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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 May 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Local Government Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the Local Government Bill received Royal Assent on 12 May 2014. It will be known as the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill also received Royal Assent on 12 May 2014. It will be known as the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Education

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. A Cheann Comhairle, le do chead ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh i gcomhlíonadh alt 52 d'Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998 faoi chruinniú den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas san fhormáid oideachais. Reachtáladh an cruinniú in Ard Mhacha ar 2 Aibreán 2014.

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in education format. The meeting was held in Armagh on 2 April 2014. This statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland and is made on behalf of us both.

Minister Quinn and I affirmed our commitment to work to broaden and deepen cross-border collaboration on education matters. We identified areas in which there may be further opportunities for progress, including youth

policy, all-Ireland cyber-safety initiatives and awareness, and addressing obstacles to the transition from second- to third-level education between the jurisdictions. We also agreed that higher education should be included in the NSMC framework.

We noted the work being taken forward through the North/South future sectoral work programme since the previous NSMC meeting in November 2013.

We received a presentation from officials that provided an update on the work programme and included the outcomes of a workshop held on 25 March between DE and Department of Education and Skills (DES) officials. The event provided an opportunity for officials to brief one another on strategic approaches to addressing underachievement in their respective jurisdictions and to consider options for the exchange of best practice. The workshop demonstrated that both Departments are addressing similar challenges in similar ways, although the arrangements for the delivery of the support programmes may differ.

We agreed to the development of proposals to scope a cross-border pilot in support of leadership development that would include existing groups of principals in both jurisdictions. The pilot would involve existing groups of principals in a number of area-learning communities in the North working with equivalent groups of principals in the South. The intention is to provide a context for peer engagement on leadership matters that draws on the respective experiences in the different schools involved.

Ministers received a joint presentation from the chief inspectors of both inspectorates on their continuing programme of cooperation, which includes such activities as inspector exchanges; participation in professional development programmes; joint inspections of specialised projects; and regular meetings of senior management. I was pleased to be advised that successful and productive inspector exchanges between both inspectorates have been in place

since January 2008. The exchange programme is providing many benefits to inspectors on an individual basis and to their organisations. I am encouraged by the professional exchange and learning that is taking place between both inspectorates.

I welcome the decision of Ministers at the NSMC to approve the continuing efforts of both inspectorates to extend cooperative activities, including their plans to implement the following key actions in 2014: North/South work on literacy and numeracy, leading to joint publications of good practice in 2014; enhancing inspection exchanges to involve inspecting with authority in other jurisdictions; joint inspections in agricultural colleges and Irish-medium schools; evaluation of the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) work on promoting improvement in English and mathematics; and joint work on the development of the inspection of well-being in schools.

In January, I had the pleasure of meeting the chair, vice-chair and chief executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism. They outlined some of the work they have done, the positive feedback they have received and their plans for the future. I was left in no doubt that it was correct to endorse their expansion of services in 2012, and it is clear that the benefits of that expansion are being felt by children with autism, their families and educational professionals across each jurisdiction. I look forward to Minister Quinn and I being able to demonstrate our commitment to and support for the centre when we undertake a joint visit there before the summer.

It is pleasing to note that, through the North/South teacher qualification working group, both Education Departments continue to work with the teaching councils, North and South, to remove outstanding obstacles to teacher mobility on the island. The decision by the Teaching Council Ireland (TCI) to simplify qualification assessment through an increase in the use of in-house desk assessment of applications is to be welcomed. I also note that the TCI, in consultation with the General Teaching Council, is working to simplify assessment of qualifications of teachers for the purposes of their registration with the TCI and that this process will follow the completion of work on the review and redesign of teacher education programmes in the South, which is expected to finish in the first quarter of 2015.

I am pleased to report that both Departments continue to work to make it easier for teachers from the North to undertake the qualification to

meet the necessary conditions of the Irish language requirements in the South. I am also pleased to report that, following agreement by all stakeholders, the way is open for St Mary's University College, Belfast to deliver the Irish language qualification in the North of Ireland, possibly in an online format. Progress on that is subject to validation of any proposal by the TCI.

Work on the implementation of an extension of the North/South collaborative programme of work in the Irish-medium sector for the 2013-14 academic year is nearing completion. An independent evaluation of the programme that will look at its work up to the end of 2013-14 is to be commissioned. That is a welcome development and an opportunity to review how we have done to this point and what lessons we can learn. That will help to inform future work in the sector, and I look forward to the outcome of the evaluation.

All three funding Departments — DE, DEL and DES — have agreed to retain funding of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South at the current level for the incoming year, 2014-15. That funding comprises a joint contribution of £25,000 from DE and DEL, with DES contributing an equivalent amount in euro.

With regard to school, youth and teacher exchanges, my Department continues to support the Causeway youth exchange programme and the North/South education and training standards committee for youth work.

Other ministerial colleagues and I were pleased to hear about the ongoing work of the dissolving boundaries teams during the 2013-14 school year.

Ministers agreed that the North/South Ministerial Council in education format should meet again on 22 October 2014.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will ask a couple of questions as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Will the Minister update us on an issue that has been at the heart of all these North/South ministerial meetings since their inception: the obstacles for Northern Ireland students in the transition from second-level to third-level education? In particular, will he clarify what has been achieved to date in improving access for Northern Ireland A-level students to universities in the Republic of Ireland?

The Minister's statement refers to the North/South Ministerial Council framework being changed to include higher education, which is a concern. Will he clarify the protocol and procedure for doing that and whether that decision included his colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning? Has it been endorsed by the Executive?

I will now speak as a Member. I am glad that, at the commencement of our proceedings, Mr Speaker, you referred to our gracious Majesty The Queen in endorsing legislation. That was something of benefit and worth. There is little of benefit and worth in the North/South Ministerial Council. The sooner that it is closed down and that those resources are put into education, the better. It is the most pathetic effort by a Minister to come to the House with the most useless piece of paper that I have ever seen.

