developing the minimum fostering services standards to ensure that the welfare of children who have been placed or who are to be placed with foster carers is safeguarded at all times. We will review the kinship care standards in 2015. We are also developing a strategic statement for looked-after children that will set the strategic priorities for the next three to five years. That statement will be subject to public consultation. The HSCB review of fostering in the context of the Transforming Your Care reforms and the introduction of an adoption and children Bill will, among other things, put fostering panels on a statutory basis and introduce a review mechanism panel for foster carers who are not approved or who are deregistered.

For the 46 recommendations, and specifically on the point of a retention strategy, there will emerge as a result of the ongoing review being undertaken as a remit of the TYC recommendation to establish a professional foster care service. I understand that it is anticipated that a recruitment and retention strategy will be developed by February 2015.

I have dealt with the finances. Mr Boylan is not present. I will raise his issue of the boiler replacement scheme with the Minister for Social Development to seek an exemption for foster carers. Case load management was raised recently. It is being considered in the context of implementing the social work strategy and the consistency of social work involvement in a child's life. We are considering establishing one or more pilots that will test how we deliver social work services. The aim in establishing the pilot is to find ways of delivering a consistently present social worker as a child goes through the system. That is considered to be very important.

In conclusion, I recognise that foster carers provide an invaluable service caring for some of the most vulnerable children and young people

in Northern Ireland. Most children have better outcomes if they are brought up in a family rather than in residential care. By sharing their homes and lives, foster carers provide stability for those young people. We greatly appreciate the work of what is an undervalued service.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker — many promoted you to Principal Deputy Speaker during the debate — I welcome the debate and the many valued contributions from across the Chamber. We need to recognise and value the range of care provision for children. There can be foster care by a non-relative, kinship care and of course residential care. There should be no hierarchy of care; no one type of care is better than another. We will continue to need a fostering service that is sufficiently robust, with a wide range of options to meet ever-increasing need among children.

The proposer of the motion, Michelle McIlveen, set the scene very well. Indeed, I often wonder whether Miss McIlveen would make a very useful addition to the Committee for Health, which, at present, is dominated by grey-haired middle-aged men, of which I am one. It might be good to have some youth come into the Committee to join Mrs Cameron and give us that particular outlook. Hopefully, some day, that will happen.

I must say that Miss McIlveen painted a very vivid picture of the importance of fostering in Northern Ireland. She made some very telling points. Like many others, she paid tribute to those who are involved in foster care. She also outlined the range of emotions and huge responsibility that they face and the strain that the system is under. She was the first of many to say that we need 200 new carers per year or four per week. That is a very demanding target. One of her most telling comments was that it is not just a health issue; it should be regarded as an Executive issue because of its importance. She also said that foster carers were a scarce resource and that a retention strategy was not evident in any trust. The RQIA report recommends such a strategy as a priority. There must be adequate remuneration, training, support etc to deal with the very great challenges that foster carers face.

1.45 pm

Miss McIlveen was concerned that the review team had queried the lack of basic data on the age, culture and geographical distribution of carers, the spectrum of provision, such as those providing long-term and short-term care, and the training needs of carers and their areas of

expertise. I think that it is somewhat unfortunate that we are in a situation where we do not have basic raw data on which to base our decisions. I suppose that fostering has done exceptionally well in Northern Ireland despite rather than because of the support that it receives.

Maeve McLaughlin, the Chair of the Health Committee, pointed out that this is the second time that this issue has been debated. She wanted to hear what progress and actions were flowing from the report, which was a common theme in many Members' speeches. Members want to see action on the 46 recommendations in the report, for which there was a clear consensus of support in the Chamber.

Ms McLaughlin was one of many Members who pointed out there are 2,800 children in care, which represents an increase of 15% since 2008. There has been an 18% increase of children in foster care in the same period. She also focused on kinship care. She pointed out that between 8,000 and 10,000 children are in kinship care arrangements in Northern Ireland at the moment. She believes that those carers get very little in the way of support, which was a recurring theme in many Members' speeches.

Fearghal McKinney welcomed the RQIA report and mentioned the six high-level outcomes. He pointed out that many trust employees did not seem to be aware of those six crucial recommendations, and he asked for a consistent approach to be shown between trusts. He also pointed out the cost faced by foster carers who are parenting young children. I think it was Sam Gardiner who gave us the figures. Anyone who is in this for money needs to question themselves, because the grant payable is between £114 and £168 a week, based on the age of the child.

I thought that Cathal Boylan brought out a very unusual but novel point when he asked why someone who gets the grant, which is in return for the expenses that they incur when fostering a child, should then be penalised when it comes to things like an application for a replacement boiler. I do not see that as an income at all; I see it simply as a repayment of expenses incurred. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the Minister is prepared to take that matter up with DSD, because it is a clear anomaly.

Mr McKinney also mentioned the need to get rid of difficult little issues such as consent for school trips and the bureaucracy associated with foster carers in such situations. He strongly supported increased resources for

foster carers. He also outlined the benefits of kinship care.

Sam Gardiner pointed out that four times as many children are in kinship care than foster care. He also outlined the poverty of many of those in kinship care. He was the first to outline the range of grants or reimbursements made to foster carers.

Kieran McCarthy pointed out that a large number of young people — 2,700 — need care. He paid tribute to foster carers, as did almost every Member who spoke. We are absolutely reliant on such people. We all know of individual cases; I know a young lad in south Down very well. He lost both his parents at an exceptionally young age and was brought into a foster care relationship. He has flourished and grown up to be a very fine young citizen.

Kieran McCarthy also paid tribute — he was perhaps the only Member to do so — to those in the voluntary sector in this field and, of course, to those in state provision. He called for early implementation of the 46 recommendations. Strangely, Mr McCarthy was the only Member to mention TYC, which features in every health debate in the Chamber. He decried the fact that this issue got very little mention in TYC and said that it needed to be expanded upon.

Gordon Dunne paid tribute to carers and emphasised the great sacrifice that many of them make. Mickey Brady mentioned that children in care are one of the most vulnerable groups in Northern Ireland. Uniquely, he mentioned another very important issue, namely the complaint made by many foster carers that they see between one and three social workers. Indeed, 42% saw four or more social workers. The obvious point to be made is this: how can you ensure continuity of provision and support when such a disparate range of staff is involved in the care of that young person?

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. As well as seeing a number of different social workers, some young people will see different foster families and will maybe even go to different care homes. The Minister highlighted one issue when he was summing up, and that was foster children being placed with potential adoptive parents, which has huge potential benefits but also some negatives. He highlighted, for example, the fact that the child may be returned to the natural parents. How does the Member view that situation? Would he say that that is a good and positive aspect?

Mr Wells: The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone has pointed out one of the problems for foster carers and children; that of the wide range of staff and the wide range of positions that children find themselves in. The one thing that is absolutely clear is that the best way forward is to have a sole social worker deal with the difficult issue of placing a young person in a loving and caring family on as permanent a basis as is required for their care. However, to move children around between various forms of care has to be extremely disruptive. That may be one of the reasons why kinship care works, in the sense that it tends to be a permanent and long-term placement.

I mentioned that Cathal Boylan brought up the interesting point about the boiler replacement scheme. He wanted to see the 46 recommendations implemented as soon as possible.

Dolores Kelly, again, uniquely, brought up the need for quick assessments of potential foster parents. She made it clear that she did not want any corners cut, but she said that there must be a way of speeding up this process because, as we have seen, we obviously have a lack of foster carers coming along, and something must be done to expedite this. She also made the useful point that we should listen carefully to foster carers and the children. Of course, VOYPIC has been a useful vessel in articulating the concerns of children in care. If we were to sit down and do that more often, Northern Ireland would have a more fit-for-purpose form of fostering.

Roy Beggs highlighted the emerging concerns in the system, which is clearly under stress. It would be awfully sad if, through our not providing enough foster care for children, children would be in residential homes when they did not need to be there.

So we need to address these stresses and strains in the system. The report goes a long way towards that, and we all look forward to the Minister's commitment to implementing its recommendations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the recent Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority report on statutory fostering services and its recommendations; notes with concern the lack of a retention and support strategy for foster carers and the identified need for more investment to transform foster care to a

modern, highly skilled, child-centred service; further notes the continued need to fully value the role of carers in looking after the most vulnerable children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans and programme of investment to meet the needs of fostering services.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.53 pm and resumed at 2.00 pm.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 8 have been withdrawn. Judith Cochrane is not in her place.

Delivering Social Change: Rural Childcare

3. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department will progress the rural childcare initiatives in Delivering Social Change in South Tyrone. (AQO 5831/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Executive's Delivering Social Change framework includes Bright Start, which is a programme for affordable and integrated childcare. Access to childcare is critical to help parents across the North into work, to move families out of poverty and to help to break the cycle of intergenerational deprivation.

Good childcare that provides positive experiences and promotes children's opportunities to develop is an essential building block for a stable and prosperous future for all. Bright Start is central in helping to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage, and it involves important actions on which my Department is taking a lead role that will benefit rural areas, such as an initiative to take forward a rural childminder start-up package creating up to 1,000 childminder places. My officials are appraising options for how this can be done in a way that delivers maximum impact and value for money for rural dwellers right across the North. Until that process has been completed, it is too early to say how Bright Start actions would be progressed in south Tyrone specifically. However, as for the previous support that we have been able to give to rural childcare in south Tyrone, in 2011, DARD's rural childcare programme supported the refurbishment of the former Eglisish Primary School as a new day-care centre with facilities for breakfast and after-school clubs.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. If the childminder start-up places are not fully used up in rural areas, will she consider transferring those places to the social enterprise model? What is

the timescale for the implementation of the rural childcare package?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. My officials are working with OFMDFM and the Strategic Investment Board to complete the business case for the new initiative. That business case will set out and identify very clearly the relevant timescales. I am hopeful that, while all that work is ongoing, a scheme will be in place and up and running by the end of the year. If we are unable to meet the targets for some of the identified areas, I will ensure, on the back of the Member's question about looking at start-ups, that that is also part of the discussions so that we can see whether it can be incorporated into the business case that is being developed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that this a constituency-based question.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Minister expect to go beyond south Tyrone in developing rural childcare initiatives?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. The Bright Start programme is aimed at the whole of the Six Counties. Ms McGahan asked a question that was relevant to her constituency — she has a right to do that — but the scheme will be rolling out, and we are working our way through the process now. We hope to have something on the ground, with groups applying to it, before the end of the year. That will be relevant for the whole area, including Derry.

Rural Development Programme: North Antrim

4. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the rural development programme is benefiting rural areas in North Antrim. (AQO 5832/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Axis 1 of the rural development programme (RDP) provides funding for rural businesses, skills enhancement and competitiveness. Farmers in North Antrim have been awarded £2 million under the farm modernisation programme, and a further £479,000 has been awarded under the manure efficiency technology scheme (METS). In addition, nine companies in the North Antrim area have been awarded funding of £2.2 million from the processing and marketing grant scheme. Under the skills training element of axis 1, a total of 531 people in the North Antrim area have been trained under the collective training themes.

Under axis 2, farmers in North Antrim received significant funding in return for managing their land to benefit the environment. During the seven-year term of the RDP, farmers in the agrienvironment schemes received just over £22 million for managing their land to enhance biodiversity, protect the landscape and improve water quality. In addition, 1,540 farm businesses in the North Antrim area claimed approximately £21.7 million in support through the less-favoured area compensatory allowance, which helps to ensure continued agricultural land use and therefore contributes to the maintenance of a viable rural society. Forestry grant schemes provide support for new woodland creation and for the sustainable management of existing woodland. Forest Service has spent £814,000 on projects in the North Antrim area.

For axis 3, I will interpret your question as referring to the areas covered by North East Region, which is the local action group. To date, North East Region has invested almost £8 million in the north-east area across 317 different projects, including five strategic projects worth £2 million and farm diversification projects worth £2.6 million. Those projects are helping the rural economy, and, on a recent visit, I was particularly impressed by Moyle council's canoe trail, which was already attracting visitors from Scotland and Donegal.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer and for her Department's continued investment in the North Antrim constituency. Will she provide more detail on the collective skills training?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. As I said in the initial answer, there has been quite a large uptake of skills training. A total of 531 people have been trained in collective skills, including, to March 2012, some 76 in the early tranches of Farm Family Options. The current breakdown is 119 on ICT training; 86 on bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) awareness training; and 250 on FarmSafe awareness training. In addition, under the Focus Farms initiative, 3,285 people have been trained on 14 focus farms across the North Antrim area. Finally, under the mentoring programme, some 2,225 people have attended succession events.

Mr Swann: Minister, a number of villages in North Antrim have received funding for village improvement plans. Do you think that money will be available under the next rural

development programme to implement some of those plans?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of the work being done across the North to develop the village plans; there has been fantastic work. A natural progression would be assisting areas to deliver on some of the things that they have identified. The Member will be aware that I am going through the process of examining all the consultation responses and working towards making sure that we have a fit-for-purpose rural development programme in place for the new scheme. The ability to fund some of the work under village renewal will be part of those discussions and considerations in taking final decisions and moving forward on how we can support rural communities to grow.

Mr Byrne: What proposals does DARD have in the new rural development programme to bring forward and sustain more projects such as the North Antrim project?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my previous answer, I am working through the consultation responses that we have received to make sure that we have a fit-for-purpose rural development programme in place. I do not need to rehearse to the House my disappointment at not being able to transfer money to the rural development programme. That would have allowed me the opportunity to further enhance rural communities and bring a balanced approach. In the time ahead, my priorities are to make sure that I use the funding that I have from Europe to the best effect, take on board the views of stakeholders and then put on the table a balanced approach to looking to the future. That has to include agriculture and environmental considerations and provision for rural dwellers. We need a balanced approach to support all those elements of rural communities because they are equally important.

Rural Development Programme: Priority 6

5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how priority 6 in the new rural development programme 2014-2020 will be delivered. (AQO 5833/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The aim of priority 6 is to promote social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas. My Department's proposals to address the needs identified in our rural areas were set out in the public consultation document on the 2014-2020

rural development programme. The proposed schemes for priority 6 aim to assist new and existing rural businesses, including farm diversification and rural tourism businesses, to become sustainable and grow. The proposals also seek to combat poverty and isolation through improving access to basic services and supporting village renewal. It is important that the next rural development programme builds on the successes of the current programme to strengthen the social, economic and cultural infrastructure of rural areas and create a vibrant rural community. My officials are continuing to develop the proposals for the 2014-2020 programme, including the delivery options, with the stakeholder consultation group that was established to oversee the development of the programme.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. What structural changes will there be in the new rural development programme?

Mrs O'Neill: The local government reform programme will reduce the number of councils from 26 to 11 by April 2015, and DARD has proposed that the LEADER local action groups be re-formed in the next RDP, in line with the new council areas and boundaries. There would still be an option to cluster councils together in line with the new boundaries, if it was felt that having fewer than 11 local action groups would be more cost-effective and easier to administer. There might also be a greater impact from the funds in the combined areas. Aligning the local action groups to the new council structures will also mean that there will no longer be a requirement for the joint council committees, which were established in the current programme. So, there are obviously efficiencies to be made there.

Mr A Maginness: Given the importance of priority 6 to rural development, will the Minister outline the specific moneys that will be targeted to priority 6 in the programme between 2014 and 2020?

Mrs O'Neill: I cannot provide the exact figures today. We are working our way through the process of developing the programme, and then we will decide how much money will be allocated to each measure. However, I can give the Member an assurance that priority 6 is a priority for me. I want to make sure that it is well funded and meets the needs of rural communities that have obviously been identified. It will be considered in the round,

along with all the other allocations of moneys to each priority. I was unable to transfer money into the programme because of the court challenge that was made. I now put it to the Executive — I have put it to the Executive — that they need to step up to the mark and support rural communities, because supporting those communities is not just the business of my Department but the business of every Department in the Executive.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister clarify when the final budget for the 2014-2020 rural development programme will be known?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we are working our way through the process. We know what our European allocation is, and obviously it is a reduction in comparison with the current programme because of the overall cuts at the European level. So, I am working with my Executive colleagues to make sure that we can get as much Executive funding as possible to match the funding that we have got from Europe. That is the process that I am engaged in, and it will allow me to take final decisions on how we spend and prioritise the money across the six measures. So, the final allocations are still a work in progress. We can confirm the European budget but not the Executive's contribution at this stage.

DARD: Headquarters

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the number of staff based in her departmental headquarters that have indicated that they would be willing to transfer to Ballykelly. (AQO 5834/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Following my announcement about relocating DARD headquarters to my preferred location in Ballykelly, officials surveyed the staff who are affected. The results indicate that 86% — 642 staff members — are not prepared to work in Ballykelly. However, when the wider Civil Service was surveyed, over 1,100 staff members indicated that they would like to work in that area, and a further 800 indicated that they would consider the opportunity.