Mr O'Dowd: It is good to note that canvassing must be going well for Mr Storey. He is in good form. I would have hoped that walking the country lanes of North Antrim would have cheered him up, but apparently not.

For the Member, it is worth noting that, if the North/South Ministerial Council closes down, the Assembly closes down, because they are all part of one agreement: the Good Friday Agreement. Closing down the North/South Ministerial Council is a wee bit like turkeys wishing for Christmas.

I disagree with the Member that it is a waste of time or that I have brought a useless piece of paper to the Assembly today. The Member has only to look through the range of ongoing work programmes, particularly the cooperation between inspectorates, North/South and east-west. I will focus on that because I know that the Committee is working on its report on the inspectorate. At the meeting, two chief inspectors gave a very interesting report to the Ministers present. They also reported on the work between the Welsh and Scottish inspectorates, as well as the two inspectorates on this island. There is cooperation in many different formats.

Work has been carried out on the obstacles to students from the North travelling to universities in the South. Minister Quinn and I are on the same page on this. However, admissions to universities in the South are controlled and run by an independent body, which, thankfully, is now taking those concerns on board. I welcome the announcement from Dublin City University and Trinity College that they are reviewing their admissions criteria to make

them more accessible and equitable to students from the North and to ensure that they can access courses that are available there.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Minister for a very positive and productive statement on the work of the North/South Ministerial Council. Will he expand on what seems to be positive, cooperative work between the inspectorates and why that is of benefit to local young people? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: The inspectorates not only share best practice in how they carry out inspections and hold the various institutions to account on the quality of education that they provide but share best practice on numeracy and literacy across the island. We are learning from our colleagues in the South, and they are learning from us about how we are improving. With numeracy and literacy, there continues to be a mountain to climb. However, it is quite clear that there is a good working relationship between the inspectorates, which predates the North/South ministerial institutions. They are working well together, learning from each other and sharing experiences. As I said to Mr Storey, they are also sharing experiences east-west, which is to the benefit of young people and the inspectorate. Ultimately, it benefits the economy to have highly qualified, motivated young people leaving school, and we are learning how to do that from other jurisdictions.

10.45 am

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for his statement. I welcome the commitment to broaden and deepen cross-border collaboration on education matters, but, Minister, what has happened to the cross-border education survey? Has it evaporated into the ether? Do you have any plans to bring the recommendations of that survey to the House?

Mr O'Dowd: The North/South survey is one element of the work of the North/South Ministerial Council, and I would like to see it published. I have no difficulty with its being published, but it is a North/South Ministerial Council paper. It requires agreement from OFMDFM and my Department to bring it to the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, and it requires the agreement of the North/South Ministerial Council in education format to publish it. I have no difficulty with any of those procedures being followed. However, it is a snapshot of people's views at a period in time on cross-border education and the requirement, need and support for cross-border cooperation. However, in reality, it is happening in many

areas along the border. It is working in practice, and there are growing demands in certain areas for greater cross-border collaboration on education services. I assure the Member that I have no difficulty with publishing the survey, but it has to go through a number of procedures before I can do so.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is particularly good to see that leadership and professional qualifications are in it and part of the concentration on the inspectorate. I saw a vice principals' survey yesterday that showed that 89% of them do not receive adequate training and that 68% are working over the 48 hours allowed by the working time directive from Europe. Did you discuss how we will give better support to our teachers so that they get the training and carry on being the excellent teachers that they are but get all the help that they can?

Mr O'Dowd: Internally, in this jurisdiction, I am looking at and auditing the support services for school leaders and our teaching staff, and, once that audit is complete, we will decide on what other services are required. I accept that other services are required. I accept that the vast majority of our school leaders, principals and deputy principals, are doing a great job and often work above and beyond the call of duty. Through the NSMC, we are working our way through setting up a pilot scheme along at least one of the border corridors to look at sharing ideas between area-learning communities, particularly on leadership and how leaders can work together and learn from their experiences. Leadership is high on my agenda internally and high on the agenda at North/South Ministerial Council meetings.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I am glad to see that, among all the very important education topics, the Minister has not left out special educational needs. Despite some misgivings about the Middletown centre some years ago and given the ever-increasing number of students with autism, is the Minister content that the provision is up to scratch for the foreseeable future for the increased volume of students attending Middletown?

Mr O'Dowd: Not only are Minister Quinn and I satisfied, but the joint inspectorate report referred to the services at Middletown as outstanding. It is one of the quiet success stories of North/South cooperation. You are right: there were some political concerns at the start that, thankfully, have now been worked through, and the centre is providing excellent

services to young people with autism and their families.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to focus again on the Middletown centre, Minister. Can you confirm for us the financial breakdown of support for it and whether agreement has been received for a period of funding over the next number of years?

Mr O'Dowd: Apologies to the Member, but I do not have the exact funding figures in front of me. However, the budgets for the comprehensive spending review period that we are operating in have been agreed for Middletown. There was some debate in the earlier stages of this Assembly term about how much each Department would contribute, on what basis we would contribute and to what services we would contribute, but those budgets have now been agreed, and I am happy to supply the Member with the figures.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that the Minister referred to area-learning communities and the scoping of a cross-border pilot in support of leadership development. Is that the basis of a cross-border learning zone? Practically, how can that be delivered regarding timescales?

Mr O'Dowd: It is the start of something new. How it develops will depend on the evaluation of the pilot and the worthiness of the project in regard to the views of those schools that have been involved in it, the inspectorate and the independent evaluation, which, I think, is useful at the end of any pilot scheme. It has come about after deliberations between my officials and officials from the Department of Education and Skills in the South. It is seen as a worthwhile area to explore. The area-learning communities that have developed on this side of the border, in most cases, have proven to be very valuable to the delivery of education in their areas. We want to share ideas with our counterparts in the South around that. I do not have a specific timescale in front of me for when the pilot scheme will be up and running, but I assure the Member that officials are actively working on it now.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his statement. My question is about Middletown. In his response to a question for written answer from me earlier this year, the Minister confirmed that just 20 children were referred for outreach support from April to November last year and, on average, they received just over 90 hours of

direct support. What is the Minister's view on that level of uptake, given, as Mr McCarthy said, the number of children with autism? Does the Minister feel, as he said earlier, that it was correct to expand the services in 2012?

Mr O'Dowd: The area that the Member refers to regarding services out of Middletown is only one area of support being offered through the Middletown centre. We are now dealing with significantly higher numbers than the Member was quoted in response to the question that she asked me earlier in the year. I am more than happy to share with the Member the entirety of the numbers going through the Middletown centre and the support that is being offered by each jurisdiction, because each jurisdiction required different services from the Middletown centre. I am more than happy to share those figures with the Member, but I assure the Member that it is significantly more than the number that she refers to.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I welcome the Minister's statement and the continuing progress that is being made through the North/South Ministerial Council. With regard to the issue of area planning, the Minister's comments in the statement on deepening cross-border collaboration in education matters and his comments at the INTO conference on the need for cross-border solutions in certain areas, how do the Minister and his Dublin counterpart intend to work together to bring forward such innovative solutions in areas such as north-west Fermanagh and south Donegal?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I have raised the issue about north-west Fermanagh with Minister Quinn. He has agreed that our officials should sit down and discuss whether there is potential for cross-border cooperation, and, if there is potential, how that would work. The meeting has been agreed to, and I am awaiting an agreed date for it.

Committee Business

Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report Number Three

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

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report Number Three produced by the Community Relations Council and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

It is my pleasure to move the motion this morning. The motion follows a briefing that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister received from the author of the report, Dr Paul Nolan, and the Community Relations Council (CRC). That briefing, which was on the Northern Ireland peace monitoring report number three, took place on 9 April 2014. As the name suggests, it is the third report and aims to monitor the peace process, year on year, by use of an indicator framework, which covers four main areas: the sense of safety; the sense of equality; the sense of cohesion and sharing; and the sense of political progress.

The report is produced jointly by CRC, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Although the Committee does not have an agreed position on the report, it agreed that a debate would be a useful way of discussing the issues raised.

Dr Nolan said that the purpose of the report is to:

"provide a sort of X-ray of society to see where the problems might occur."

Consideration of the report is particularly timely given the proposal in Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) to create a new equality and good relations commission. In creating that new body, the need for robust monitoring will be vital, so this report is certainly worth discussing further. The Committee is still

awaiting further detail on the primary legislation needed to create the new commission, and we look forward to the Department making progress in that area.

The report identified 10 key points: the moral basis of the 1998 peace accord has evaporated; the absence of trust has resulted in the absence of progress; there has been some increase in polarisation; a culture war has been talked into existence; the City of Culture year provided a different understanding of culture; failure lies in wait for young working-class Protestant males; front line police have been the human shock absorbers for failures elsewhere; the rebalancing of inequalities unbalances unionism; at grassroots level, the reconciliation impulse remains strong; and, finally, no one picks up the tab.

Dr Nolan acknowledges the limitations of the report with regard to research, data and sample surveys and the fact that the peace is "an elusive concept". Although those limitations must be acknowledged, there is a wealth of information in the report covering policing and justice, arts and sport, poverty and inequality, housing and education, community relations and the reform of local government and, indeed, there is a section on the workings of this institution. The comments in the report make for interesting reading, and the range of topics covered will, no doubt, be of interest to a number of Statutory Committees.

At the briefing, the Community Relations Council advised that the report is supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and that this year marks the end of a three-year funding cycle. Following a review of the report, CRC hopes to secure funding to continue with this work, but the future is not absolutely secure. It will be interesting to see the future for this report. I am keen to hear Members' views on that issue.

During the briefing, Dr Nolan discussed some of the key findings of the report. There were concerns concerning statistics in relation to educational attainment levels in Northern Ireland, which was the subject of a debate in the Chamber last week. The Committee is keen to see how the Department's Delivering Social Change framework will seek to address those issues around securing a better future for our young people.

The Committee also discussed the need for improved engagement with young people on community cohesion. The Committee sees that as a very important aspect of bringing our communities together and recognises some of

the work, including work around young people and interfaces, that CRC has done in that area. The Committee hopes to launch an inquiry soon into uniting communities. A key aspect of the inquiry will be how we, as a legislature and an Executive, engage young people in the decision-making process.

Many of the issues raised in the report are central to Together: Building a United Community, and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue to monitor and scrutinise developments in that strategy. Last week, we considered a summary of the Department's consultation on the good relations indicators to be used to measure progress of T:BUC. The issue of community relations is one that will continue to be a key theme for the Committee. We recognise that those issues are often longitudinal. The strategy reflects that, as can be seen in the target to remove all interface barriers by 2023.

11.00 am

I acknowledge the presence of junior Minister Jonathan Bell. I appreciate that he is here to respond to the debate.

In the foreword to the peace monitoring report, there is an acknowledgement that, in the compilation of the report:

"Data sets from various government departments and public bodies in Northern Ireland have been used".

It states:

"comparisons are made which draw upon figures produced by government departments and public bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Using this variety of sources means there is no standard model that applies across the different departments and jurisdictions. Many organisations have also changed the way in which they collect their data over the years, which means that in some cases it has not been possible to provide historical perspective on a consistent basis."

On the theme of consistency, I acknowledge that, although I missed the discussion at Committee because I was in England for some of the events around the state visit of President Michael D Higgins, I have studied the Hansard report, which highlights some concerns about consistency. I will mention three, if I have time.

A point was made about respectability with reference to those who represent what we might call paramilitary groups. It states:

"This new respectability allowed the PSNI to include those publicly associated with paramilitarism to join them in the sessions of the 'Cardiff group'."