I have since announced that not all the headquarter posts will relocate to Ballykelly. Some will relocate to Loughry with the Rivers Agency and some to south Down with the fisheries division. I had previously announced that Forest Service headquarters would be based in Fermanagh. More recently, as part of the development of the HR strategy for

relocation, my officials have developed questionnaires that will gather even more detailed information at individual staff level. Questionnaires have issued to Rivers Agency and fisheries division, with the remaining questionnaires to be issued by 30 June 2014. I will not be in a position to provide the full number of staff until all that work is completed.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her response. The move affects a number of staff members who live in my constituency. I understand that the Minister has made her decision against the better judgement of her Department and, improperly, in the absence of the business case. Minister, has an accurate forecast budget now been determined for this pet project of yours? If so, what is it?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member's information is incorrect. My officials are engaged with me and working with me on the project. We have been working very hard to bring forward a business case. This is something new; other Departments have not moved on this scale. We have been working our way through the business case, which has now been agreed and signed off in my Department. We are waiting for it to be discussed at the Executive, hopefully, over the next number of weeks. That is the process that we are working through. I am as committed to this project as ever I was. I will make sure that we have the move, but I want to discuss it around the Executive table now that we have signed off on the business case.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware that there is a haemorrhaging of public sector jobs from the east Londonderry area. This commitment to move to Ballykelly has now been on the boards for several years. I know that, at the early stage, the Minister was quite reluctant to support it but now appears to be fully supportive. She has given June as the date by which some movement will occur: when can we expect to see the first civil servants from DARD located in Ballykelly?

2.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: As I have said to the Member before — again, his information is incorrect — I have always said that Ballykelly was a preferred location, and I have worked on the business case to make sure that we have got to the position that we are in now. So, we have gone through the process. I encourage you to talk to your Executive colleagues, because the sooner I can have the discussion with the Executive, the sooner that we can move forward on the

move. I want to have the staff there. We have set out very clearly a workforce plan. This is a massive move and it affects quite a number of staff, so we need to have a very clear plan in place. Staff want reassurance, so the sooner the Executive agree that we can move forward, the sooner staff will get the reassurance that they want. We have clearly set it out that we will do it on a phased basis, with 400 staff going very quickly next year. The sooner we can move the process forward, the better. I want to see that, and I am sure that you can use your influence to encourage it too.

Mr McAleer: Does the Minister believe that, with the closure of the DVA in Coleraine, the move will be of benefit to the north-west?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. There has been a haemorrhage of jobs not just in the north-west but in a number of other areas because of the DVA decision. I have clearly said to the Minister of the Environment that I want to work with him on how we can respond to the closure of the DVA offices and how other staff can be accommodated throughout other Departments. I know that the Executive as a whole are very keen to do that.

The positive aspect is that there will be a group of people from the north-west who will obviously be keen to stay in that area for work, so, if there is any way that we can assist those people, I am prepared to do that. I have asked my permanent secretary to consider whether there are any options or whether any of the Ballykelly posts could be moved earlier. That would help to accommodate some of those staff. So, I am actively engaged with the Minister of the Environment and with the Executive as a whole in trying to tackle those issues.

Mr Dallat: I hope that the Minister has just given some solace to the 300 workers who disgracefully lost their job last Thursday. Can the Minister assure the House — she may have already done so — that there is a lot of empty space in County Hall, Coleraine? Will she speed up the process if that is one of the viable options? Will she set an example to the other 10 Departments so that they will come to the aid of the workers who marched through Coleraine on Friday for their rights?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. As I said, I want to play my role, and I have asked my permanent secretary to see whether there is any way that we can help to accommodate some of those staff. I have made it very clear to the Minister of the Environment that I want to help him to respond to the issue. Those people are

devastated because of their job losses, and the onus is on us, as Executive Ministers and an Assembly, to try to accommodate them in other areas. I will not be found short in my commitment to help them to find something else.

Lough Neagh

7. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why her Department has refused to publish the report into the future of Lough Neagh eighteen months after its completion. (AQO 5835/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has not refused to publish the report of the cross-departmental working group on the future of Lough Neagh. The report is still a working document, which has been updated, and further work has been carried out by DCAL during 2013. Until the report is finalised and brought to the Executive, it cannot be published.

I can advise that the interdepartmental working group was reconvened informally on 24 February and that officials are working towards the production of an Executive paper for the April Executive meeting. My Department will lead the way in taking forward the Executive's decision on the way forward, so I will be very happy to publish the paper after it goes to the Executive, which will be pretty much within a number of weeks.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her response and welcome the fact that we are due to see the publication of the report in, hopefully, a short time. Lough Neagh is of regional significance and of importance to many. What knowledge did the Minister have of the unauthorised quarrying at Lough Neagh, and what concerns does she have about its impact, particularly on the lough's biodiversity?

Mrs O'Neill: It was very clear from the consultation and is something that I have always known and many stakeholders in the lough will be very aware of that there is no overarching management plan. That is the key problem. A lot of these things can happen in the absence of any regulation or any plan for all the things that go on, whether it be sand extraction, the tourism potential on the lough, biodiversity or environmental concerns. In my opinion, one of the first things that have to happen is that we put in place an effective management plan that will help to bring together and marry all the interests on the lough and make sure that there is regulation where it is needed. That is where we are at the

moment. The problem that you have identified occurs because there is no overarching management; no one Department has responsibility for the lough. Responsibility goes across many Departments, and that is something that I would like to see coming out of the review.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister met others to discuss the report?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I have met the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to discuss the findings of the additional research that was taken forward by her Department. I have also met Gwynneth Cockcroft, the managing director from DCP Strategic Communication Ltd, along with the Earl of Shaftesbury on 3 March this year, to discuss progress and the initial findings of the report. It is important that we engage with all stakeholders in moving forward. As I have said clearly, there is a need for a proper overarching management structure, and that, at the very least, is what I want to see coming out of the report.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for her answers. Can she confirm to the House what legal advice she has taken on the issue? I was going to ask what contact she had had with the Shaftesbury estate, but I think that she said that she had met the Earl of Shaftesbury in March.

Mrs O'Neill: I have not sought legal advice. The work that we have been involved with has been a scoping exercise. It has looked at what potential avenues we can explore in respect of Lough Neagh, public ownership and the need for an overarching management structure. Quite a lot of homework has been done across my Department and the interdepartmental working group and in the significant work that DCAL has done. Therefore there has been no need to seek legal advice.

I have met the Shaftesbury estate on a few occasions, most recently just last month, to continue discussions about the future. As a key stakeholder on the lough, it wants to play a part in moving forward with any new management structure.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra go dtí seo. I listened with intent to hear that the Minister had met the Earl of Shaftesbury. I know that calls have been publicly made to acquire the rights to the lough and to take into public ownership the rights to the lough from the Shaftesbury estate.

Has the Minister set aside funding in that regard or made any case to the Executive in respect of that acquisition?

Mrs O'Neill: No, because it would be pre-emptive to do so. As I said, we have done the scoping work, and we have looked at the potential, at the problems and at how we can improve things for the future. One of the things that was said at the start was that one of the options would be to bring the lough into public ownership. So, when we finalise the report, which, hopefully, will be at the start of next month, I intend to bring it to the Executive for discussion. I have said clearly that I am content to take the lead in moving forward with any new structure that comes into play. However, if the outcome of the Executive's discussion is around public ownership and there is a decision that that is something that the Executive want to do, I will be happy to bid for the money.

Single Farm Payments: Update

9. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the payment of single farm payments based on remote sensing inspections. (AQO 5837/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: To date, 680 businesses subject to an inspection using control with remote sensing have been processed for payment. That represents the majority of businesses subject to a remote sensing inspection. My Department is working diligently to process the results of the remaining inspections for payment. It is intended that all remaining businesses will have their inspection results processed for payment by the end of April. That means that inspected businesses will have received their single farm payments two months earlier than last year and four months earlier than the year before.

In overall terms, 97.4% of single farm payment claims have been finalised since the opening of the payment window on 1 December 2013. The Department set its highest payment target ever for December 2013 at 85% and significantly exceeded it by finalising 90% of claims. More farmers received their single farm payment in December than ever before.

The value of single farm payments made so far is £260.24 million and is a vital element of farm incomes. The significantly improved payment performance this year is a welcome boost for the farming industry and the wider rural economy. However, if you are a farmer waiting for a payment, I understand the exceptional circumstances that you find yourself in, and I can only give an assurance that we are working

to have all those people paid as quickly as possible.

Mr Frew: The Minister read in her answer that the majority of farmers — 680 — involved in remote sensing had been paid: Minister, that leaves 459 cases still to be paid. That is a very slim majority indeed, and it was a very flippant response. Does the Minister realise and recognise that, because of those 459 single farm payments that are still to be paid, she has let those people down, she has let my constituents in North Antrim down and she has, once again, failed the farmers of this country?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I do not agree. I say to anybody who has not been paid that I absolutely empathise with what you are going through. I absolutely understand. I have spoken to some of those people. However, if you put it in context, the reality is that we are paying people four months earlier than ever before. This has been the best year for payments. I will always contextualise that by saying that, if you have not been paid, I totally understand the frustration you feel. I assure anybody listening to Question Time today — I have taken the steps to assure as many people as possible — that we are working round the clock to get the rest of the payments out as quickly as possible. We have had staff in on overtime. We are working round the clock to get the rest of the payments processed. You have to recognise that it has been a better year; we are way ahead compared with the past two years. Significant improvements have been made, and even more improvements will be made next year. I will put it all in the context that, although it has been a good year on the whole, with 97·4%, if you are waiting to be paid, I understand that you are under stress.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us whether the payments have been prioritised?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. I have regular meetings with my officials every other day to get updates on the numbers that have been paid. I am chasing the Department all the time to make sure that we do absolutely everything we can to get the remainder of the cases paid. We have Department staff in working overtime, weekends and evenings, all with the aim of getting the payments out as soon as possible. I give the assurance to anybody waiting for their payment that we are aiming to get to their payment as soon as possible.

Mr Allister: Is 680 processed for payment the same as 680 actually paid? Have the remote-sensing inspections that have been carried out thrown up any identified failures on the part of farmers, so that we can evaluate whether there was any worth in that inspection process? Can the Minister give us the percentage figure of problems actually found?

Mrs O'Neill: The priority at the moment is making sure that we get everybody paid as soon as possible. I will keep putting it in context: people are being paid four months faster than they were in 2011. So, 97·4% have been paid. That is a significant amount of money into the rural economy. The Member will be aware that, because of European regulations, we have to inspect 5% of cases. We moved to remote-control sensing so that we could speed things up. It is going to work. Next year, we will be in an even better position. There is no analysis at this stage of any of the issues thrown up by the inspection because we are prioritising the work and getting the payments out as quickly as possible.

As for the 680 people processed for payment, there may be some money waiting to go into bank accounts, but 680 have been processed. The button has been pressed to send the money on. It will go into their bank accounts, although, in some cases, that can take a number of days.

Rural Development Programme: Budget

10. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the budget for the 2014-2020 rural development programme. (AQO 5838/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Funding for the rural development programme is drawn from a number of sources. We know that the funding allocated to us from Europe for the next RDP is approximately €227 million. That is a 14% reduction compared with the 2013 allocation extrapolated over the seven years of the programme. As you are aware, to supplement that reduced allocation, it had been my intention to transfer 7% of the pillar 1 direct payments allocation to pillar 2 to help to fund rural development activities. My intention was that the transfer rate would have provided an additional €137·5 million approximately to the rural development programme budget. Following the legal action instigated by the Finance Minister, that option is no longer available to me. I am continuing to discuss with my officials how much money from DARD's budget can be used to fund the programme. In

the absence of any transfer of funds from pillar 1 to pillar 2, the Executive obviously have a greater role to play in making the funds available to bridge the deficit.

The RDP will be a key tool for delivering on the aims and objectives of Going for Growth, including the farm business improvement scheme proposed by the Agri-Food Strategy Board. I will need to draw in additional funding from the Executive to fully deliver on the aims and objectives outlined by the Agri-Food Strategy Board. Given the increased pressure on the RDP budget, a positive response from the Executive is now more vital than ever.

The main objective is to put together a balanced package of funding for the next rural development programme to ensure that we improve the competitiveness of our agrifood industry, protect and enhance our environment and countryside, and improve the quality of life in our rural communities.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of questions for oral answer. It is now time for topical questions, for which we will have 15 minutes. Questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn.

CAFRE: Courses and Students

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she would consider expanding the number and range of courses and the number of students at CAFRE, and to state the timescale in which she might do that, given that, recently, he, with colleagues associated with the Assembly and Business Trust, visited a number of plants engaged in the agrifood sector where, although they were impressed by the work, they learned that, in order to produce the food that is necessary for the food processing industry, one needs a good and skilled workforce. (AQT 913/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The courses that we offer at our agricultural colleges are based on discussions with the industry around identified need. The Member might be interested to know that our colleges are actually oversubscribed. We have more people applying to be part of food and agriculture than ever before. That is very positive because it shows that young people see a future in the agrifood industry. We need to support and enhance that.

As I said, in looking towards new courses, we engage with industry around its identified needs. I am very happy to do that, because there is no point in us running courses that do not provide opportunities for people when they come out with a qualification.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer in sympathy with what I was saying. Given the fact that there is such demand, will the Minister consider expanding the number of places available for people in CAFRE so that we have the skilled workforce that I am talking about? Will the Minister consider looking at that immediately, rather than leaving it for the long run?

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure you that it is more than sympathy. I have been working very closely with the agrifood industry. We have developed an agrifood strategic plan, which looks towards the future. It looks at educational and training needs and identifies all those areas. That is being done in conjunction with industry. It is not the Department telling industry what is needed; it is a joint piece of work that was taken forward between my Department, DETI and the industry.

So, we have a plan in place. We are making sure that our courses are targeted for industry needs. As I said, one of the areas that we looked at as part of that whole piece of work is education and training. There are no gaps. If there were gaps, those will have been flagged up as part of that process. There are areas in which we need to continue to work with the industry around its future growth up to 2020. We now have a plan in place that, hopefully, the Executive will support over the next couple of weeks.

Cattle: Payments

5. **Mr Wilson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she agrees with the proposal from abattoirs to reduce payments to cattle farmers by £150 for those cattle that have been resident at more than four farms during their lifetime. (AQT 915/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely not. I do not agree, and I have made that very clear to NIMEA, the exporters association, which I have had in my office in the past number of weeks. I am glad that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has also made it very clear to the association that this is not something that the industry has asked for. It was done with no consultation with the industry. It would be ridiculous to bring it in at this stage when

people are in the middle of their normal process.

We have asked them to take it off the table. Obviously, it is an industry decision for them. However, I have made my views very clear. The farming sector has also made its view very clear to them. This is not something that we want brought in. If it were to come in now, what would come next? If you bring the movements down now, next year it will be even more again. It is very clear that it was just decided, "Let us put more pressure on the farmers." That is not something that I will support.

Mr Wilson: I am pleased with the answer that the Minister has given. Can she tell us what specific action she intends to take within her Department? In fact, can her Department take any action to ensure that the industry is not hit with this further penalty, which would be very detrimental to cattle farmers in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, I have made my views strongly. I do not have any control over NIMEA, which, obviously, is outside government. I have made my views very strongly, as have all the stakeholders, so you would like to think that it will go away and take a fresh look at the decision. It indicated that it would do so, but it made no promises, and I cannot speak for it. We will see what it does. Beef prices are falling, and it is a difficult time for the farming community, and it is not acceptable to bring in this extra burden. As a former Finance Minister, the Member will be aware that the price that farmers receive for their meat is outside my control. However, on practical supports, I am keen that we ensure that we work with farmers on cooperation and on how they can work together to be a stronger voice. We can look towards improving efficiency in the chain. We can get involved with all those practical measures. Unfortunately, pricing is outside my control. I will do whatever I can to make sure that I provide a strong voice for their needs.

Rural Crime

6. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of how crime is affecting the rural community, albeit that it is a matter for the PSNI, but given that, at the weekend, I was made aware of crimes involving farm machinery and a horsebox and tack. (AQT 916/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rural crime is an ongoing issue on which I regularly engage with the Justice

Minister and the Chief Constable. We welcome the fact that a rural crime unit has been set up, and we sit on that. It is about collective work, but everyone has an individual role to play. Obviously, rural crime is an issue for the PSNI, but it is positive that we have a lot more collaboration in ongoing investigations, with everyone working together, which will lead to more successes.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answer. Setting aside collaborative working, will the Minister indicate what support the rural community is receiving on this matter directly from the Department?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, someone from the Department has been appointed to sit on the rural steering group, and we have an enforcement unit. It depends on the issues that are being dealt with. There is rural crime, agricultural crime, cattle theft and machinery theft, which is very much of a criminal nature. A lot of these things happen because of criminal gangs, and so on, so collaborative working is key to moving forward. There might be the involvement of the Food Standards Agency, the PSNI, the Department, environmental health and the councils, particularly when it comes to food crime.

Cattle: Meat Plant Cartel

7. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether a price-fixing cartel is in operation between the meat plants in Northern Ireland, leading to the current devastating effect on prices to farmers. (AQT 917/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the price that farmers receive for their produce is a commercial matter. It is nothing to do with me, but I will ensure that, when it comes to dealing with organisations such as NIMEA, which, in this instance, is trying to make these changes, I will be the voice for the farming community. I have done so in this instance. On the matter of whether there is a cartel, I suppose that that is speculation.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister not need to do a lot more than that? Is it not patently obvious that there is a cartel, and is it not the case that synchronising over the action of reducing prices for cattle with more than four movements is an indication of that collusion between the meat plants, which is all directed at driving prices down?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has asked his question.