That was a group assembled in Cardiff last May by the police and the University of Ulster to discuss community policing. There is a claim of a new respectability, and yet the report goes on to say:

"If there is something incongruous about police sitting down with members of illegal organisations to discuss law-and-order matters, it is an incongruity that has lost its power to surprise because the peace process has long accepted it as a modus operandi."

I hope that you agree that there is a clear inconsistency between those two statements.

In discussing police numbers, there is a comparison between other forces in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and a proposed ratio of one officer for every 200 citizens. It ignores the fact that the Patten report based figures on the New York Police Department, where the ratio was 1:220. There is no explanation of why the peace monitoring report has chosen to ignore Patten's comparator of the New York Police Department and to replace it with UK and Republic of Ireland forces.

The report also makes reference, at page 55, to the Historical Enquiries Team (HET). It states:

"in the original plan, it was to work alongside the proposals of the Consultative Group on the Past (otherwise known as Eames-Bradley)."

That is surprising to say the least. The Historical Enquiries Team was established in 2005. The Consultative Group on the Past was not established until 2007 and did not report until 2009, but Dr Nolan seemed to predict that the HET, in its original plan, was to work alongside a body that was not set up until two years later and did not report until four years later.

So, there are inconsistencies in the report. That is a matter of regret because, generally speaking, the House should welcome academic research and reports on the state of the country

and the progress of the peace progress, but those inaccuracies and inconsistencies obviously serve to undermine confidence in the report. I am not sure whether it has been peer reviewed, but perhaps, if there is to be a peace four report, peer review might be a way to tackle such inconsistencies.

As I said, I welcome the presence of the junior Minister and the other Members in the House. I look forward to their comments during the debate.

Mr Moutray: I rise as a member of the OFMDFM Committee to make a few brief comments on the detailed report before the House this morning. This is the third annual report produced by Dr Paul Nolan and published by the Community Relations Council. Slugger O'Toole sums it up well when he says that it is part statistical almanac and part annual report card. As with the previous reports, it is clear that a great amount of effort has gone into the latest assessment of where Northern Ireland now stands as a society. Before Easter, our Committee had the opportunity to meet Dr Nolan, along with the chair of the Community Relations Council, Peter Osborne, and Jacqueline Irwin, its chief executive.

In places, the report makes for uncomfortable reading for us all. It is important for us to face up to some of the challenges that it presents us with. However, the report is perhaps overly negative and simplistic in places. I am not sure how reliable some of its conclusions are. It gives an overall impression that although we are progressing in some areas, there is slippage in others. There is a reference to Richard Haass, who said that Northern Ireland can no longer be held up as a model for conflict resolution. I suspect that Dr Haass is slightly miffed by his experiences here, but that is a matter for another day.

The author refers to the "moral basis" of the 1998 peace accord and asserts that it has evaporated. In my eyes, the 1998 agreement had no moral basis in the first place. When we see what is emerging about the shady and dirty deals that went on behind the scenes, I, for one, am glad that I opposed the agreement. The author also states that anti-agreement unionists now accept that Northern Ireland is secure within the United Kingdom. He is right on that matter. We have never felt more secure or confident in that. However, he goes on to assert that a cultural war is being talked into existence. I am not sure what is being talked into existence. It seems to me and many others that nationalists and republicans, faced with the reality of the union, are attempting to remove as

many expressions of Britishness as possible. That is the rationale behind their opposition to loyal order parades. The report refers to the cost of policing the marching season, which was £18.5 million last year compared with £4.1 million in 2012. That cost could be very greatly reduced if the cultural war being waged on my community was brought to an end.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: No, not at this point.

The cultural war was also the rationale behind the removal of the Union Jack from Belfast City Hall. The report refers to a "demographic tipping point" in Belfast. The author is alluding to the 2011 census figures, but the term "tipping point" is loaded, unhelpful and an illustration of the use of language and terminology in the report that leads me to question its accuracy and impartiality in places. We are told that unionists must wake up to the new reality in Belfast. However, with respect, Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland and the Union Jack is the flag of our country. If there is a tipping point in Belfast, it is up to those now in the majority to show some respect for the rights of those now in the minority in the city.

Finally, I want to highlight my grave concern about what the report has to say about educational underachievement among young working-class Protestant males. This has been spoken about in the Chamber before. The performance of Protestant males who are in receipt of free school meals is deeply worrying. The percentage of young Protestants who are unemployed is a lot higher than that of their Roman Catholic counterparts. The whole issue needs to be addressed urgently and radically. I note that my colleague the Member for North Belfast Mr Humphrey drew attention in the House last week to the report's failure to speak to the education and library board chief executive, principals or the chief executive or chairman of the Greater Shankill Partnership. That is one illustration of where the report might have fallen down. If the research and consultation are flawed, the conclusions are also likely to be flawed. I will leave it at that this morning.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. The report raises a number of findings. We are already aware of some of these issues. As a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I am particularly aware of them. The report refers to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community and to the Equality Commission recording an increase in

harassment cases in the workplace. This issue is quite topical as we heard on the radio this morning about Belfast docker Martin Sheil taking a case against his former employer. It was ruled that he had been the victim of discrimination and harassment at work on the grounds of sexual orientation. It is disappointing that, despite having a number of laws that state that you should not discriminate against anyone on the basis of age, race, religion or sexual orientation, people are still being treated differently. A sexual orientation strategy is progressing, and it will, hopefully, further raise awareness of what is acceptable and not acceptable in public life.

One chapter in the report is on dealing and not dealing with the past. We also learned on the radio this morning that the PSNI will take no action against a former undercover unit, the Military Reaction Force, which was the subject of a BBC 'Panorama' programme last November.

Solicitor Pádraig Murray expressed concerns that there was no thorough investigation of the unit, and such contradictions make it very difficult to deal with the past. This angers a lot of families.

The report refers to the fact that, where you have inequalities and unemployment, you have the potential for public disorder. We always have the potential for public disorder, and there are inequalities everywhere. Inequality causes hopelessness and despair, not just public disorder. Inequality causes poverty, health inequalities, lower educational achievement, suicides and so on. We are concerned about the low level of educational attainment and the poor skills base in the younger age group, who, without appropriate support and access to opportunities, face a lifetime of marginalisation and poverty. Sinn Féin is fully committed to tackling marginalisation and social exclusion through the progressive realisation of the right to education and work, but we view the problem primarily as a lack of employment or educational opportunities, with the additional barrier of the lack of accessible, affordable childcare for lone parents and social care for carers rather than a lack of individual motivation. Steps have been taken to address these issues, particularly on access to affordable childcare.

The report also raises the field of NEETs. It is an important issue, and, as a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I know that we have a great interest in it. The Department and the Executive have invested considerable resources in reducing the number

of young people who are NEET. The commitment is in the Pathways to Success strategy. Funding for employability programmes is vital to this commitment, and Pathways to Success covers apprenticeships, training, higher education, further education, Steps to Work and other programmes. There are a lot of good programmes out there, but we always have to ask whether they are making a difference. Pathways to Success is an Executive strategy that provides £25.2 million in additional money for young people who fall into this category. There is a lot of frustration among young people who feel marginalised, and we always have to ask whether we are targeting people in an effective way. As a Committee, we have a lot of monitoring to see how effective the employability programmes really are.

A motion was recently brought to the House on the persecution of Christians in many countries around the world. In particular, it was clear that there were great wrongdoings in North Korea, which the Assembly condemned. It was difficult to see what impact we would make, but, if the political will exists in the Assembly, we can make an impact on the issues that are identified in this report.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to comment on the report. If people were objective in their assessment of the report, they would see that it sets out in stark detail much that we already know to be true. It is unfortunate that, yet again, today we hear mixed messages from the DUP and others about reaching out across the community. They want to represent and to attract Catholic votes, but that has to be set against the denial and continued insistence that there is some sort of culture war. There is a denial of the fact that this very place is a physical manifestation of the Good Friday Agreement. On the one hand, they say that they oppose the agreement, but, on the other hand, they are very eager to work the agreement and to be here in the House.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will give way in a moment, but I have a point that I want to expand on. Issues around a cultural war have been used over the past year to drum up feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence, particularly in the Protestant community, so that the failure to give political leadership and to tackle poverty, deprivation and educational underachievement is not recognised and laid at the door of unionist politicians. The facts are that, last year, the highest number of parades — 2,687 — took

place and there is an unprecedented level of funding for Orange culture and Ulster Scots. Marching bands are on the increase and are up to some 660. Far from being a culture war —

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I have already said that I will give way to Mr Storey, and I am happy to do so.

11.15 am

Mr Storey: The Member talks about conflicting messages and blames everybody else for doing that. What conflicting message did she send to her community when your own Church leaders advocated a particular course of action in the House last week in relation to same-sex marriage? You ignored it, and other members of your party voted in another way. You have sent out a conflicting message to many people in the Roman Catholic community who are disappointed with the leadership in your party and in the party opposite.

Mr Speaker: Order. Even with interventions, let us make sure that they are towards the business that we are dealing with in the House at this moment in time.

Mrs D Kelly: I am happy to say that I do not believe that there is any conflicting message when one believes that religion and politics should not be one and the same. There is a difference between a secular Government and one that is guaranteed under the ayatollah as some sort of Islamic state.

The report on dealing with the past again fails to look at how we build reconciliation. I heard the Sinn Féin Member speak about North Korea and heard Sinn Féin Members yesterday speak about the success of the House. As far as I understand it, in North Korea at the border with South Korea there are shopfronts put up like a scene from a play to show that everything is happy and really nice. It is something like a fake street. That is sometimes the Sinn Féin imagery of the situation between the two parties here and their failure on delivery.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she realise that we spend over £7 million painting shopfronts? Are you against that policy?

Mrs D Kelly: There is a difference between painting shopfronts to regenerate town centres and doing it to create a false image for the wider community. I have been out on the

doorsteps for weeks now, and I can tell you that people on the doorstep are worried about their job, their security and getting an affordable home.

Mr Speaker: Order. As the Member will know — she is a long-serving Member, and I am trying to help her — we need to get back to the report. If the Member can link whatever she is saying to the report, that would be even more helpful.

Mrs D Kelly: I am happy to do so, because, as we know, much in the report refers to poverty, social deprivation and the difficulties that many people experience. Much more needs to be done about underachievement in our education system. Many people across the world know that education is the way out of poverty. That is a value and a principle that we should all recognise. Therefore we should redouble our efforts to assist those who do not believe that the education system has any meaningful engagement with them.

Other Members referred to the childcare strategy and affordable childcare. It is a real issue to allow families to get back to work. We increasingly hear about the working poor. Much more needs to be done. I am pleased that the junior Minister is here, and I hope that he will give a commitment to provide greater security to working families and to families who want to get to work and increased support for childcare places that are within easy travelling distance, not some of the ludicrous suggestions that we have seen about pre-nursery school places being maybe 10 miles away from a child's home.

The report sets out challenges for all the parties represented in the Chamber. The SDLP will not be found wanting in living up to the commitments and challenges that the report poses for us. Again, on behalf of the party, I urge those who have disengaged either from the leadership meetings in the House or from the Haass process. We owe it not only to today's generation but to future generations to re-engage in that and to resolve some of the matters that the report highlights as challenges for us.

Mr McCarthy: Like other Members, I welcome the report, which is a valuable reminder of how our peace process is settling in in Northern Ireland, slow as that may seem at times. We should be grateful to the organisations that contributed to the report, especially Dr Paul Nolan, its author.