Mr Allister: As champion for the agriculture industry, what does the Minister intend to do about that?

Mrs O'Neill: I set that out in a previous answer. We need to look at how we can grow the industry into the future. Pricing is one of many factors that impact on the farming community. I have always said that we need fairness in the supply chain. A farmer cannot be the person who is continually squeezed, but in this instance again, farmers are being continually squeezed. As we move forward, we need to be a strong voice, and we need to work together in challenging the meat processors and ensuring that farmers receive a fair price. The only way that we will have a sustainable agrifood sector into the future is if farmers are treated fairly in the supply chain. If we do not have fairness in the supply chain, the industry will be under threat for the future. I am committed to playing my role, which is why we have an industry/government strategic partnership and an agrifood strategy in place. It is why we are looking at and working together on all the issues that need to be addressed.

Cattle: Illegal Slaughter

8. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to illegal slaughter, what investigations are ongoing and how are those progressing with her Department, given that there seems to be an element in our community that will follow criminality no matter what the area, including stealing farm machinery. (AQT 918/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I think that the Member may be referring to the recent investigation into the south Armagh slaughter plant. That was very much a multi-agency operation, and the PSNI was in the lead as part of the ongoing efforts to tackle agricultural crime. The investigation covers public health, for which the PSNI and Newry and Mourne District Council have responsibility, and animal health, which is the responsibility of DARD. There was collaborative working in that investigation, too.

I always like to make it very clear that the reputation of our industry and the traceability of our food are second to none. However, unfortunately, as you said, every community has some element of criminality, no matter what it is. It is important that we tackle it head-on. There is an ongoing investigation, and I want to make sure that my Department plays its role in

whatever shape or form. In that instance, the PSNI was in the lead, and we gave them every support. Instances like that can damage the reputation of the high-quality food that we produce.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for her answer. How will we bring confidence back to the industry? How does that type of activity impact on the wider agrifood industry?

Mrs O'Neill: I have always been very keen, particularly throughout the horse meat scandal, to say that we have the highest quality of food and that we can stand over its traceability because of the farm quality assurance logo that we can put on all of it. However, instances like these, which can involve a criminal element, tarnish the reputation of our high-quality produce. We need every partner involved, whether it is the PSNI, my Department or environmental health departments, to work together to make sure that we drive it out. It causes reputational damage to the good, high-quality food that we have to offer.

Badgers: TVR Scheme

9. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the catch, test and release scheme for badgers in her efforts to eradicate bovine TB. (AQT 919/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very committed to making sure that we deal with the wildlife issue. An expansive piece of work is ongoing on the modelling for the new scheme and what we can do. My officials will go before the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development very soon to discuss that further and to give more detail. We have done a lot of scoping and modelling work and are looking at rolling the scheme out very shortly.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response, but the issue has been around for some time. This could be a case of a bit of good talk from the Minister about what is being done, but I believe that more needs to be done. When will the Minister get a handle on this very important issue and address it with some urgency?

Mrs O'Neill: If it was an easy problem to solve, I would have solved it by now. TB is a complex, multifactorial disease, and there is no simple solution or quick fix. That has been the case right across Europe. If there was a tried and tested method for dealing with TB, I would

implement it here, but, unfortunately, that is not the case.

We are looking very closely at what other areas are doing. We are working up our TVR approach, which has the support of the badger lobby. It is very important that we take on board the views of all interests. As I said, there is no simple solution or quick fix. If there was, I would have done it by now.

Reservoirs Bill

10. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to clarify whether she is willing to be flexible with the Reservoirs Bill so that small reservoir owners and community organisations will not be unduly burdened by the proposed legislation. (AQT 920/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very open to listening to the views of individuals and Committee members. I know that that issue was raised very early on in the legislative process. The simple answer is yes: I am open to listening to views as part of the Committee's scrutiny process, and I look forward to engaging with the Committee on how best we can make the Bill fit for purpose and meet the needs of local communities.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. As the Minister is aware, the Bill sets the capacity of a reservoir at 10,000 cubic metres. Will she be flexible in looking at the prospect of increasing it?

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware that that is a concern, particularly for some community groups involved in social economy enterprises on some reservoirs. It is not my intention, in any shape or fashion, to introduce legislation that will unduly burden small community groups. I am very happy for the Committee to consider that further and make recommendations. I am absolutely open to looking at those and will ensure that the legislation is fit for purpose so that, as I said, we do not unduly burden small community groups.

2.45 pm

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 5 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Haass Talks: Value for Money

1. **Mr McQuillan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the value for money represented by the £243,749 cost of the Haass talks. (AQO 5814/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I request an extra minute to answer questions 4 and 6, which I propose to group.

The establishment of the panel of parties and its deliberations under the chairmanship of Richard Haass was an essential step in the search for consensus on the issues of parades, flags and dealing with the past. When we made the initial announcement about the panel of parties, we recognised that there were no easy answers, but we were and remain committed to finding long-term and sustainable solutions that are in the best interests of the community we serve. We were privileged that figures of such international standing as Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan agreed to facilitate the talks and that they offered their services on a pro bono basis. Although the talks concluded without agreement between the five Executive parties, that does not negate the value of the process so far or call into question the necessary and unavoidable costs that it entailed.

Mr McQuillan: Does the deputy First Minister think that the revelation of the letters for the on-the-runs (OTRs) has harmed the process?

Mr M McGuinness: In the past couple of weeks, it has certainly been the subject of much discussion, but I do not think it has necessarily harmed the process. On the challenges that all the parties faced about how we deal with the past, the issue of parades and the whole issue of identity, those discussions clearly showed that there was a very large measure of agreement around the type of architecture and mechanisms that would be required to move us forward. I think that still represents the big challenge for all of us.

We are very conscious that, beginning shortly, we have a judicial review of the situation around OTRs, which, people should remind themselves, was part of a solemn agreement between the British and the Irish Governments at Weston Park. What I would like to see is a scenario that, whatever happens with whatever reviews are taking place over the OTRs, does not interrupt the essential work that party leaders have to engage in if we are to bring the Haass proposals to a successful conclusion.

Mr Nesbitt: I note that the deputy First Minister now talks of parades, the past and identity, rather than parades, the past and flags and emblems. On that basis, I am sure he heard Professor O'Sullivan recently on CNN talking in a critical manner of:

"the immature way in which some engaged on the issue of identity and how that interacted with the question of sovereignty".

Does the deputy First Minister accept that criticism?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that the contribution made by the Member to the whole Haass process and all that fell out from that in the past couple of weeks has been something to marvel at. I have marvelled at how someone could, in the latter stages of the Haass discussions, describe us as being 80% to 90% there, and then, when the First Minister and I arrive in the United States, we learn that the Member, as the leader of his party, has effectively produced all sorts of other proposals, none of which contained anything of the 80% or 90% that he had articulated in the final hours of the Haass process.

As I said to some of my friends over the past couple of weeks, I wonder how the Mike Nesbitt who interviewed me many years ago on behalf of UTV would conduct an interview with the Mike Nesbitt of today. I have to say that he has turned out to be a major disappointment in the entire process and someone who has not contributed in any serious way to finding solutions to very serious problems.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Can the Minister give his assessment of the current situation on the party leaders' meeting to discuss the proposals that Dr Haass and Professor O'Sullivan presented?

Mr M McGuinness: I am very pleased that the party leaders are going to meet later today. I do not know whether the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party will be at those discussions. I think that it would be very foolish of him not to be, but that is his prerogative. He is quite entitled not to attend. However, I think that he is swimming against the tide. The reality is that the vast majority of Members believe that we need a resolution to parades and the past and to the whole issue of flags, symbols, emblems and identity.

That represents a real challenge of leadership to all of us and to whether we believe that we have within us the ability to crack these difficult

situations in a way that delivers for our people. Yesterday, an event took place here in the North where hundreds of young people, most of them members of the Christian Churches right across the board, engaged in what I think was a useful exercise. They described it as "Haass hope". Through social media in past hours, they have encouraged political leaders in the House to sit down with each other to find solutions that will give them a future. I am determined to do that.

Social Investment Fund

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of the social investment fund. (AQO 5815/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission I will ask junior Minister Jennifer McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): On 10 February, we announced that £33 million would be invested in 23 projects that are aimed at tackling poverty and deprivation through improved community-based services and facilities. These first 23 projects have been identified as priorities by the steering groups in each local area that is covered by the nine social investment fund zones.

Draft letters of offer have issued to the successful projects, and those offers will be finalised following completion of verification and governance checks and agreement by lead partners on the conditions of offer. Lead partners will then take forward the procurement to deliver the outcomes that are described in the projects' proposals and that have been approved.

We are keen to ensure that projects are fully established and under way as soon as possible. Officials will be providing support to the lead partners to ensure that that is the case. To this end, a conference for all lead partners was held on 10 March, and that event provided a great platform to move forward with the delivery.

Mr Dunne: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. I am sure that the junior Minister would agree with me that the social investment fund has been somewhat slow in its roll-out. However, does she recognise the need for further movement and progress to see roll-out in places such as North Down?

Ms J McCann: I can give the Member an update on the North Down zone in a written reply if he wants. This has been a slow process in a sense. It was always going to be a process that was led by people in the community, who came together in the steering groups and devised the projects and priorities for their areas. As I said, we are keen to get those letters of offer verified so that the delivery plans can go ahead and the money can be put into the projects in those communities. That is why we had the meeting on 10 March with the lead partners.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the junior Minister confirm that, as the information that we all received suggests, demand has outstripped the resources that are available from the funds? Could the Minister confirm that the steering groups in each zone have prioritised all the projects?

Ms J McCann: If we had the money to provide what was needed for all the projects that came in, we would have done that. Unfortunately, we are working with a budget. I think that once the allocations were determined and sent out to the individual zones, it was up to those zones to revisit their plans and to look at their priorities. Certainly, other funding will become available.

I have said in the House before that the social investment fund will not cure everything; there will still be issues, services and projects that we need to deliver. We hope that other programmes will fit in with the priorities that the zones have identified.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I urge Members and the Minister to address the Chair so that their voice can be picked up by the microphone more clearly.

Mrs D Kelly: In all sincerity, does the junior Minister really believe that, coming into the third year of delivery and not a penny spent on project and programme delivery, the social investment fund is achieving what it said it would: tackling deprivation and poverty? How many people will be lifted out of poverty as a consequence of the £80 million spend?

Ms J McCann: As I said in my answer to the previous question, the social investment fund is part of the jigsaw of tackling poverty and disadvantage. It will not lift everybody out of poverty, as the Member said; it is unrealistic even to suggest that. There has been a lot of movement in recent months to push it forward. There were problems, but, once the allocations

had been identified and the letters of offer sent out, quite a bit of work was done by departmental officials and the steering groups to move projects forward.

Victims and Survivors

3. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what engagement they have undertaken with victims and survivors groups following the publication of the independent assessment of the Victims and Survivors Service. (AQO 5816/11-15)

9. **Mr Milne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the advice of the Victims Commissioner and the recommendations of the independent assessment into the Victims and Survivors Service will be implemented. (AQO 5822/11-15)

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

Ms J McCann: It is important that we first confirm our commitment to implementing in full the commissioner's advice and all 55 recommendations presented to us following the independent assessment. Throughout the assessment process there was extensive engagement with key stakeholders to ensure that their experience informed the final reports. We are pleased that the recommendations have been based on input received from those key stakeholders. Our intention is not to create undue delay by repeating or duplicating engagement that has already taken place, but rather to focus on taking forward the work required to ensure that further improvements are made and recommendations implemented in full. That said, we recognise the valuable input that groups and individual victims and survivors make. As such, we will ensure that engagement with key stakeholders continues during the implementation process.

Most of the report's recommendations relate to actions that fall within the responsibility of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS), with a smaller number to be taken forward by the Commission for Victims and Survivors and OFMDFM. Implementation will be overseen by the programme board established following initial concerns raised by individual victims, groups and the Commission for Victims and Survivors. The programme board comprises representatives from the Victims and Survivors Service, the commission, OFMDFM and the victims' forum. The programme board has agreed an overarching implementation plan,

which will inform individual work plans in all three organisations. Progress will be closely monitored and action taken to address any issues or risks to delivery. We remain committed to ensuring that the necessary action is taken in a timely manner and, most important, that it is the right action to address the issues identified through the independent assessment and the commissioner's advice.

Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have answered questions 3 and 9 together. I forgot to mention that at the beginning.

Mr Cree: I thank the junior Minister. She will have no doubt noted the primary criticism of the independent assessment. The lack of a fully constituted board left the VSS without strategic leadership and oversight until December 2013. That was a serious failure. Has any apology been offered to victims and survivors for that failure?

Ms J McCann: The Member quite rightly identifies a problem that was brought to our attention. A permanent chair has been appointed to the Victims and Survivors Service, with effect from last December. That appointment is for a four-year term, and the board will strategically empower the Victims and Survivors Service to move forward with improvements in development matters.

There were other issues concerning governance, and quite a lot of concern was brought to us about the individual review assessments. Many recommendations came forward, and we will ensure that all those recommendations will be put in place quickly.

3.00 pm

Mr Milne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire go dtí seo. Is the Minister satisfied that the necessary capabilities and expertise and, indeed, the will exist in the Victims and Survivors Service to ensure that all the recommendations and the advice are implemented?

Ms J McCann: As I said in my previous answer, we now have a copy of the recommendations that the review brought forward. A programme board has also been set up. Officials from OFMDFM are part of the programme board, along with people from the service and representatives from the Victims' Commission. There are also representatives from a working group within the victims forum, who are victims themselves, and Mr Alex Bunting is the proposed representative. When all those groups get together, we will be in a

much better position to make sure that the service provides for the needs and the concerns of the people who really matter out there: the victims and survivors.

Mr Eastwood: I am glad to hear the Minister say that the Department will implement the recommendations in a timely manner. How timely will that be? Is there a timeline for delivering the recommendations?

Ms J McCann: The initial programme board meeting that I have just outlined — the board that has all the sectors' interests represented — has put forward a subgroup that has been specifically tasked with looking at the recommendations. Some interim issues have been looked at and identified, particularly the form for the independent needs review. We will look at what we can implement quickly and, where we cannot implement the recommendations as quickly as we would hope, at putting in place some sort of interim service to cover the issues that we need to take a longer-term view on.

First Minister and deputy First Minister: US Visit

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their recent trip to the USA. (AQO 5817/11-15)

6. **Mr McGlone** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the investment they secured on their recent visit to the USA. (AQO 5819/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 6 together.

The First Minister and I covered a wide geographical area on both the west and east coasts of the United States during our official visit earlier this month. We were very pleased with the quality of the meetings that we attended and with the existing and potential investment opportunities that we were able to support on the west coast. Our time in Washington DC was dominated by a heavy political itinerary related to the St Patrick's Day celebrations in Capitol Hill and the White House.

In Los Angeles, we met six senior executives from HBO. We were very struck by the warm reception that we received and the enthusiasm that the company has for our relationship. It is worth noting that 'Game of Thrones' has

brought over £98 million into the local economy since HBO first came here. The spin-off in terms of increasing tourism and encouraging other production studios to come here on the back of that is very important to our economy. That evening, we attended an event to support Cinemagic, the locally based charity that gives children from disadvantaged areas the opportunity to make films that address social issues while allowing them to break down sectarian and racial barriers. We were very pleased that the event attracted over 200 guests from the film and TV production sector. We used the event to promote the local creative industry sector.

We also met Seagate's senior management board in San Jose. We had never been to Seagate's headquarters before, and we wanted to underscore our personal commitment to the company. Since 1993, the company has invested over £1 billion in the north-west, and it employs around 1,400 people. Again, we were very struck by the senior management's enthusiasm for our relationship, and they were very appreciative that we took the time to visit.

We hosted an inward investment lunch in Silicon Valley for 120 executives, where we made keynote speeches about the local business opportunity and why we have been so successful in attracting foreign direct investment. That message was underscored by the president of Concentrix, who gave his personal testimony of his experience of our economic and workforce strength. That event was attended by several potential investors, whom we were able to meet privately to encourage them to make that final commitment.

In San Francisco, we officiated at the opening of Invest NI's new offices, where we were joined by the mayor of San Francisco, Mayor Lee. On the investment front, we are very confident that a number of significant new investments will be announced in the coming months, to which we were able to add our support and commitment at a crucial stage of the negotiations.

In Washington DC, we were guests of the American Ireland Fund, along with the vice president and the Taoiseach, at its gala dinner on Thursday 13 March. We attended the Speaker's lunch with the president, the vice president and the Taoiseach on Friday 14. The latter event attracts many members of Congress. We, as always, were impressed with the welcome that we received from both sides of the aisle.