The report highlights outstanding issues that need to be dealt with and should be dealt with. The most prominent, which has already been spoken about, is the underperformance of young Protestant working-class boys in education. The media rightly highlighted that as an issue of concern, and it is one that we need to reflect on and develop a strong plan to tackle. Indeed, the Assembly debated the issue recently. Let us hope that improvements will soon be made. It is particularly noteworthy that the report cites the division in the education system as one of the variables that interact to extend the gap between top and bottom. That suggests that promoting sharing and integration must be part of our drive to improve results among the groups that need support to reach their potential. That is not the only policy needed, however: we also need to target poverty and the impact it has on education. We need to develop ways to promote literacy and numeracy.

Although that was highlighted by the press as the crucial issue in the report, it is only one of its findings. Others that cause me concern include the reliance on the veto developed by the Good Friday Agreement, which has led to a position where devolution is failing on bread-and-butter issues. Talk of a culture war could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In eight months in 2013, one in 10 PSNI officers was injured in public order disturbances.

The report is not all doom and gloom. It highlights the positive work that took place in Derry during the City of Culture year. Of course, no one should be mistaken: that was organised by my niece Miss Shona McCarthy, who was the chief executive. That goes without saying. The report demonstrates that, at a grass-roots level, there is a desire for reconciliation and for people to work and live together in peace and harmony. In fact, the latter point is perhaps the most encouraging: it should remind us all that the public want reconciliation, integration and tolerance.

I want to speak quickly about the way that the report should influence the public process on these issues. It is a significant and weighty report that gets to the heart of a good number of the issues. It should continue to be published in the future as an assessment of how our peace process has bedded in. It is in stark contrast to the proposed good relations indicators, which do not offer so rounded or nuanced a view of the peace process. Indeed, I welcome the presence in the Chamber today of junior Minister Bell. In his response, perhaps he can inform the House how many meetings of the equality and good relations commission

transition board have taken place and what progress, if any, has been made on the matter.

The report should be used to inform policy development on these issues. For example, Together: Building a United Community limits its education proposals to the development of 10 shared campuses. The report demonstrates that a much more transformative approach that tackles division and improves sharing is needed. Likewise, T:BUC limits its ambition on shared housing to identifying 10 neighbourhoods, which are themselves not forthcoming. The report shows that segregation is still, unfortunately, widespread throughout Northern Ireland.

Regrettably, I still do not believe that the two large parties in the Assembly are really and genuinely signed up to the agenda of tackling division in our society. Reports like the one we are debating today explain why we absolutely must dedicate all our efforts to getting everyone in Northern Ireland signed up to genuine sharing.

Mrs Hale: Mr Speaker, I ask your indulgence and apologise: I need to leave the Chamber once I have spoken.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the report. The underlying context of Dr Nolan's report tries to illustrate that the current lack of trust in the political framework is leading to stalemate on future progress and that a culture war is brewing on the streets that could plunge Northern Ireland back decades. The report highlights the belief that Dr Haass warns of impending doom, gloom and violence if agreement cannot be reached on some issues relating to the past and that Northern Ireland can no longer be held up as an international model of conflict resolution. The fact is that levels of violence are at their lowest in 40 years. In the past years, the Orange/Protestant family has had its covenant parade and the Queen's jubilee festival. The UK City of Culture events in Londonderry showcased how Northern Ireland has moved on from the dark days of the Troubles. The report could have done more to illustrate the positives: how the majority of people work, play and do business, socialise and live their life in harmony with their neighbours. Does that mean that everything in the garden is rosy? Of course not. We still have issues to reach an agreed and shared view on, and there will be issues that, fundamentally, we will never agree on. However, that is no different to all societies throughout the world.

At the time of the Haass discussions, my party leader said that the DUP would not be bullied into making a decision on issues relating to victims, flags, emblems and the past that would be a back step for unionism and, indeed, victims. When it comes to dealing with those issues, people need strong leadership now and in the future.

The report also notes that an agreed view has not been reached on the 11-plus, welfare reform, ESA, an Irish language Act and the peace and reconciliation centre at the Maze, thereby creating a logjam for future development. Sinn Féin and the SDLP need to recognise that welfare reform must go through in line with the demands of the Westminster Government. They need to listen to polls that show that an overwhelming majority of parents still wish to have an 11-plus, and they must question the need for money to be wasted on the implementation of an Irish language Act. The DUP will not be pushed over by the Westminster, Irish and American Governments for a political fudge with Sinn Féin on those issues. Quite simply, poor decisions on those issues will not be popular with the electorate, and decisions to keep external audiences happy are not what the DUP is about.

The Assembly must do more to embrace and welcome the loyalist marching band tradition and ensure that additional funding is available. As the Member across the Chamber said, there are now 660 bands in Northern Ireland, which is pleasing, and I welcome the opportunities that that creates for young people in skills and education. As the report states —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Hale: I need to finish. Thank you.

As the report states, there appear to be parallel realities in Northern Ireland where hope and division run alongside each other. For the vast majority of people, peace and harmony prevail. However, that does not mean that certain elements in society will not utilise the current stalemate on historical issues as an opportunity to derail the future for malevolent and malicious purposes. It is also vital that we persist and challenge issues such as educational underachievement, lack of economic prosperity and unemployment. I am a strong advocate of ensuring that the Assembly does all in its power to challenge youth unemployment. As we saw during the August riots throughout England, an unemployment rate of 20% can translate into a danger zone and, indeed, anarchy. We need to be careful that the current economic instability does not translate into a reignition of hatred that

is allowed to be transferred to future generations, who, thankfully, did not grow up through the Troubles. I spoke on poverty in the Chamber last year and welcomed the plans by Iain Duncan Smith MP to look at the ways in which we measure poverty. I continue to challenge the use of free school meals as a key parameter for poverty and state again that that must be broadened if we are to actively support the most disadvantaged families in our society.

Many challenges lie ahead, not least dealing with the past, and we must all ensure that we put our best foot forward. Mr Speaker, I thank you, and I welcome the report.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the publication of the report and the tabling of the motion on it this morning. However, given the volume of the report, I am disappointed — I say this without fear of contradiction — that, if you look at Hansard, you will see that the essence of the report appears to have been lost on virtually every contributor so far this morning. Every Member who has spoken has, in some cases, tried to look more widely at the report and some of its conclusions, but, for the most part, they focused on certain aspects of it, particularly from their own perspective.