We also hosted the bureau's annual St Patrick's Day business breakfast for over 300

Washington-based contacts. That annual event in the St Patrick's Day calendar is one that we have ownership of and that continues to provide an excellent vehicle for us to engage directly with a wide range of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Cathal Boylan for a supplementary question. Three minutes has been exceeded. Thank you.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he give us his assessment of the importance of Seagate, particularly in the north-west?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said in my earlier answer, Seagate is a hugely important US company. It was established at Springtown in 1993. Along with the group's Normandale site in Minnesota, it manufactures the read/write heads for the Seagate group's final hard disk drive products. The company here is a subsidiary of Seagate Technology, which is the world's leading manufacturer of disk drives, magnetic disks and read/write heads. Seagate is one of the largest employers in the north-west. It currently employs over 1,300 people. It is recognised as a most advanced nanotechnology-scale manufacturing facility. The Springtown factory is an integral part of Seagate's global supply chain and continues to supply over one million read/write heads every day for Seagate disk drives. Indeed, it is estimated that 25% of the world's recording heads are produced from the Springtown plant. Seagate's importance as a major investor here — in the north-west, in particular — is widely recognised, with the company estimated to have invested over £1 billion in the local operation since opening in 1993.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire as ucht a fhreagra.

I know that the deputy First Minister has dwelt somewhat on the creative sectors and film industries. Can he give us any indication of which economic or business sectors are likely to benefit from the visit to the United States this year? He alluded to them earlier.

Mr M McGuinness: Given that we engaged in a very important lunch for 120 senior executives in Silicon Valley, people can draw their own conclusions about what sort of sectors we have been pitching at. Certainly, we are very encouraged by the response that we received. I think that it is safe to say that the First Minister would agree with me that it was probably the

most successful economic business venture that we have been involved in with regard to foreign trips. It was well worthwhile, in our opinion. The First Minister and I feel that we can stand here today confidently predicting that there will be some very good news from several fronts over the coming weeks and months.

Mr G Robinson: Can any of those investors be encouraged to locate in East Londonderry to help to alleviate some of the DVA job losses in Coleraine recently?

Mr M McGuinness: I have every sympathy with the Member and, indeed, all Members from that constituency. There have been a number of very serious job losses. Even historically, the loss of Seagate in the Limavady area was a very sore blow. We then had the KPL announcement, and, of course, the loss of the DVA jobs represents a serious blow for the constituency. That is why we place such a major focus on the development of the Ballykelly site.

As the First Minister has clearly indicated in previous answers, what is shaping up for that location, outside of DARD's relocation, is very encouraging. We think that much more can be developed on the site, and there is a tremendous amount of interest in it at this time. The whole purpose, obviously, is to provide employment for the north-west region. I have every sympathy with what the Member said. We are doing everything in our power and Invest NI is doing everything in its power to ensure that, where there are heavy job losses, we can compensate for that by encouraging those who might be interested in investing in the North to look at those areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dominic Bradley is not in his place.

4 Nations Play Symposium

8. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the recent visit of the junior Minister to the 4 Nations Play Policy Symposium. (AQO 5821/11-15)

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

Ms J McCann: I was delighted to accept the invitation from Aileen Campbell, the Scottish Minister for Children and Young People, to attend the 4 Nations play symposium in

Glasgow on 13 March. The symposium takes place every two years, and the aim is to have a discussion about play policies and strategies that will benefit children and young people. When I was there, I told the audience about recent developments and future plans to enhance the opportunities for play and leisure across the North. We heard from each region, and a theme that emerged was that play rarely has an obvious lead Department. However, many Departments, agencies and voluntary and community organisations provide for play in its own right and as a medium to address issues such as physical and mental health and social needs. That highlights the importance of a joined-up approach to providing for play, and we remain committed to leading a coordinated approach to play through the play and leisure implementation plan and enhancing provision through the play and leisure signature programme, on which we have committed to spend £1.6 million over the next three years.

PlayBoard presented its community-based CAN Play project, which it delivered in Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey with the support of Peace III funding. That project has inspired one strand of the signature programme that will build on the PlayBoard concept to help to support communities to provide for play.

I also visited a bus that is part of the Scottish Play Talk Read campaign. The campaign promotes the critical importance of play in the earliest years of a child's life and provides many resources to parents and carers. We would like to build on existing initiatives here to ensure that everyone appreciates that play is a vital ingredient in the development of our children through to adulthood.

The experience that we shared at the symposium will help us to achieve more and to increase the opportunities for children and young people to gain all the benefits of play and leisure.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give us an update on her visit to the Castlemilk Youth Complex while at the play symposium?

Ms J McCann: When we were in Glasgow, we took the opportunity to visit the Castlemilk Youth Complex. Castlemilk is a part of Glasgow that has a high number of families who are considered to be economically and socially disadvantaged. We were glad that those at the complex let us come in to see what happens there. As I said, Castlemilk is a youth complex on one of Glasgow's largest housing estates. It has a long track record of offering

programmes, projects, positive interventions and education to some of the poorest and most disaffected young people in Glasgow. It was a very good learning experience for us. We hope that we can bring back some of what we learned about the way that programmes are delivered at the complex. For me, one of the most enjoyable parts of the evening was seeing the way in which the young people, some of whom had different disabilities, came together at this warehouse-type building not only to meet each other but to work together through the forum of art and play. That was a really good experience for me. It was also about tackling sectarianism and drug and alcohol misuse. In my view, lessons on all those issues, which we in the North have as well, can be learned from the people at Castlemilk.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends listed questions. We move to 15 minutes of topical questions, and I call Ms Anna Lo.

Mr Allister: From one nationalist to another.

Ms Lo: May I start, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Good Relations

1. **Ms Lo** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the deputy First Minister's party can justify not supporting the Alliance Party's amendment from last week for good relations to be included in community planning in the Local Government Bill, given the commitments within the strategy Together: Building a United Community. (AQT 901/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr M McGuinness: — I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann: In answer to that part of the Member's question I would say that we believed that the amendment ran contrary to the section 75 equality issues already identified and so diluted the equality agenda.

I come back to Together: Building a United Community. Our Department is and has been involved in the different themes, and a ministerial panel will meet this week or next to discuss the way forward. Specific pilots have already been identified, particularly for young

people, such as the United Youth programme. When junior Minister Bell and I go to events for young people — I was at the event yesterday that the deputy First Minister mentioned — we listen to them, and we see that they want to move forward together. They want to move forward in equality, and they want to tell us in places such as this that it is their future that is important. We need to listen to what those young people say.

Ms Lo: I thank the junior Minister for her response. Of course it is very important that we listen to and work with young people; they are our future. How will the junior Minister ensure that the new councils live up to delivering good community relations programmes?

Ms J McCann: All government, whether local or central, should be committed to delivering equality for everyone. We cannot afford to dilute any equality gains that we have made. No one should be frightened about equality for everyone. Any right-thinking person will see that you need to build on legislation and on what is already there to strengthen the equality agenda. Equality is a basic human right. Everybody, no matter what their background, should enjoy the same access of opportunity to all services, whether they are provided by local councils, central government or whatever. Everyone, no matter what their economic, social or political background, should have the same rights.

Flags, Emblems, Parades and the Past

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what prospect of success is there from the party leaders' meetings to deal with flags, emblems, parades and the past. (AQT 902/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: I am the eternal optimist. I work on the basis that, if people are prepared to commit to serious engagement on these important issues, it is possible to find a way forward. The way forward has been pointed out to all of us as a result of the great work done by Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan, and it is critical that we all understand that we have a duty and a responsibility as leaders to lead. Leading can be a lonely post, but it can only be done from the front. That means effectively standing up to those who are determined, as some are both in my community and in the community of the representatives opposite, to drag us back. In no circumstances will I stand by and allow that to happen.

Other parties are prepared to continue with the party leaders' meetings against the backdrop of recognising that the eyes of the world are on us. We saw that in the United States in a very powerful speech by Vice President Joe Biden at the American Ireland Fund dinner and the remarks made by President Obama at the Speaker's lunch. There is a huge focus on what we are doing here, and it is critical that we engage seriously in those discussions. I am engaging in them in good faith and on the basis that the others who will attend those meetings are as serious about finding a resolution as I am.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply, but, in the light of what he has just said and of the upcoming elections, does he believe that some parties are more interested in grandstanding than in dealing with these serious issues?

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly believe that there are interest groups and politicians who attempt to use these situations for their own purposes. That is why I have to express my particular disappointment at the behaviour of the Ulster Unionist Party, whose contribution to the Haass stuff clearly suggests that it is certainly one of those parties that is grandstanding and adopting a position that, it believes, will get it preference votes in the upcoming European and local government elections.

I think that the people out there in the loyalist community and the people who have shown themselves to be extremists in recent times are not representative of where the vast majority of unionists and loyalists are coming from. People do not want anything to do with sectarianism or racism. Certainly, from our perspective in my community, people want absolutely nothing to do with so-called dissident groups who think that it is a good idea to go out and bomb people and shoot people.

We have seen examples in the House today of how efforts are made to bully people. I consider the comments made by the Member for North Antrim against the Member for South Belfast Anna Lo a continuation of the bullying that happened — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: — for example, when people in east Belfast were criticised because they were learning the Irish language. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.

Victims: Justice

3. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister agrees that any process to deal with the past must keep open the prospect of victims getting justice. (AQT 903/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Absolutely. In the course of the discussions, Haass came forward with very serious proposals. I am not here to answer for Sinn Féin — I am speaking on behalf of OFMDFM — but, going into those discussions, my party was prepared to compromise given that we had our own position on the three issues. The compromise involved the establishment of a historical investigation unit — a very serious project that is about delivering justice for citizens — alongside the independent information recovery mechanism and the establishment of an adjudicating body on how parades will be dealt with. The Member asked specifically about the past and whether people are entitled to justice, and I absolutely agree.

Miss M McIlveen: Further to that, would the deputy First Minister agree that the police and prosecuting authorities should pursue those who have committed criminal offences, irrespective of whether they are so-called friends of the peace process?

Mr M McGuinness: That raises a very serious question about whether efforts are being made to pursue people who were involved in activities in the past involving members of the British Army, the RUC and the UDR. There is a very clear perception —

Mr Allister: And the IRA. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: Members can try to interrupt all they want. The truth obviously hurts. I will not be bullied or cowed by any of the chirping from the sidelines. The reality that we are dealing with is that, if there is going to be justice, it has to be justice for all.

Job Opportunities: Silicon Valley

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following their recent visit to Silicon Valley, whether there is a possibility of job opportunities emanating from that quarter. (AQT 904/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: As I said in an earlier answer, the First Minister and I are very confident that very substantial job announcements will be made in the coming weeks and months. This was one of the most encouraging economic missions that we have been on, and it was clear from the turnout at the Silicon Valley event that there is tremendous interest in what is happening here in the North of Ireland. People absolutely get it when world-brand companies, such as Chicago Mercantile, the New York Stock Exchange, Allstate and many others, base their enterprises here and further develop them, increasing our employment prospects and their own revenues. It is hugely encouraging when we go there to see people who take a very clear interest in the propositions that we have to offer.

We are also very encouraged by the number of people who are out in Silicon Valley who have connections to the island of Ireland and themselves found it beneficial to turn up at that event and to outline for us the projects that they are involved in throughout the island of Ireland, including the North of Ireland. I think that the very positive reception that we received will certainly lead to very positive announcements very shortly.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the devolution of the maximum amount of fiscal power here is desirable and that the devolution of corporation tax will assist in bringing job opportunities here?

Mr M McGuinness: It will be no secret to anybody in the House that the First Minister and I, as well as the entire Executive, absolutely believe that it is crucial to get the devolution of these powers to our Administration. Obviously, we are impatient to do that, and we are very conscious that it has been made clear that there will be no decision on the matter until after the Scottish referendum later this year. However, it is our assessment that, even in the context of the position as it stands, we are doing a very good job in attracting foreign direct investment. We have attracted more foreign direct investment over the past couple of years

than at any other time in the history of the state. I contend that doing that against the backdrop of an economic recession that has been very cruel worldwide is a major achievement. Just think what we could do if we can get the powers to reduce our corporation tax to the sort of level that exists in Dublin; it would make a huge difference and would, clearly, bring tens of thousands of new jobs.

Goods, Facilities and Services Legislation: Age Discrimination

5. **Mr G Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they are aware of legal opinion given to NICCY and the Equality Commission by Robin Allen and Dee Masters regarding age discrimination in goods, facilities and services legislation. (AQT 905/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann: I share many of the concerns that the legal opinion offers on the legislation with particular regard to the exclusion of persons under 18 and, more generally, the protection against age discrimination in goods, facilities and services legislation. The drafters of the legal opinion also said that there would likely be justification for allowing some special measures to protect the interests of vulnerable age groups.

We see that already in the likes of the immunisation programme for children and the free travel bus pass for older people. It is important that we look at the issues raised by Robin Allen QC and Dee Masters when they brought that opinion forward.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

Private Members' Business

Social Housing: Affordable Homes

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up

speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Before we begin, the House should note that the amendments are mutually exclusive. So, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern that, in March 2013, there were 41,356 applicants registered on the social housing waiting list, with 22,414 deemed to be in housing stress and 9,878 accepted as statutorily homeless; further notes the Programme for Government 2011-15 commitment to deliver 8,000 social and affordable homes will not match the current level of need; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to begin to tackle the housing crisis by committing to deliver an additional 4,000 social and affordable homes by the end of the current Programme for Government 2011-15 period.

I am very pleased to be here on behalf of the SDLP this afternoon to highlight the severe crisis in housing, particularly social housing. The figures in the motion speak for themselves: we are in the midst of a severe housing crisis.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The SDLP has long been associated with the need for decent homes. Everyone longs to have a decent affordable home that allows them to live in their local community. It is a fundamental human right; it is also widely recognised as a key component of good health outcomes. The SDLP is putting down a marker this afternoon to the Minister for Social Development that the key objectives and principles in the allocation of social homes should be, and must remain, based on certain key principles.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: No, not at the moment. I will give way later.

It is vital that any system operates on the basis of objective housing need, that the most vulnerable are protected and prioritised and that housing allocations continue to be made under the principle of fairness and equity. In a recent answer to a question, Minister McCausland outlined that the top areas most in need of

social housing are west Belfast, where the bulletin says that 1,428 families are in need; south and east Belfast with 1,414; and north Belfast with 789. The figures drop to 314 in Bangor Urban and 274 in Westbank 1 in the north region. Therefore, you can see the huge difference between the top areas of greatest need and the remaining areas.

Of the two amendments to the motion, the SDLP is happy to accept the Alliance proposal. When Margaret Ritchie was Minister for Social Development, she took the lead in trying to ensure that homes were not segregated and that there were shared communities and key principles in support of that.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will give way in a couple of minutes. There are a few things that I want to get onto the record first.

Unfortunately, we are not in a position to accept the DUP amendment. It quite rightly highlights the need for additional homes and talks about working with housing associations. However, on more than one occasion, the Minister has said that, of the 29 housing associations registered in the North, only four have the capacity to deliver new homes. Therefore, we do not believe that that amendment will meet the current crisis.

The 'Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin' published on 29 January 2014 states:

"During the quarter ending 30th September 2013: The total number of new dwelling starts was 1,103, a decrease of 3% (38) on the previous quarter (April – June 2013) and 34% (1,681) on the same quarter in 2012. The total number of new dwelling completions"

— "completions" as opposed to new starts, and that, sometimes, is where the difficulty lies, in getting beyond the announcement and actually getting people the key for their new home —

"was 2,040, an increase of 2% (41) on the previous quarter, and a decrease of 12% (279) on the same quarter in 2012."

Only in the last monitoring round, the Social Development Minister returned over £10 million that his Department had set aside to try to buy back in areas of high demand, because, as I understand it, the Finance Minister would not accept the business case. At Committee, I asked whether the Finance Department would

take into consideration the other outcomes of housing that are more qualitative than quantitative; that includes how housing impacts on good health outcomes and on reductions in spend on temporary accommodation.

Over the past number of months, I have had occasion to meet many families. Housing is one of the biggest concerns raised with me at constituency level, particularly in the north Lurgan area where there is high demand for housing.

There is an old saying: "One thing about land is that they are not making any more of it." One of the things that this Minister can take a lead on, with his colleagues in the Executive, is to identify land that is in public ownership. Much of that land may belong to local authorities. For example, Craigavon Borough Council owns significant tracts of land. The Minister should investigate whether there are any flexibilities in dealing with the Finance Minister and the district valuer on whether that land can be transferred for housing to housing associations at a particular cost.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will give way to Mr Wilson, who asked first, at this stage.

Mr Wilson: I appreciate the points that the Member makes. However, let me ask her about the severe housing crisis and the situation now. Does she accept that when SDLP Ministers were responsible for housing, the Housing Executive estimated that 3,000 new houses were required every year, and her Ministers delivered 1,800; whereas the current Minister, with the housing need running at 2,000 houses each year, is delivering 2,000 houses this year? Surely the crisis has been resolved by the DUP Minister, while it was ignored when Ministers of her own party were responsible? I do not remember any such motions coming to the Assembly then.

Mrs D Kelly: I take the Member's point, but it is widely acknowledged that the housing crisis is not something that has happened in the past year or over the past two or three years. It happened during periods of neglect under direct rule. It has been exacerbated by the austerity downturn. I will tell you one thing: my colleague Margaret Ritchie got an extra £40 million from the Executive to build new houses from the very Member, who was then the Finance Minister and agreed that there was a need for it. *[Interruption.]* Unlike the current Minister, she did not hand back money, hand

over fist, for the Executive to divvy up among other projects.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor and must be heard.