I welcome the report from Dr Paul Nolan and his colleagues. I do not accept all its conclusions, but, if Members took the trouble to read the report, they would see that the indicator framework in the early part heavily caveats the report, its findings and even the evidence base that produced it. That makes it clear that it is somewhat difficult to measure what is a post-conflict society. It tries to break it down into a number of domains, and I think that it has done justice to a very difficult task. Obviously, it is difficult to measure, because, depending on where you come from, your political persuasion and even, perhaps, where you happen to live and the immediate problems that you have to face, you may come at the report from an entirely different perspective. A range of issues has been dealt with in the report, and we may or may not agree with the conclusions that the report draws on some of those issues. However, it points to a wide range of issues and indicators that we have to reflect on.

11.30 am

I urge all of us — each and every Member here — to take the time to study the report and, in a sense, to try to be objective about it, at least in the first instance. We should set aside our

views and simply read and try to digest it. It would be helpful if, rather than simply having an-hour-and-a-half debate in the Assembly, we asked the junior Ministers, OFMDFM or even the OFMDFM scrutiny Committee to look at meeting in a different or additional format to allow us more time to examine the report in much more critical detail. Maybe the authors of the report or some of the people who contributed could be brought along for a day-long conference; I do not know. From my point of view, an hour and a half does not give us anywhere near enough time to do the report justice. I know that we in the OFMDFM Committee have dealt with these reports annually for the past two or three years, but, even there, I do not think that we have had enough time to devote to them. So, I urge consideration of a more full way in which we can look at the report more openly, honestly and critically to see whether we can draw lessons from it.

Clearly, we can all refer to aspects of the report, whether it is parading, the past or whatever, and we all have our views on that. A lot of other issues in the report do not get the same headlines as those dealt with through the Haass and O'Sullivan negotiations last year. However, each and every one of them is equally important in its own right. As I said, I urge Members to think long and hard about what they say and how they deal with the report.

For me, the report sets out encouraging and even discouraging discourses. There is no question or doubt that the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process that led to it created an awful lot of hope in this community. I know that a lot of people were fearful of the Good Friday Agreement and distrustful of the peace process, and that is understandable given our long, tortured history. Nevertheless, I have no doubt in my mind that the Good Friday Agreement engendered tremendous hope. There is also no question in my mind that a lot of that hope has evaporated in the past number of years.

The number of people who showed up to view the Giro d'Italia at the weekend, to visit Derry as the City of Culture or to attend all these big international events tells me that, for the vast majority of people out there, those events are like a tonic against the negative politics that often prevail not only in here but in the media and elsewhere. We have a duty to look at the report, to look long and hard at its conclusions and, probably more importantly, to look long and hard at ourselves and at what our contribution has been to any of the negative

aspects of this and at what are the positives. I commend, for example, the work of Martin McGuinness — I use my party colleague as an example — who attended a state visit in Britain —

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

Mr Maskey: — as a gesture of reconciliation. Let us look at what we all can do to tackle what we all know are the difficulties out in our community to give people out there hope, particularly our young people.

Mr G Robinson: The Nolan report mentions a number of areas, and I will briefly mention a few.

The mention of a culture war is concerning, especially as it is a product of irresponsible action by those who have shown utter contempt for the Protestant/unionist/loyalist tradition. An example is the erosion of where we are even allowed to walk to celebrate our culture. When a tradition has pride in flying the flag of the country, it is not surprising that there is a reaction when that pride is attacked. An example of this happened last year when the flag of our country was removed from the City Hall in the capital city of Northern Ireland. If there is to be a shared future, as some allude to, it is up to them to ensure that their actions do not enflame the feelings of a different tradition. This will then prevent a culture war being talked into existence, and this is the best way to enhance Northern Ireland's reputation globally. Cohesion and sharing can only be achieved when respect is shown to all cultures and no culture war continues.

A topic that has recently been discussed by the Assembly — the underachievement of working-class Protestant young men on free school meals — is highlighted in the report. It is essential that this situation is addressed, as it will adversely affect the individual opportunity and economic prosperity of Northern Ireland. If equality is to be ensured, this problem must be rectified urgently.

There is no such thing as perfect research, so any report must be considered in a manner that reflects that. As this is a sample survey, the accuracy of the figures cannot be guaranteed. However, it provides a useful source for possible trends in society. I am not criticising the authors of the report in any way, but it is always useful to be mindful that figures are not always 100% accurate or reflective. The

respondents' backgrounds and beliefs cannot be guaranteed, no matter how hard authors try.

I am sure that we all agree that Northern Ireland can still be a great place in which to work and live, if we can show respect to our culture.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will make a few comments on the report, particularly on the qualifications issues that it raises. The Community Relations Council report has a number of chapters dealing with a wide range of issues. Under dimension two, part four, it highlights equality matters

The Education Committee had previously scrutinised the data reproduced in the report, including the TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA information. However, I want to focus, for a moment, on another data set, namely the GCSE and A level attainment results. I understand that the school leaver data for 2013 will be available soon and the relevant year 12 information shows a general improvement in the attainment of five good GCSEs, including English and maths. Indeed, for pupils not from a disadvantaged background, it appears that the relevant Programme for Government target of 66% GCSE attainment may be actually or nearly achieved in 2014-15. The same cannot be said, however, for pupils identified as being disadvantaged or entitled to free school meals. For them, although attainment has improved, it appears very unlikely that the 49% GCSE attainment target will be achieved. That is despite significant improvements in GCSE attainment in non-grammar schools, a narrowing of the attainment difference with grammar schools and a slight reduction in the gender gap at GCSE.