Mrs D Kelly: It is widely accepted and acknowledged that not only is there a demand for housing but the construction industry is still at a very low ebb, and we all know the multiplier effect of money spent on infrastructure. Apparently — this is not my fact, but one contained in the information helpfully supplied by the Research and Information Service — money spent on the housing infrastructure has a greater multiplier effect than money spent on any other construction project in any other Department. That needs to be acknowledged.

More than that, inequalities prevail across Northern Ireland in housing. Girdwood is one of the finest examples of where there has been abject failure —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: — on behalf of the representatives in that area to represent all their citizens and colleagues.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: No. I am almost finished. There is only — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mrs D Kelly: There have been unaccountable delays in developing on that site. Margaret Ritchie agreed over 200 houses, and that has been filtered down to 60. That is an absolute disgrace. Not only that, but the delays in putting forward an application that will meet all planning standards is an indictment of the lack of enthusiasm —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: — that the Minister and his colleagues in that constituency have for the people of North Belfast.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will know that the Member who has the Floor decides whether they want to give way.

Mr Humphrey: It is polite to ask.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is quite obvious that the Member has no intention of giving way. Order. Let us move on.

Mrs D Kelly: I usually give way to allow Members to have something useful to say, but I have never heard anything useful come from the Member for North Belfast in this House. I acknowledge the fact that we need to build a better shared future and the fact that segregation in our housing is something that stands as a collective failure of this Executive and the failure to bring this community forward out of conflict.

We must also acknowledge the desire among many families to live near home, beside friends and family. Although many people might aspire to living in a shared community, there are also those who, for childcare or other caring arrangements, want to live next to neighbours, friends and family. That is a reality. However, I believe that much more can be done and much more must be done. If the Assembly does not recognise that there is a housing crisis, it is blinded to the facts.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "homeless" and insert:

"and that some social housing falls below an expected quality and that this exacerbates the housing crisis; further notes the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to deliver 8,000 social and affordable homes will not match the current level of need; believes that the segregation of housing contributes to an inflexible supply of housing and therefore to the housing crisis; calls on the Minister for Social Development to begin to tackle the housing crisis by committing to deliver an additional 4,000 social and affordable homes by the end of the current Programme for Government period; and further calls for the introduction of legislation to facilitate shared housing and the role it can play in tackling the housing crisis."

I support the motion and propose the Alliance Party amendment, which emphasises how poor housing quality and segregation are key contributing factors to the housing crisis. We agree with the proposers of the motion that access to adequate housing is absolutely a fundamental human right. As has been mentioned already, the number of applicants on the social housing waiting list is completely unacceptable and needs to be addressed with

serious, concerted and urgent action. There are a number of contributing factors, but, at the most basic level, there is a need for many more new homes. The proposers of the motion call on us to set our sights higher and increase the planned provision of housing by 50%. That has Alliance Party support today.

Turning to our amendment, the first additional point that I would like to highlight —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I would like to make a bit of progress — is the contribution that poor-quality housing makes to the housing crisis. I am sure that many Members will agree that, week on week, we are approached by constituents for assistance with regard to maintenance issues in their homes. In my constituency of East Belfast, I have had some very serious maintenance issues to deal with, from, at the most extreme level, ceilings that have collapsed in the rooms of older people to more routine maintenance issues not being dealt with that then become more serious issues.

My Alliance Party colleagues in North Belfast recently met the Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) project and the Equality Can't Wait residents' group who are working to highlight and address inequalities in social housing. They heard from residents living in social housing that falls far below an acceptable standard. A high number of children are living in houses and flats with cramped, damp and dark conditions. Indeed, the UN special rapporteur visited those same residents and was equally appalled at the living conditions that they find themselves in.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I would like to make some progress. Listening to the concerns from residents living in those conditions highlights a need not only to alleviate the housing waiting list but to deal with those in social housing in conditions that are simply not adequate. The Minister has himself noted recently that there has been significant underinvestment in our social housing stock in recent years, and that is a major issue that needs to be addressed. It is not difficult to draw the connection between housing falling below an expected quality and a desire by an occupant to move to a different property.

In the time that I have, I do not want to go over the difficulties with contracts that have led to major delays in essential housing maintenance. Obviously, there have been significant

problems, and I am sure that the Assembly will be keen to hear from the Minister today about the ongoing steps that are being taken to address that situation. It is clear that, if the issues around maintenance were resolved, it would help significantly in addressing the waiting list for social housing.

3.45 pm

The final part of our amendment calls for legislation to facilitate shared housing, recognising the role that that could play in tackling the housing crisis. The Alliance Party believes that all housing, streets and public spaces in every residential area must be accessible and welcoming to all. However, segregation and fear in housing continue to represent a significant barrier to the growth of a more united community and contribute to an inflexible supply of housing.

We do not believe that we will fully address problems around housing provision if we do not address the key contributing factor: our community is deeply divided. Based on the 2001 census, 91% of all Belfast Housing Executive housing areas were highly polarised, with more than 80% of one section of the community or less than 20% of one section of the community in a housing area. Issues of safety and fear continue to have a negative impact on the accessibility of social housing. There are areas that are exclusively recognised by the Housing Executive as single identity neighbourhoods, and that further reduces the availability of housing to applicants.

We are in a situation in which, despite the design of a points system to achieve fairness, people who apply from one section of the community can find themselves waiting longer because, at a particular time, there is less availability in a single identity area. There would not be that added delay if housing were provided solely on the basis of need. We must work to ensure that fear does not become a factor. Unfortunately, however, the pattern of fear and anxiety around housing choice has never been properly confronted let alone addressed by this Government. A commitment to tackling the issues that prevent people feeling comfortable living in a certain area is not a form of social engineering — on the contrary, Mr Speaker. The unfortunate and sobering reality is that the current pattern of housing is actively engineered through intimidation and exclusion, and government has proved unwilling to meet that challenge. That reality, combined with the demonstrated preference of the majority of people in Northern Ireland to live in truly mixed neighbourhoods, should

challenge us into real action to address segregation.

Changing the pattern of fear and division in housing must be a priority if we are to address fully the issues around accessibility of housing and, more widely, achieve a vision of a truly shared society. We therefore propose a shared housing review that would include recommendations on how to ensure that a commitment to promote and facilitate mixed housing can be translated into a formal duty for housing authorities, and any legislative instruments required to produce and underpin change. That review would also recommend actions over the coming years to eliminate discrimination and exclusion, and encourage the development of neighbourhoods and housing that is genuinely mixed.

We will also need to make structural and behavioural changes in public agencies that are required to manage changes in housing. That includes the removal of the de facto marketing of some housing as single identity. How to design and market housing developments to maximise the potential for sharing will also be vital, as will measures to monitor and evaluate the changes that we need to see.

We recognise that the Housing Executive has taken positive action to promote shared housing, including through its shared future programme. Some people involved in that programme have done excellent work in creating shared neighbourhoods and in promoting over 30 shared housing areas. However, the reality is that segregation remains a significant problem in many areas and continues to be a key contributing factor to the inflexibility of the supply of housing and, consequently, the housing crisis that the proposers of the motion mentioned today.

I encourage Members to support our amendment and give the Assembly the opportunity to demonstrate a willingness to meet this challenge with robust and serious action and to put it on a legislative footing. I commend the amendment to the House.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after the first "homes" and insert:

"which was deemed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to meet identified need; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue working with the housing association movement to increase its capacity to provide an additional 1000 social and affordable homes over the Programme for Government period

whilst also providing additional services to tenants."

We acknowledge Mrs Kelly's bringing the issue to the Floor. Our amendment is fairly clear and precise on the wider definition of the Minister's responsibility. It is not just about providing an adequate number of homes; it is about the type of accommodation. We refer to that at the end of the amendment, "additional services to tenants."

I start by drawing attention to the numbers in the SDLP motion, on which its mover elaborated, of those on the waiting list who are in housing stress. The housing stress category is not a precise tool, but it is commonly acknowledged to be as good an assessment as we have at the moment of those in acute need of housing. The demand can be tailored by an assessment of those in housing stress. The mover, quite rightly, drew attention to the fact that there are 22,400 people in housing stress, but what she did not say was that, six years ago, that number was almost exactly the same. I do not know whether that is a coincidence or whether the Member's omission was deliberate, but the numbers have not changed since an SDLP Minister happened to be in charge, when almost 22,000 people were in housing stress.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: Yes.

Mr Wilson: I am glad that the Member has raised this. At that stage, the Housing Executive estimated that 3,000 new houses were required to meet housing stress, yet the SDLP Minister delivered just over half that number. Does he not find it strange that the SDLP saw no housing crisis then? Now, with a Minister delivering every house that the Housing Executive says is required to deal with housing stress, there is suddenly a crisis.

Mr Campbell: I thank my honourable colleague for highlighting that. It is an unfortunate politicisation of the housing issue. Six or seven years ago — I checked this — we did not have a full-blown debate in the Assembly on the severity of the housing crisis, even though the number of people in housing stress was almost identical to now. As my friend quite rightly says, we are much closer to meeting the targeted need now than we were then, and yet there is a crisis now and there was not then. We shall deal with the politics of it, as I am sure that the Minister and others will do. The Member for Upper Bann appears to have a North Belfast fetish. I am not sure what it is.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: Further to the point about the Member's North Belfast fetish, when she was moving the motion, she made it very clear that, in North Belfast, there was little leadership on the issue of Girdwood. The Democratic Unionist Party has not played politics with Girdwood. The former leader of the SDLP, Ms Ritchie, trying to secure the leadership of her party, announced that there would not be shared housing in Girdwood. That was totally contrary to Dunlop/Toner — I suspect that that is why the Member would not let me in. Then, in the run-up to the elections in 2011, the then Minister, Mr Attwood, had a meeting on the site and invited all the North Belfast SDLP councillors and candidates — no one else; just them. We have not played politics with Girdwood. We are determined to make Girdwood a shared site. Sadly, the SDLP was not.

Mr Campbell: I thank my honourable friend for that insight into North Belfast. It certainly puts on the record something contrary to what has been in the media in the recent past.

I wish to move on. This is not just about numbers: the number of homes being provided or the number of people in housing stress. In addition, there is the issue that the Minister has raised over the past 12 to 18 months, which is the quality of existing tenants' homes. Although all the housing surveys indicate that the quality of housing in the sector is quite good, the issue of double-glazing, for example, had to be addressed by the current Minister. It was not being addressed on previous occasions, but, hopefully, it will be systematically addressed in the next year or two as he gets to grips with that legacy.

We need to try to transcend the cheap jibes of who did what and when and, "It was a crisis then, and it is not a crisis now". What we need to try to get now, and what people out there will want to see, is all-party consensus on a number of things, including trying to provide more quality homes in the sector for all our citizens, irrespective of where they live, their politics, their religion or their background. They will also want to see us looking at whether the housing stock that we have is completely fit for purpose. Is it the best housing stock that we can provide? Hopefully, the Minister will be able to answer those questions when he responds to the debate.

I want to spend a couple of minutes dealing with the Alliance Party's amendment. Again, the Alliance Party appears to want to go down more than just a shared housing route. I think that everybody wants to go down the route of trying to get housing allocated on a shared basis, where it is not a case of people in communities feeling on a religious or political basis, "We can accept a property there, but we cannot accept one elsewhere". It appears, again, that the Alliance Party is intent on some sort of social engineering aspect and trying to force the issue. Rather than people choosing to live in a certain area, they want to take the profile of shared housing accommodation and raise it to the level of people being almost forced to go to an area that they may not want to go to. Our view is that we should be trying to ensure that society evolves in such a way as there will be a very natural allocation whereby people will want to share because they do not want to live in segregated housing estates.

In coming to a conclusion, I have number of queries for the Minister, which, hopefully, he can answer in his response to the debate. How does the level of new social housing that we are providing in Northern Ireland compare with levels of social housing in England, Scotland and Wales? Are we ahead of the game, are we just on a par, or are we behind? In my view, it always does us good if we look at how we are doing compared with others and not just say, "Here what is happening", but, "Here what is happening in comparison with other locations".

Another issue is land acquisition. Obviously, there needs to be acquisition of land to build new homes. How does land acquisition in the current year compare with that six or seven years ago, for example? Again, I use that period because that is period that I used for the housing stress comparisons. What does that land acquisition enable the housing associations to build now compared with previously when, if property were acquired to a significantly less extent, they obviously could not build to the same extent?

Mrs Kelly mentioned the issue of only four associations being in a position where they could build properties. Maybe the Minister will be able to outline the extent of what those four associations are able to provide. If it was quite small and only 10% or 20%, for example, that would obviously be a matter for concern. However, if those associations are able to provide 70% to 75% of demand, as I understand they might well be, that is a significant contribution to meeting what we know is the demand out there that must be met.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Unlike some Members opposite, I do believe that the housing crisis is very real. It can be seen by the almost 20,000 people who declare themselves homeless every year or the hostels for homeless families that are packed to capacity.

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

Some of those people have been in the hostels for more than two years. They have little hope of being housed because their points level is not enough to get them one of the few social housing newbuilds that are being constructed, especially in areas of high demand.

4.00 pm

The Programme for Government promised to deliver 8,000 houses through the lifetime of this Assembly. A third of those are affordable homes, meaning co-ownership, but we should remember that the Programme for Government targets were minimum targets and that, if they were stuck to rigidly, they would not deal with the underlying problem of increasing waiting lists, which outgrow the targets that have been set under the Programme for Government. That is why we need to find the resources to urgently deal with this crisis.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No, I will not.

We need to seriously increase the level of newbuild to meet this demand. Many of us believe that the Minister is not up to this task. Does he see this as a priority? The answer must be no, it is not his priority. Over the past year or so, we have seen continual underspends in all aspects of housing, in capital and revenue, as well as in newbuild and maintenance. The housing associations have seen tens of millions of pounds of additional resources from underspend being directed to them. That money could have been better spent on building social housing to deal with waiting lists. I have no doubt that co-ownership provides a service for some people. I understand that it has a waiting list of 1,200. When you match that against the 40,000 people who are on the social housing waiting list, over half of whom are in housing stress, you can see where the Minister has got it wrong. Also, over half of those who declare themselves homeless are denied homeless status and are left to fend for themselves. The majority of those people

are young singles who either drift into the private rented sector or on to a friend's settee. Many of those people may suffer from illnesses, including mental illness. Maybe the Minister can tell me how he intends to deal with those increasing waiting lists.

With your indulgence, I will now indulge my fetish for West and North Belfast. What will the Minister say to the 3,307 people who are on the waiting list in West Belfast, 2,048 of whom are in housing stress? What will he say to the 326 families who are in hostel accommodation?

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: I will.

Mr McCausland: One thing that I will say to people in West Belfast is that they should be working very closely with the political parties who represent the area to ensure that the entire Visteon site is developed for social housing, rather than trying, in some cases, to con people by suggesting that they are for it even though they are not for it. No one knows where they stand. Will both parties come out today and tell us whether they are in favour of the social housing development on the Visteon site — yes or no?

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

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his intervention.

There are 326 families in hostel accommodation in the same constituency — West Belfast — who have little chance of being housed because even fewer houses will be built this year. There are 1,218 families on the waiting list. In the same constituency, there are 210 elderly people on the waiting list, many of whom may never see a suitable home.

Let us look at North Belfast, and again, I am indulging in my fetish. The Minister is more interested in redrawing housing boundaries to hide the true extent of need in nationalist communities than he is in dealing with the housing problem.

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

Mr Brady: I think that you will get your opportunity, Minister. Maybe you can explain this at the relevant time. Can he say why money was spent to refurbish houses in the

lower Oldpark, which were used to transfer people from that local or neighbouring community? Can he possibly tell us what happened to the homes that they left? While he is at it, can he say whether some allocations were made to people with no points at all? It is my understanding that at least five of those moves, three transfers and two from the waiting list, had no points at all.

That is in stark contrast to communities in North Belfast, where people are sitting with 150 points in a management transfer and still cannot get a home. This manipulation of housing need denies those in most need any chance of being housed because money is being redirected from newbuild. The Minister has serious questions to answer about that. He blames everyone for their problems except his Department. He says that housing associations are not up to building additional newbuilds, but they would tell a different story. On numerous occasions, they have asked for certain barriers to be removed so that they can deliver, but the Minister and his Department ignore that. He has thrown a smokescreen over these issues. He blames the Housing Executive, which he seems intent and on course to dismantle. He blames housing associations but can see no fault in his own Department.

In Derry and Strabane, we have seen increasing waiting lists, with newbuild provision coming nowhere near what is required. The Derry district housing plan has said that 3,000 people are on the waiting list, but it plans to build only 788 houses in the next three years when what is required is upwards of 1,500 houses a year in Derry alone. Then you have areas such as Newry and Armagh in my constituency, where there are continuing and growing waiting lists. At the moment, the waiting list in my area of Newry is 1,965.

The Minister needs to get real in dealing with the issue. He needs to recognise that many believe that his present agenda is sectarian and manipulative and is impacting on those who are most in housing need. Rather than trying to hide from the housing crisis, he should develop a strategy that truly deals with the growing waiting lists.

Mr Swann: I have heard from both sides. They have said that it is and is not a crisis and both have tried to say what Minister was and was not responsible. I echo Mr Campbell's comments and look forward to the Minister's solution to providing houses for our constituents.

The Housing Executive's net stock model has indicated that there is a need for 1,900 homes

to be built each year. However, because there have been several years since 2001 when that target was not met, it is now considered by many, not least the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, that an additional 600 need to be provided each year to make up for the previous years' shortfalls. Having too few social homes will not only precipitate problems on the waiting list but will mean that available properties are often in the private rented sector, which is often more expensive.

Housing is one of the main issues that I deal with in my constituency office, and that is the case for many in the House. Like others, I will enjoy the same fetish for putting forward the case for the North Antrim constituency. There are 2,283 people on the social housing waiting list in North Antrim and 1,250 designated as being in housing stress.

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

Mr Swann: Certainly.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member accept that, if Sinn Féin was to allow the welfare reform proposals to go through the Assembly, it would immediately — in the next year — release sufficient money to build 1,050 of the homes that he is talking about and which are needed in North Antrim? Will he further accept that, when we hear Sinn Féin describing a very real housing crisis, while at the same time throwing money back to the Exchequer, we can see the extent of its hypocrisy on the issue?

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

Mr Swann: I hear the former Minister's point about money. However, I also know that the Minister for Social Development handed back £8 million and put it into co-ownership. There might have been an opportunity to use that £8 million to build social housing.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. In one of the answers to the questions in our pack, the Minister stated that financial constraints were not the issue.

Mr Swann: I fully appreciate that. However, I started with a fetish for North Antrim, and I intend to get back to it. I know that other Members want to get in, and they will have time to do that.

When I listed the people in housing stress and those on the housing waiting list, the thing that

struck me most about North Antrim — many consider it to be one of the most affluent rural constituencies — was that, outside Belfast and Londonderry, the Ballymena Northern Ireland Housing Executive district office has the highest number of people registered as homeless, with 665 full-duty applicants. In this day and age, it is staggering to think that so many people in one constituency could be registered in that way.

The solution — Mr Campbell raised it — is in land becoming available. In Ballymena, we have the St Patrick's Barracks site, which has long been on the agenda for social housing. When I was elected MLA, 489 people were on the waiting list for the 47 houses that were to be built there. Those have been reinstated and reallocated. The plan for the next phase was to build another 10 homes, but that was reduced to two homes due to planning issues as they did not have enough access to public space. I have met the Minister of the Environment about that issue. The St Patrick's Barracks site has nearly 100 acres, yet they do not have enough public space to build another 10 homes, which would solve the problem.

I have pushed OFMDFM to release the rest of the St Patrick's Barracks site and was told recently that no firm decision had been taken about the timing of the transfer of the site. If that site was made available to DSD, and, as Mrs Kelly said, funds are not an issue, there is an opportunity to provide housing for those 665 full-duty applicants who are listed as homeless.

In the motion and the amendments, two phrases caught my eye: "expected quality" and "services to tenants". One of the Minister for Social Development's initiatives was the regeneration programme to build successful communities. In his words, and I quote from a press release following the launch of the lower Shankill/Brown Square project:

"In the past there was a tendency to simply bulldoze the empty properties, clear the site and walk away. But a bulldozer and some grass seed is simply not good enough."

He went on to say:

"I want to see a more radical and strategic approach."

He then said that he wanted to see an approach that truly engages with local people to create thriving and successful communities. He further said:

"this pilot programme will allow us to try out a range of initiatives to see what works best."

Finally, he said:

"These six pilot areas ... have good potential for recovery with available land or properties that can be refurbished."

The Doury Road in Ballymena was the only one of those pilot projects outside the greater Belfast area. It was with shock and complete awe that the 22 families who live in that area on the Doury Road received notices to quit last week, because the Housing Executive is moving into that area to bulldoze those homes. I ask the Minister at this stage —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: If you give me a wee minute. I ask the Minister at this stage to intervene with those families because, over the weekend, I have had families in turmoil, not knowing what the direction is. I have had the community association in turmoil, not knowing what the direction is. Minister, my time is limited, but I ask you to meet those people.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for giving way. I will quickly say that I have already been approached by my party colleague Paul Frew in regard to that matter, and I have given him some guidance as to what might be done in that regard, because I think that there was some awkwardness in the way that the Housing Executive handled it.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for that clarity. Perhaps he could provide all the elected reps for the area with that same information, because those 22 families there, homeowners and Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants, have received notices from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to evacuate their properties.

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

Mr Swann: Even a 70-year-old woman was in tears, not knowing what her time was going to be in her own home.

Mr Clarke: I support the amendment in the names of my party colleagues. There is a bit of an irony in the debate today in terms of the numbers. I think that the Member who spoke previously got it right when he asked who is

right and who is wrong. However, the facts speak for themselves. Even the Member from Sinn Féin who spoke talked about the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government is agreed by all parties. Not only did the Minister meet the target set in the Programme for Government, which was agreed by all parties, but he exceeded that target.

I think that we have possibly failed to look at the reason for some of the homelessness and the housing stress. Some of that has been because of the failure of previous Ministers to keep houses up to a good standard so that people live in a good standard house that is fit for purpose. We were all inundated with people due to poor maintenance regimes in the past, and I think that the current Minister is still playing catch up in getting that programme up to speed to bring those houses up to a modern standard. Some of them are even without suitable heating or, as other Members have said, double glazing.

I listened to what the Member who spoke previously said about that particular barrack. I think that it is a good proposal, but, it is interesting, because, when I look around the Chamber, I think about my constituency, where there have been schemes put forward by the Housing Executive or some of the associations, and there is not one political party in the Chamber today that has not opposed some of those applications. On the one hand, we have a reasonably good scheme brought forward by a housing association or the Housing Executive, but then we have representatives from each of the parties coming out to oppose them because of Nimbyism as some of the people who live in those areas do not want new houses.

I think that we have to get real. The Minister has a challenge, and he has taken on a challenging role in what he has to do, given the legacy issues that he has taken on from previous Ministers. As representatives, we have to be real as well. When applications come forward in constituencies, we have to bear in mind the applications that we are working on in our own offices in terms of where people want to live. When those applications come forward, we should be more supportive, as opposed to just joining the Nimbyism factor.

The other thing that gets me is when we see people who are in housing stress. In my office, people come up with different suggestions about the problems they face, but when an offer of a house comes, if it is not in the particular street that they want, they turn it down. Sometimes you have to question how accurate

the statistics are. If a person was in housing stress or was lying on someone's settee night after night waiting on a house coming up but turns down their third offer, I think that you have to question the reality and what the real need for some of those individuals is. In my opinion, some of those numbers are inflated.

4.15 pm

We all could agree that there is a need for housing. However, the Minister has driven that forward over the past couple of years and did, as I said at the outset, exceed the target. I encourage the Minister to keep on that path and try to deliver more quality homes, but not to take the focus off homes that people have lived in for many years.

The Member for North Antrim referred to the Doury Road, where people have been moved out. I understand the plight of those people but we cannot forget about the people in my constituency — your constituency, Principal Deputy Speaker — who are living in prefabricated homes. Those houses were built probably 60 or 70 years ago and are not up to current standards. We have to thank the Minister for the work that he is bringing forward to bring the quality of those houses up. It would be nice to get new houses for everyone, but a lot of our elderly population have grown up in a particular area and are passionate about it. All they want is their house brought up to a good standard so that they can live in that area and not be forced to move because the Housing Executive has failed to bring that house up to current standards.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion is on an issue on which all parties should be able to agree. Unfortunately, there have been attempts by some to shed responsibility or point the finger elsewhere. I do not think that is terribly helpful. It is not helpful in the debate and it certainly will not get a single person who is homeless or in housing stress a new home.

We need to look at the situation that we find ourselves in. People may want to bandy about figures for those on waiting lists, those who are homeless and those who are spending an inordinate amount of time in hostels. We may query some of the figures on housing stress, but no Member can sit here today and safely say that they are not aware of people in their constituency on whose behalf they have advocated because they are clearly in need of a home or are living in housing stress. I imagine that not one Member could do that. It would be

a wonderful constituency where not one person needs a home or a transfer to a better home, a more appropriately sized home or an area where they can get family support. It is a bit foolish for Members to say that this or that figure is incorrect or exaggerated. The reality is that every MLA and all parties in the Chamber experience, on a day-to-day basis, working on behalf of constituents who need to be rehoused or given a home. As a group of parties, we should be working together to identify what the need is and, of equal importance, what the barriers are. We have all been told what many of the barriers are, and Members have addressed them today.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I would prefer not to. I know that people will want to intervene, but everybody will have the opportunity to speak. Thank you.

At the end of the day, we have all been advised about this. For example, representatives of the housing association movement have come along repeatedly to the Social Development Committee to share their belief that there are quite a number of barriers, whether land procurement, Nimbyism or planning permission. A whole range of issues have been outlined as barriers. The Minister and the Department have been asked repeatedly what is being done to tackle and remove those barriers. I am not satisfied that I have heard all the answers I need to hear to know that enough has been done to remove those barriers.

I take Sammy Wilson's earlier comment on welfare reform with a pinch of salt. The Member is not that long on the Social Development Committee, but has repeatedly criticised the Department for its failure to spend the budget available to it. He has to take that up with his party colleague the Minister for Social Development. The Member, a former Finance Minister, made it very clear at a number of Committee meetings that it would not be unusual if the Department found it difficult to get the same level of budget in future because of its repeated failure — those are the Member's words, not mine — to spend its budget. It is clear that, in the past year alone, quite a lot of criticism has been levelled at the Department due to money not being spent. That money was made available from the Executive to deliver on the Programme for Government commitments. Money from maintenance contracts and the newbuild programme was returned or redistributed elsewhere.

My colleague Mickey Brady made the point that we are not against co-ownership. However, a lot of money was redirected towards co-ownership, which is not, in effect, meeting the housing need.

Our party will support the motion, which is important. It is quite interesting that the Social Development Committee will, this Thursday, have a strategic discussion on the issues that it needs to deal with. Housing is one of the key issues that the Committee has unanimously agreed we need to get some focus and attention on.

Ultimately, as far as I am concerned and as far as Sinn Féin is concerned, the housing need is clearly not being met. We have asked the Department repeatedly to give us an example. I accept entirely that there are sometimes competing requirements and competing objectives. For example, we need to get people new houses or transfer them to other houses, and we also need to regenerate areas. However, there has to be some level of proportionality, and some criteria laid down, that allows the Department and the Minister to pursue policies, whether to regenerate an area or to build new homes in areas of need. Quite clearly, the question has never been answered as to whether there are set criteria for determining the level of budget that will be spent to regenerate an area within which there is absolutely no demand for housing. We have other areas where there is a huge demand and a huge waiting list, where people have not been given the opportunity to have a home, never mind the luxury of moving to another home.

We support the motion, and we are against the DUP amendment because it sells the issue quite well short.

Mr Humphrey: At the 2011 election, the largest issue by far on the doorstep was housing. The provision of good and affordable housing is absolutely essential. I welcome the SDLP's motion, because it is a civil right that everyone should get a good and affordable house. I also welcome the fact that there is a Programme for Government commitment for 8,000 new homes over this term.

However, I also welcome and pay tribute to the Minister. As a result of his decision, he has introduced the housing repossession task force and the housing supply forum. He has driven down efficiencies in his Department, which has meant that more investment is going into housing and across the Department. That will ultimately deliver more and better homes. There is also the provision for double glazing in

homes and the warm homes scheme, all of which have been introduced by this Minister. I am sure that when the Minister comes to speak, he will update the House on the houses delivered and the figures for houses that will be delivered during the remainder of the term.

I am confident that the newbuilds are ahead of target. As Mr Campbell said, compared to other parts of the United Kingdom, the ratio of newbuilds in Northern Ireland is an important figure. I look forward to the Minister touching on that during his contribution. Another key point is to address the issue of housing need and reallocating. I understand that some 8,000 properties are reallocated every year, and that is a major issue. All of us in our constituency offices deal with the completion of change of tenancy repairs in many properties that are reallocated. It is vital to ensure that once a property has ceased with a tenant, it is then repaired and left in a fit state to be reallocated to the new tenant as soon as possible. Any delay ultimately costs money to the Northern Ireland budget.

Another key point is the figures for need. Given what my colleague from East Antrim said during an intervention, it would be interesting to get the figures for need now as opposed to the figures for need in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 — right through to the election.

As I said, very clearly housing was the biggest issue on the doorsteps in North Belfast. Mrs Kelly talked about Girdwood earlier, and there was also a contribution from Mr Lyttle in relation to PPR. Let us deal with the facts on that issue. PPR came to North Belfast and spoke to officials and dealt with figures from the North Belfast Housing Executive office. That is one office out of four. It did not look at the figures for Shankill, Newtownabbey 1 or Newtownabbey 2. In September 2013, the waiting list in North Belfast was Protestant 2,059 and Catholic 1,986, which equates to 51% and 49% respectively. For housing stress — remember, you need 30 points plus to be in housing stress — the figures were Protestant 821 and Catholic 898, which equates to 48% and 52% respectively.

What was most unhelpful about the report was that it suggested that, in north Belfast, 83% of the people on the waiting list and 80% of the people on the housing stress list were Catholic. It used those jaundiced, gerrymandered figures, which totally skewed the actual position. Sadly —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I will surely.

Mr McCausland: Does the Member agree that, in relation to the PPR project and the PPR publication on housing figures, there are three important issues? First, they chose a boundary for their work that excluded the vast majority of the Protestant community in north Belfast. Secondly, when they came to north Belfast with the UN rapporteur, they took that rapporteur only to one nationalist area and did not engage at all with any Protestants. Thirdly, they could not even get their sums right: the figures that they produced do not even add up. They obviously need a calculator.

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

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for his contribution. I was about to say that constituents of mine in Woodvale, Crumlin, mid-Shankill — some of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland and in this kingdom — Queen's Park and Rathcoole were totally ignored, and their rights were totally ignored.

The SDLP has now found a new interest in social justice. I welcome that because, for 13 years, the former housing Minister, Mr Attwood, held up Somervale and prevented 35 social bungalows being built there for old and disabled people. He agreed to put new houses in the Shankill estate, but only if 20 houses were knocked down would there be progress in that area. Of course, the lower Oldpark has been mentioned. The lower Oldpark was left like something from the Blitz. Quite frankly, it has to be remembered that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a duty and responsibility not just for housing but for regeneration. That area was consistently totally ignored by Governments.

When it comes to dealing with Girdwood, as I have said before, the SDLP has used it as a political football. Margaret Ritchie used it in her leadership election.

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

Mr Humphrey: Alex Attwood used it as a political tool in 2011, ignoring the Dunlop/Toner report. If the Member really wants to understand Girdwood and talk about leadership, the MLAs and the MP for North Belfast agree a way forward —

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

Mr Humphrey: It was agreed to by one Alban Maginness —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Humphrey: He signed up to it.

Mr Eastwood: I will try not to get as excited as some Members who have spoken about gerrymandering and things like that. We could talk about gerrymandering all day if you want, Mr Humphrey. In fact, it was decisions on housing made in this very Building that created the civil rights movement and the real need for it. Thank God, we ended up with a Housing Executive that would do all in its power to ensure that everybody got a house on the basis of their need, not their second name. We will not take lectures on gerrymandering from the Members opposite.

Clearly, housing is a very emotive issue in the House. It is also a very emotive issue in my constituency, for a very good reason. Never mind the historical context that we talk about around the civil rights movement, over 50% of the people who come into my office — I am sure that it is the same for other MLAs — are there because they are in housing stress. Many of them are in housing and family crisis. Therefore, the issue is not just for politicians to beat each other up with or to have battles across the Chamber. It affects people in a very real and significant way.

The situation will only get worse if we end up with the bedroom tax and the changes to the welfare system that some Members want to happen. Is it not bad enough that there are over 3,000 people in Derry on the waiting list? In fact, there are 1,123 people in Collon Terrace, which represents an increase of 54.5% in the past five years; the waiting list in Waterloo Place is 1,220, an increase of 49.3% in the past five years; and there are 943 people on the waiting list in the Waterside, which is an increase of 8%. I know that Members do not want to hear me bandying figures about, but behind every one of those figures are real people who are suffering real stress.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: I will, yes.

4.30 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member not think it ironic that, as we discuss the housing crisis here, there is an event in the Long Gallery about young people and homelessness?

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

Mr Eastwood: The Member is right: there is an event going on. That highlights the very fact that we need to talk about these issues. Perhaps these are the issues that we should get excited about rather than spending six hours talking about flags, as we did last week. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Eastwood: Sorry, do you want to come in?

Mr Campbell: You did not want to get excited. You were telling everybody to calm down.

Mr Eastwood: Do you want to get up and speak? If you do, I will sit down.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member said that he would like people to get excited about the housing crisis, as his party has described it, even though it did not get excited enough to table anything six years ago, when the same number of people were in housing stress. At the start, he said that we should not get excited, and now he is saying that we should. Why did you not get excited enough to table a motion six years ago, when your party was in charge of the Department?

Mr Eastwood: It would have been pretty difficult for me to do so six years ago because I was in Derry City Council; I was not in here. What we did when we had the Minister was build record numbers of houses to try to tackle the problem. We did not have the luxury of having the Finance Minister or control of the Executive, but we did everything that we could. What we need to do now —

Mr Campbell: No motion.

Mr Eastwood: You had your chance, and I am sure that you will have your chance again *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Eastwood: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The point is that we need to be far more ambitious about this. This is a crisis. I know that, whether it is the health service or whatever else, the Members opposite

want to deny that we are in a crisis. This is a crisis for all the people who come into my office and your office every day of the week. I come from a constituency where the unemployment rate has more than doubled in the past five years. The impact of unemployment and repossessions on the housing waiting list is nothing short of a crisis. The Executive and the Minister need to act urgently to deal with this real difficulty.

It was Mr Clarke, I think, who said that all parties had agreed the Programme for Government: the SDLP did not.

Mr B McCrea: To avoid raising the temperature, I will not talk about gerrymandering and all the other issues that were raised at the start. If we are to keep the temperature low, maybe we should keep to the topic.

One of the things that I am interested in — perhaps the proposer of the motion will address this in her winding-up speech — is why we need social housing. What is the principle? People say that we do not have enough, that there is a crisis, that there is too little or whatever. However, many people come to me and ask, "Why are we giving people a free house? Why do they not go and get a job? Why do they not rent or do something else?". It looks to them as though they get the best of all possible worlds. The people asking these questions are mainly taxpayers, ratepayers or whatever, and they ask, quite rightly, what the justification is for having social housing.

One of the interesting things raised in the debate is why the rents are currently below market value.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: In a moment.

Why are they below market value? Is that intended to be a long-term subsidy, or is it the case that we want to get to the stage at which there is equalisation between the public sector and the private sector? I give way.

Mr Eastwood: I am interested to hear that the Member is bemused about why we need social housing. Has he ever been on the dole or needed social housing? A lot of people have and know very well why it is essential.

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

Mr B McCrea: I suppose that I could answer that by saying that I have been on the dole and I am the lead sponsor of the event in the Long Gallery that you referred to. I spent some time sleeping rough on my own just to see what it was like, so I have an interest in the issue. What I am saying to the House is that people need to make the argument. I do not know whether the Member has had any experience of it. He had five or six minutes before me to make his case, but he was still talking about gerrymandering. I do not know why he did not take the opportunity. It comes back to this: we need to make the argument. Arguments can be made about the long-term benefits to society and to individuals and about why it is a good thing for all of us to provide. However, I can tell you that the argument is not yet made out in the wider world, and we should be looking at it.

I also wonder about that when we deal with housing, and I look to the amendment, which talks about social housing falling below the expected quality. It would be interesting to me if we were going to change building control standards for all newbuilds. That would raise the building quality of all houses to the highest possible standard so that we did not have to spend so much money heating homes with expensive oil and suchlike. This is another area where we might be interested in seeing how that might work.

I am also interested to know about refurbishing the existing stock. There was a time when we would take over a house and do everything that had to be changed. We would do the windows, the doors and the draught exclusion. We would make sure that we did it all in one go, but that, apparently, was too expensive. Now, we seem to have a series of initiatives: you do the windows in one year; the draught exclusion in the second; and you change the heating in the third. It goes round in a circle. It seems to me that some strategic vision is needed.

When I travel to the Shankill and in and around the area, crossing over to the Falls or wherever, my perception is that there seems to be some high-quality housing stock. It seems to be pretty good. I wonder where the crisis actually exists, which brings me nicely to what I saw just an hour ago when I introduced the conference on homelessness for the Council for the Homeless NI. What struck me first was that the Long Gallery was absolutely packed. All of us in the Chamber will have been to events in the Long Gallery, but seeing it absolutely full the whole way back with people from all parts of Northern Ireland — they all seemed to be fairly young — left me struck by the feeling of helplessness that they have. They are looking

at this and going, "You know what? I don't really know why I am here. Sure, none of you will do any good. Who are you anyway, and what's this?". That is a knock-on effect of the poverty in our society, which is getting worse as we get more stringent controls coming in through welfare reform. We have to find a way of dealing with this issue.

Without wishing to offend anybody, it strikes me that that is the homelessness that people think of when they hear the term. These are young people who are living rough. They have nowhere to go, no way of getting a job, no way of getting out of the poverty trap and no way of getting to anybody that might help them. They are sitting around; they are lost to our society. That does not seem right. I think that there would be general support for such people.

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

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The issue, when it comes to this, is that people need to make the argument for social housing. It should be part of an integrated plan, and there should be a strategic vision. I look forward to what the Minister has to say on the matter.

Mr McCausland: The motion provides an opportunity to outline the good progress being made by my Department. I also welcome and support amendment No 2. My Department's efforts are aimed at ensuring that everyone in Northern Ireland has the opportunity to access good housing at a reasonable cost. The housing market has been through a turbulent time over the last seven or eight years. The result has been very low levels of new house building in the private sector and, at the same time, an increased demand for rented housing, whether in the social or private rented sector.

Although the motion deals specifically with social and affordable housing, housing supply is not confined within those narrow parameters. During my period in office, I have taken significant steps to meet need across all housing tenures and have responded to the challenging economic situation with the first ever housing strategy for Northern Ireland. The strategy promotes a joined-up approach and actively strives to address the challenges that we face across all tenures.

Where private renting is concerned, I have brought forward new initiatives in an effort to improve this sector, for example, the tenancy deposit scheme and mandatory landlord

registration. In the biggest housing sector — the owner-occupied sector, which makes up nearly 70% of households — I continue to support and fund the mortgage debt advice service, which has helped over 4,000 people in mortgage difficulty. Also, last month, I set up the housing repossessions task force. Underpinning all the work on market housing is the recently established housing supply forum, which I have asked to identify viable ways of increasing housing supply in Northern Ireland. I look forward to hearing its proposals in due course.

Turning briefly to amendment No 1, I will say that my housing strategy recognises the high quality of most social housing stock, identifies ways of addressing poor stock and recognises the importance of long-term investment to maintain stock to a high standard. On shared housing, I have committed to extending successful work to promote shared communities and will create 10 new shared neighbourhoods over the next few years. However, legislation and social engineering are not the way to go about this: the work must be about winning hearts and minds and supporting communities that want to become or to stay shared.

I will now turn specifically to social and affordable housing. I want to nail down the facts on the motion's muddled thinking about what is and is not possible under the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government commits me to delivering 8,000 social and affordable homes by 2015. Funding is allocated on that basis. That is my starting point, as it is for every Department. However, my intention is to go well beyond those original targets. The fact is that efficiencies have been found, and the result is that significantly more new homes will be delivered than was specified in the Programme for Government. By the end of this month, I anticipate that up to 6,800 social and affordable homes will have been delivered. At the start of the Programme for Government, the expectation was that there would be 5,500, so we have gone well beyond that target. I plan to deliver a further 2,500 new homes next year. That will give a total of over 9,000 new social and affordable homes, compared with the original target of 8,000.

Let us be clear about two things. First, delivery is already ahead of target, and, secondly, we are well on course not just for meeting the target but for going well beyond it. That has to be good news by anybody's analysis. Affordable housing in particular has exceeded expectations, but social housing is also delivering beyond the original numbers, and we

are doing much better than the rest of the United Kingdom. My colleague Gregory Campbell mentioned comparisons. The comparison is this: in England last year, one new social house was provided for every 60 applicants on the waiting list; in Scotland, there was one for every 49; in Wales, there was one for every 44 on the waiting list; and, in Northern Ireland, the figure was one for every 30. So, in relative terms, Northern Ireland is performing twice as well as England. However I am not complacent; of course more needs to be done. The waiting list figures clearly show that, and of course we would like to deliver more. It was always the same under previous Administrations, where budgets constrained what we would ideally like to do. Those who tabled the motion say that an additional 4,000 social and affordable homes are needed next year. Those are big figures. I do not know where they come from, but I would be keen to hear the rationale for how that figure was arrived at.

The Housing Executive has the statutory responsibility for assessing need, and its evidence comes from the common waiting list and the net stock model. Excluding transfers, we now reallocate around 8,000 properties every year to new applicants. That means that well over one third of those in housing stress at any point in time can be accommodated through existing stock alone. However, it is clear from the waiting list figures that there is an ongoing need for new homes in the social sector.

The net stock model currently estimates that there is a need for 1,200 new social homes in each of the next five years. The Housing Executive has also built in an extra provision of 800 per annum to take account of the backlog that has developed over the past decade, including the four years that the SDLP had charge of the Department. It concludes that, going forward, we need to build 2,000 new social houses per year. That is not my figure; it is the Housing Executive's figure. Rather than invent figures out of thin air, those are the figures that inform my decision-making process. At this point, it might also be worth highlighting —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: No, I will press on, as I have a lot of points to answer.

4.45 pm

It might also be worth highlighting outputs in previous years to put it into perspective. In the four years before I came to office, the Housing Executive was estimating a need for 2,500 and, at one point, 3,000 homes a year. However, what was provided in that period under previous Ministers fell far short of what was needed. In one year, the shortfall was as high as almost 1,900 houses. There was never a year when output came anywhere near to matching the requirement identified by the Housing Executive, including those years under the SDLP when it never came near its target.

However, I plan to turn that around. Plans that I approved in December are predicated on delivering 2,000 new social homes in each of the next three years. For the first time in many years, the numbers are in line with the Housing Executive's recommendations. Funding is already in place for 2014-15, and I shall be making a strong case and bidding for resources to ensure that that level of output can be maintained. The House can be assured that I am committed to delivering greater numbers of social housing for Northern Ireland.

However, delivery will not be without its challenges. During the downturn, up to 25% of the social housing development programme came from buying up, at keen prices, stock that developers could not otherwise sell. Such stock is no longer available in large numbers. In the past, buying off the shelf was one of the main ways of providing homes. However, it is no longer possible, and we now need the housing association movement as a whole to step up a gear.

In recent years, 70% of the social housing programme has been delivered by just four housing associations. There are 25 in total so, clearly, many are not getting involved. They could step up but they have chosen not to. My Department is actively engaged with the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations to see how the capacity of our housing associations can be improved. Rather than pluck figures out of the air, I much prefer to work with those who are involved to see how we can improve the situation.

In tandem, I am looking at other options for delivery. Land, in particular, has been a recurring problem. There is no doubt that sites have become more difficult to acquire, but, at the same time, significant progress has been made. Just a few years ago, housing associations were acquiring very little land in advance. This year, however, my Department has made it possible for associations to acquire half the land needed to start next year's

programme. That will be the strongest housing association land bank ever to have been assembled. My intention is to make sufficient finance available to increase the land bank so that future delivery is put on a firmer footing.

Related to that, sadly, we see many instances where there is opposition from residents and, indeed, elected representatives, to social housing schemes proposed in areas of high housing need — I mentioned Visteon earlier — even though land is available. That is despite those same elected representatives lobbying me to deliver more social housing. I am sure that Members cannot fail to see the irony of that situation, which seriously delays, and can ultimately result in the abandonment of, schemes in areas of high housing need.

I now turn to points made in the debate. There are 25 housing associations. Apart from eight that are suspended for various governance reasons, the remainder can develop if they want to. The problem is ensuring that they have a desire to step up to deliver more; unfortunately, some have chosen not to. About 12 or 13 housing associations are actively engaged in development, and four of the biggest — Apex, Clanmil Housing, Oaklee Housing Association and Fold — deliver 70% of the programme.

I have been working with associations strenuously and in a focused way on other barriers. I have already covered the issue of land from a planning perspective, and my officials are supporting housing associations to navigate the planning system more effectively because planning, which is under the control of the SDLP, is a key issue. I have removed much of the red tape around the rules for delivery, and I am reviewing the procurement strategy, so a lot is being done. I will continue to focus on supporting housing associations to deliver.

Mrs Kelly raised a number of issues, and she spoke about Girdwood. I see that she has left us, but, when Alban Maginness bought into and agreed to master plan for the area at that time, he was coerced by his party into walking away from it. The SDLP, in its use of Girdwood, was sectarianising the estate to make sure that it was wall-to-wall housing for nationalists. That is how it was presented to the nationalist community. The vision was for a shared site where people could work together and share.

Chris Lyttle mentioned the UN rapporteur, who I notice one English newspaper described as the mad Marxist from Brazil, and the PPR project. I have already dealt, in an intervention, with the

fact that the figures do not even add up. They really do need a calculator.

Mickey Brady made points about lower Oldpark. That community was decimated during the Troubles. IRA terrorism drove people out of that area, and it ill behoves anyone from that corner of the Chamber to comment on lower Oldpark against that background. I remember the background to the removal of the Protestant community from Torrens, and, again, coercion drove those people out.

I want a situation in which people are not condemned to living in the midst of dereliction and despair, and that is why we have intervened with the Building Successful Communities programme, which is about regeneration. My Department is about more than just housing. It is also about regeneration.

Alex Maskey spoke about underspend. There is a complexity in revenue and capital that he failed to address, which is that it is not always possible to transfer money from one side to the other.

It is absolutely right that there is an issue with poor-quality stock. Chris Lyttle raised that. I have been tackling that. There are 5,000 homes in Northern Ireland that have no cavity wall and no cavity wall insulation. Throughout the years that the SDLP was in the Department, nothing — nothing — was done about that. We are now tackling it. In Springfarm in Antrim, a pilot is under way involving the best brains and the best experts that we can get from the United Kingdom. What is being done there will be at the cutting edge in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the United Kingdom.

I looked at the figures for waiting lists. The average time on the waiting list in parts of Newtownabbey such as Rathcoole, Glenvarna and Queens Park is longer than in some of the nationalist areas that were talked about. A lot of the things that are said about housing are, quite honestly, myths rather than reality.

Amendment No 2 recognises the good work, and I welcome and support it. I agree with elements of amendment No 1 but cannot support it as framed. More shared housing is needed, but legislation is not the answer. There is no point in holding out an impossible target for housing associations, but that is what is at the heart of the motion and the Alliance amendment. There is no point in raising expectations if the housing association movement in Northern Ireland would not have the capacity to deliver. Let us be realistic and be honest with people at least, because the

figures that I have spoken about show that, with the housing associations, we are doing all that can be done. The evidence speaks for itself on what I have done to support the delivery of social and affordable housing together with providing support to those in the private rented sector and the owner/occupiers. My performance to date against the Programme for Government targets to deliver 8,000 new social and affordable homes speaks for itself. We are pulling out all the stops to deliver more —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Mr McCausland: — and with concerted effort from all involved, more will be achieved.

Mr Wilson: The DUP Benches count housing as a very important issue. The Minister outlined what the Department has achieved so far, and it is clear that he considers this a real issue. Our amendment deals with two aspects. The first one is this: is there a housing crisis? Members have talked about people who come into their constituency offices. Individuals who find themselves homeless are, of course, in crisis. However, you cannot extrapolate that and say that, because those individuals come along, the whole system is in crisis. Look at the figures.

We have already seen through the interventions that, when it comes to shortage of housing, the number of people on waiting lists, the number in housing stress and the number of houses being built, the performance was far worse during the time of SDLP Ministers, yet there were no motions about a housing crisis then. So we have to accept that part of this is the political game playing that sometimes goes on in this place.

There are housing shortages but, as has been pointed out, they are being dealt with. Some 2,000 houses are reckoned to be necessary to deal with the current waiting list. The backlog comes from the common waiting list and from the net stock model. That is an objective measurement, as opposed to picking a figure of 4,000 out of the air. That is being met by the Minister in the current situation. Indeed, as he indicated, if one looks at the performance of other parts of the United Kingdom, we see that we are providing more social housing per person on the waiting list than anywhere else. So, by any objective measurement, the issue is being dealt with comprehensively. Given the number of re-lets as well — 8,000 a year — we can see how inroads are being made into the list.

The first question is this: is there a crisis? There may be crises for individuals, but there is not a crisis, generally speaking, in provision. The second question is dealt with by our amendment, and it is this: is it possible to build 4,000 houses over the next year? There are a number of constraints. The first is that the capital budget has already been set. We are in the final year of the Programme for Government and Budget period. How do you reassess the capital budget to find over £250 million, especially when you have Sinn Féin squandering £105 million by giving it back to the Treasury? Yes, I have been critical of the performance of the Department but at least when the money was given back by the Housing Executive, it went to the Executive to be reallocated for more housing. When Sinn Féin squanders money, it gives it back to Ministers in England. That is the difference.

Mr Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: No. If I give way, I will not get extra time. Otherwise, I would.

If it is not financially possible, is it physically possible to build 4,000 houses in the final year of the Budget period? There are the issues of land acquisition and getting planning permission. This morning, I was with a housing association. It has taken that association three years to get 60 houses built in south Belfast. One year of that was due to messing about by NIEA, which is part of the Department that the SDLP Minister is responsible for, in getting land contamination dealt with. There is planning, procurement of land and tendering. How does the SDLP expect to get another 2,000 houses into the programme and get them built — or even started — within a year? Physically, I do not believe that it is possible to get that done. It is a very naive view of life to think that you can just suddenly turn the tap on like that. The construction industry itself could not ramp up to that point.

In the longer term, with the new Budget, we will look at the capital requirements and the planning issues. However, this is a cross-departmental issue, not one that can be dealt with solely by the Social Development Minister.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Let me just point out that, had you taken the intervention, you would have been given an extra minute. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: I will take it now. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I hesitated to interrupt you when you were in full flow.

Mr McCarthy: Let me put on record our thanks for the work of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the housing associations over the years. We have come a long way and we continue to make progress. Long may it continue.

The debate has shown that Members right across the Chamber all agree that developing housing and making sure that it is fit for purpose is a priority for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. It is a pity that the debate has been so exercised, when cooler heads could have helped to take real steps forward. We all aspire to that.

5.00 pm

I welcome the Minister's commitment to build further new housing. The question is, "How many, and how fast?" We have all acknowledged that there is a need to build further social and affordable housing and the Programme for Government acknowledges that, too. However, I cannot support amendment No 2 because I believe that greater ambition in social housing is necessary and should be pursued urgently.

I encourage Members to support the amendment in the names of my colleagues Mr Dickson and Mr Lyttle. That is because I believe that a truly modern housing sector must be accessible to everyone on that housing list. If our housing is still segregated, our housing is not for all. It is simply continuing division and separation and denying the next generation the opportunity to live, work and play together.

Throughout the debate, Members have made efforts to let themselves be seen as standing up for one side or the other. I believe that we need to shake off that mindset and ensure that all in this Chamber are committed to making housing accessible and high quality, regardless of someone's background. We should show leadership in getting people to live together as soon as possible.

Northern Ireland's residential sector remains deeply divided, unfortunately, with over 90% of our public housing still segregated on religious and political grounds. Some of our most polarised developments have more than 80% of residents from the same religious or political background. The fact that an area is perceived as belonging to one side or another of the community results in all sorts of negative

economic and social consequences, such as loss of investment, paramilitary economy and people less willing to use basic public services such as libraries, cinemas, shops or even recreational facilities. Even worse, that interacts with other aspects of poverty to create pockets of multiple deprivation, which we are all trying to avoid.

The Independent Commission on the Future for Housing in Northern Ireland stated that integrated housing should be trumpeted as the key ingredient for a peaceful and prosperous future for Northern Ireland. The longer we accept the status quo, the longer our society remains entrenched in division, and we all suffer. It is also the key ingredient for tackling the housing crisis because it stops the idea that people cannot live in certain areas. That limits people's ability to have access to the full range of housing in areas right across Northern Ireland. That is why I am convinced that shared housing must be at the apex of our response to the housing crisis — Mr Wilson does not seem to think that there is a crisis, but I refer to it as a housing crisis. Legislation is essential to that because a wide range of bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, provide housing outside the direct control of the Department. It will also make sure that policy is consistent and will carry on for a long time.

I would also like to re-emphasise my colleague Mr Lyttle's remark about the need for a wide-ranging and expansive review, perhaps along the lines of Patten for policing, to develop a comprehensive big step forward for shared housing. That has to be done as soon as possible.

In conclusion, the amendment takes nothing away from the original motion, but it makes it clear that shared housing is an important ingredient in transforming Northern Ireland into a truly shared society and a better place to live, and can be an example to other places. At the end of the day, we in Northern Ireland need many more homes, and it is vital that that happens and that those homes are available to everyone. I urge Members to support the amendment and the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Alban Maginness to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the debate. I will just point out that if you accept interventions, there will be no additional time because you have 10 minutes.

Mr A Maginness: Then I cannot accept any interventions. *[Laughter.]* I thank all Members for their contributions to this important debate. I have said before in this House that the Minister

for Social Development was delusional, and I think that he still suffers from that condition. Obviously, the therapy has not worked yet.

Unfortunately, the self-delusion has spread to Mr Wilson, the former Minister of Finance. He said that it is a crisis for Mr Bradley and his family when they are homeless, for Mr Brady and his family when he is in housing stress, and for Mr Maskey and his family when they are on the waiting list, but it is not a crisis for us politically. He said that it is not a crisis for this community. After all, there are only 41,000 people on the waiting list in Northern Ireland, and, after all, there are only 22,000 —

Mr Wilson: It was no crisis for your Minister when it was worse.

Mr A Maginness: Just listen for a little while, Sammy.

There are only 22,000 in housing stress. However, the Minister assures us that he is doing all in his power to deal with it. Of course, he is dealing with it so efficiently and effectively that he hands back money to the Treasury and to the Department of Finance and Personnel because he does not know what to do with the money that he gets.

As Mr McCarthy said, it is a very important issue, and we have to tackle it collectively. I agree with Mr McCarthy, and I agree with the Alliance Party's amendment.

There is a huge need in Northern Ireland that affects all of us. It affects all our constituencies. You can have a points war if you want in North Belfast, Newtownabbey, Girdwood and all the rest, but the fact remains that almost 3,000 people in North Belfast are on the waiting list. Those people have to find some solution to their basic problem. Regardless of whether they are Catholic or Protestant, nationalist or unionist, or whether they live in Newtownabbey or Ardoyne, their needs have to be addressed. So forget about the point scoring, Minister, and forget about the nonsense that you have talked about the PPE —

Mr McCausland: The PPR.

Mr A Maginness: — PPR; sorry, I accept your correction.

It is such a petty business to come to the House and to accuse a group of people who have done considerable work, examined the issue and presented their report, and to nitpick over what they presented because, essentially, what

they said to the people in Northern Ireland is what I am saying today, it is what the motion says, it is what the Alliance Party amendment says and it is what most people in the House, apart from the DUP, have said. The DUP have formed — I use the words of Mr Allister — a human shield to protect the Minister. He needs a human shield in the Committee; he needs a human shield on the Floor; he cannot stand up for himself.

Mr Campbell: He just did.

Mr A Maginness: He is wrong. He says that, if there is a problem, it is the fault of the SDLP Ministers who did not address the issue when they were in the Department for Social Development. That is where the problem —

Mr Clarke: Then Margaret ran away.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. We know that there should not be any commentary from a sedentary position. Everyone has had their opportunity. The Member is making his winding-up speech on the debate, and we should listen to it.

Mr A Maginness: Just calm down. Gently, gently.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Remarks through the Chair. That is my job.

Mr A Maginness: Of course, yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: I tell you, you are no David Cameron either.

Mr A Maginness: Try the therapy that the Minister has tried.

The point I make is that there is a problem here that needs to be addressed. The Minister is not quite sure whether there is a problem. He is a bit confused, like Mr Wilson. He is a bit confused about whether it is a crisis for the individual or a crisis for society. The Minister says that, if there is a problem, it is somebody else's creation, and it may have been the creation of the SDLP when its Ministers were in office. *[Interruption.]* Hold on, if it was not the SDLP's problem, it is the housing associations' problem, because they do not have the capacity or the will to tackle the problem. The Minister has plenty of money in his pocket and is willing to spend it, but the housing associations do not want to know. They do not want to do their job.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. The Minister has form for blaming others, as you will see increasingly over the next few weeks with the Housing Executive. Again, his computations and figures will be seen to be grossly erroneous.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the intervention, which is important, because we should look at the trend that the Minister has created. He evades or avoids responsibility for any decision that he makes. However, he then has a human shield in the form of the former Finance Minister, who starved the Department for Social Development of finance when it was most needed: when housing programmes had —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I will not give way. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: It is so self-evident: the former Minister knows that he acted in a Scrooge-like manner on housing, to the point of frustration and to the point of preventing the issue being properly addressed by the Executive. Of course —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I am not giving way.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member knows not to persist.

Mr A Maginness: I have made that plain.

In response to a recent question for written answer from Mr McCallister, the Minister stated:

"The cumulative shortfall between social housing need and the social housing starts over the past 10 years is 7,732 units."

That is the cumulative effect. Of course, the Minister will blame everybody else, but the fact is that the shortage of starts here in Northern Ireland has accumulated. That has to be addressed.

Further —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is not giving way.

Mr A Maginness: Further to all that, the Minister says, "Well, do you know something? Despite the fact that I've underperformed over the past few years, I'm going to over-perform over the next couple of years. I'm going to build more houses than were actually programmed for or anticipated." We have Mr Wilson uttering the nonsense that building 4,000 houses cannot be done. However, the Minister is saying to the Assembly, "Don't you worry, Members, folks and society; I am going to build more houses. Whether you need the new houses or not, I'm going to build them". He kept putting forward an argument that, really, the need was being met. If the need is being met, why is he going to build more houses? Will they be vacant? Will there be phantom estates? The Minister is ridiculous when he comes to the House and feeds us with the nonsense that he has fed us over the past half hour or so.

The reality is that there is a need that has not been addressed by the Minister, and he says, "I will try to address that need in the future". Maybe there is no need after all. Maybe there is no crisis whatsoever, as Mr Wilson said. Where is the crisis? If there is no crisis, we do not have to address it, but the Minister —

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

Mr A Maginness: — contradicts Mr Wilson by saying, "In fact, I'm going to build more houses". The reality is that the Minister has failed. This is a wake-up call for the Minister and for all on the DUP Benches.

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

Mr A Maginness: They should be cognisant of the fact that the Minister has failed —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: — and that there is great need.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 54; Noes 34.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCarthy and Mr Rogers

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCreagh, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern that, in March 2013, there were 41,356 applicants registered on the social housing waiting list, with 22,414 deemed to be in housing stress and 9,878 accepted as statutorily homeless; and that some social housing falls below an expected quality and that this exacerbates the housing crisis; further notes the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to deliver 8,000 social and affordable homes will not match the current level of need; believes that the segregation of housing contributes to an inflexible supply of housing and therefore to the housing crisis; calls on the Minister for Social Development to begin to tackle the housing crisis by committing to deliver an additional 4,000 social and affordable homes by the end of the current Programme for Government

period; and further calls for the introduction of legislation to facilitate shared housing and the role it can play in tackling the housing crisis.

Executive Committee Business

Police Act 1997 (Criminal Record Certificates: Relevant Matters) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014

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

That the draft Police Act 1997 (Criminal Record Certificates: Relevant Matters) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will Members who are leaving do so quietly?

Mr Ford: I think that I heard the motion that I wish to move read out.

The draft order allows for the introduction of a filtering scheme in Northern Ireland that will remove some old and minor convictions and disposals, such as cautions, from standard and enhanced Access NI certificates, before they are issued to applicants and employers.

Access NI is the criminal history disclosure service in Northern Ireland. Under Part V of the Police Act 1997, which applies in England and Wales and Northern Ireland, Access NI provides information to applicants and employers, especially, although not exclusively, where an individual wishes to work closely, or volunteer, with children and/or vulnerable adults.

The introduction of a filtering scheme is necessary to comply with court judgments. The European Court of Human Rights in the case of *MM v United Kingdom* ruled that the disclosure of a caution to an employer in that case was a violation of article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights: the right to privacy. The court recognised that there may be a need for a comprehensive record to be maintained of all cautions, convictions, warnings, reprimands, acquittals and even other police information. It was not satisfied, however, that there are sufficient safeguards in the legislation for the retention and disclosure of criminal record data to ensure that data relating to an individual's private life would not be disclosed in violation of their article 8 rights.

The Court of Appeal in England and Wales has confirmed the need for proportionality in the application of a disclosure scheme. It stated that a number of factors should be taken into account, including the seriousness of the offence; the age of the offender at the time of the offence; the sentence imposed or other manner of disposal; the time that has elapsed since the offence was committed; whether the individual has subsequently reoffended; and the nature of the work that the individual wishes to do.

The draft order seeks to comply with the judgments. It will make amendments to the definition of "relevant matter" in section 113A(6) of the Police Act 1997. The definition of "relevant matter" sets out what may be disclosed by Access NI in response to an application for a criminal record certificate or an enhanced criminal record certificate. As a safeguard to the public, the draft order specifies that certain offences will never be filtered. In essence, that means that, for a person with one conviction only, it will only be disclosed if it is on the specified list, if it involves a custodial sentence or if it is current. For anyone with more than one conviction, all convictions will be disclosed. A caution, restorative caution, diversionary youth conference or informed warning will be disclosed if it is for a specified offence or is current. A list of specified offences and definitions of "current" are set out in the draft order.

5.30 pm

The specified offences come in one of four categories. First, they relate to the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults; secondly, they deal with protection for children and vulnerable adults; thirdly, they relate to a risk of harm or the likelihood of harm to the public, children and vulnerable adults; or, fourthly, they meet the proposals on offences that should never be filtered as set out by Mrs Sunita Mason in her report, 'A Managed Approach', in 2011. Those were assault and violence against the person; aggravated criminal damage; arson; drink driving and motoring offences, including driving under the influence of drugs; drug offences, particularly supply; robbery; and sexual offences. The list includes a number of offences that DHSSPS has asked to be included as they relate to the safeguarding and protection of children and vulnerable adults.

The relevancy test used by the police on an enhanced criminal record certificate under section 113B(4) of the Police Act 1997 will still

apply to information that has been filtered, as that will remain on the criminal record.

In conjunction with this legislation, I have also laid before the Assembly two further statutory rules under the negative resolution procedure. One makes corresponding amendments to the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Exceptions) Order 1979. The other amends the Police Act 1997 (Criminal Records) (Disclosure) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 to allow for the disclosure of cautions, diversionary youth conferences and informed warnings held on the Causeway computerised system. It is planned that, with the approval of the Assembly, all three statutory rules will come into operation on 14 April.

I wish to thank the Executive and Justice Committee for their consideration of the proposals. It is with their support that I bring the draft order before the House today. I should mention that England and Wales have introduced a scheme to filter old and minor convictions and other disposals, which has been running for some nine months without adverse comment.

The draft order will help to ensure that vulnerable people in our society continue to be protected while also providing that a relatively minor mistake in the past does not impact on the rest of a person's life. I commend the draft order to the House.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak very briefly on behalf of the Committee, which has considered the statutory rule and the policy intent on a number of occasions. The Minister having already outlined the background to it, I do not intend to rehearse it. We have been kept informed by the Department of the implications of the rulings from the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Appeal in England and Wales and recognise the need for changes to be made that will enable old and minor convictions and cautions to be filtered from standard and enhanced checks by Access NI. The changes will also implement recommendations made by Sunita Mason in her 2011 review of the criminal records regime in Northern Ireland.

The statutory rule being debated today is one of three required to bring forward necessary legislative changes. In October last year, when the Committee was briefed by departmental officials on plans to introduce the filtering scheme, members sought assurances from officials regarding the low-level nature of the offences that would be filtered and clarification

that the filtering scheme was only for the purposes of disclosure and that such offences would remain on an individual's criminal record.

The Committee noted that the aim of the filtering scheme was to provide full disclosure relating to the safeguarding and protection of children and vulnerable adults. The Committee is content that the provisions being brought forward by the Department adequately address the requirements of the recent judgements while meeting the Committee's primary concern of maintaining suitable public safeguarding arrangements.

We considered the rule at the meeting on 13 March and agreed to recommend to the Assembly that it be approved. On behalf of the Committee, I can say that we are content to support the motion brought forward by the Minister.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, I apologise to Members who had difficulty hearing the motion being read out due to the disturbance of Members leaving the room — the stamped, should I say.

Mr Ford: I thank the Committee Chair for his contribution. Indeed, I wish to thank all the members who have contributed to this particular work, because, joking aside, it was something that involved some work being done by the Committee. It involved a detailed examination of the balance between the rights of individuals to privacy and the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

My officials and the Committee worked well on this, as we so often do. It is a great pity that something like this, which is of significance to a large number of people in Northern Ireland, will go unreported by the media tonight, whilst other things tend to attract media attention when, every now and then, I disagree with the Committee.

I thank the Committee Chair for his positive words and the Committee staff and my staff for their work. I commend the draft order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Police Act 1997 (Criminal Record Certificates: Relevant Matters) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

Adjourned at 5.35 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

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

Agriculture and Rural Development

RIVERS AGENCY: DE-AGENTISATION

Published at 12.00 noon on Friday 21 March 2014

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Rivers Agency was established as a "Next Steps" Executive Agency in October 1996. Since then, much has changed and there is the opportunity to make its administration more efficient and scrutiny more consistent, without impinging on the operational autonomy of the staff carrying out its functions. Therefore, I have decided that Rivers Agency will cease to be an Executive Agency and will be subsumed within my Department, with effect from 1 April 2014.

Rivers Agency will continue to deliver the same core functions as before. This change is largely administrative and, initially, the only outward sign of de-agentisation will be that Rivers Agency will no longer be required to produce separate annual accounts. Accounting Officer responsibility will pass back to DARD's Permanent Secretary and the final set of Rivers Agency Accounts will be laid before the Assembly this Summer. Rivers Agency will retain its name for the immediate future.

Please note that the above statement is embargoed until 12:00 on Friday 21 March 2014.



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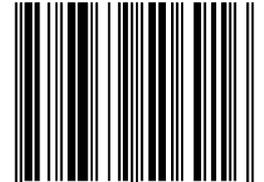
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