The Education Committee found during its scrutiny a significant difference in attainment in non-grammars and in different parts of Northern Ireland. The Department explained that non-grammar schools in the west of Northern Ireland are more likely to be Catholic maintained and have fewer pupils on free school meals. They tend to perform better at GCSE and A level. Non-grammars in the northern part of Northern Ireland or in Belfast were more likely to be either controlled or have a higher number of children on free school meals. Those schools and children tend to do less well. The average gaps in attainment could be as high as 10% to 20% at GCSE and A level for non-grammar pupils in these different education and library board areas.

Clearly, the attainment picture is complex. The Education Committee has commissioned

further external research on the contextual factors that may be impacting on attainment. The focus that the Committee keeps on the issue is highlighted in this report.

Those were the comments that I wanted to make as Chair of the Education Committee, and I now want to make a few comments as a Member. I welcome the fact that, last week, the House passed a motion saying that the underachievement of working-class Protestant boys needed be addressed by specific action. I also welcome the fact that, since our debate, the Church of Ireland synod has met in Dublin, and, as leaders of a denomination in our society, passed a resolution that endorsed the very motion that the House debated on Tuesday of last week. Clearly, society, the report and the Churches realise that there is an issue, but what is being done?

It is fine for the Member for South Belfast to come to the House and tell us all that we need to read the report, reflect and then think about what we say. Was that the case when Martin McGuinness referred to the dark side operating in the PSNI? Did he reflect? Did he reflect on his comments on the murder of Mr Gillespie in Londonderry —

Mr Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: — when he refused to endorse the comments made by Bishop Edward Daly, who described it as an act of Satan?

So let us ensure that we are consistent. I will give way: it will get me an extra minute.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way and I would not mind if he had an extra five minutes so that he could shed a bit more light on his comments.

I referred to Martin McGuinness, and you have come back to him. Do you not accept that Martin McGuinness, over the past number of years, has consistently stood shoulder to shoulder with your party leader and previous Chief Constables, speaking out very forthrightly and unflinchingly to people in our community who have been challenging not only us but the entire peace process? Do you not accept that the Member for Mid Ulster Martin McGuinness has been very forthright, along with your party leader, when that has been absent? Let us reflect on the report and see what more we can all do. We can pick holes about everybody else, but what can we do?

Mr Storey: What Martin McGuinness can do is tell the truth. He can tell the House and the people of Northern Ireland what his involvement was when he was a member of the IRA. What was his involvement in the murders of people that were endorsed by the republican community?

Mr Speaker: Order, order. We need to get back to the report, or Members at least need to link their comments to the report.

Mr Storey: In the context of the report, which wants to give us an analysis of where we are at and where we will go as a society, you cannot have partial truth. You cannot have one side being prepared to give all the facts. If the Member is genuine about making a contribution to improving the peace settlement in Northern Ireland —

Mr Maskey: What are you going to do?

Mr Storey: I was never in any illegal organisation.

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

Ms Fearon: How do I follow that?

I apologise for missing the start of the debate: I was caught up in a meeting, and business was ahead of time.

There are four dimensions to the report, and I will focus on a few of them in the short time that I have. The last dimension is about political progress. The key issues that were identified as blocking that were flags, parades and dealing with the past. Had the Haass proposals been embraced, many of the issues outlined in the report could have been dealt with. The Haass proposals were an opportunity for us to make political progress, but, unfortunately, that was allowed to falter by some.

A lot of the issues that are raised are covered extensively in here, almost on a daily basis. They are aired but not necessarily resolved. I want to focus on a few of the issues that are not mentioned but are hugely important.

The report provides a commentary on participation in public life, and it found what we already know: it is not representative at all, and serious work needs to be done to improve that. Women are under-represented not only in the Chamber but in senior grades of the Civil Service, as we heard in previous debates. The same can be said for public appointments,

where, out of 1,400 positions, only 464 are occupied by women. We also have the police and the judiciary, among others, where representation needs to be improved.

Overall representativeness in public life needs to be addressed. How often are we in a room full of white people who are talking at each other and making decisions that affect absolutely everyone? How many people realise that the room is full of white people? As the report outlines, we need to make our public bodies, our politics and our Civil Service representative because, as it stands, they do not reflect the modern society that we live in. Although some people have a problem with embracing diversity, it is vital that we address all issues of inequality.

The report refers to the gender gap, particularly in employment and economic inactivity. It is important that we involve women in shaping our economy, because not to do so is a huge waste of talent and is unjust, given that austere economic decisions disproportionately affect women. Economic inequality between the sexes needs to be addressed. Women are more likely to be employed in low-paying part-time work, to head a single parent household and to be dependent on welfare. Women are less likely to have financial assets and more likely to live in poverty, especially later in life. Those are some of the dangerous knock-on effects of not having enough women or enough equality in decision-making.

The report also mentions public safety. It would be remiss of us not to take this opportunity to condemn publicly the recent spate of racist attacks across Belfast and further afield. We should be welcoming those people with open arms. They have chosen to make their lives here. In fact, we should be honoured that they have chosen this place to bring up their families, so they should be made to feel as safe and welcome as possible.

11.45 am

Another major point outlined in the report is that of growing poverty and, in particular, child poverty. A recent IFS report showed that relative and absolute child poverty will climb to 30.9% and 38.5% respectively by 2020, so the targets in the Child Poverty Act to reduce those to 10% and 5% are unachievable. It is important that Ministers review their budgets with a view to reprioritising spend not just to assist the most disadvantaged but to live up to the Programme for Government commitment to tackle disadvantage.

Additionally, the Executive should be seeking to ensure that people are paid a living wage to reduce dependency on the benefits system. Student hardship also needs to be looked at. A recent report by NUS-USI showed that one in five students is on the brink of dropping out due to financial difficulties. The report outlines a number of hugely important issues. As was said, it makes for uncomfortable reading for many people and hugely frustrating reading for many young people.

The one thing that we do know is that the issues raised require cohesion and the will to tackle them. We more than offer that.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion and address the points that were raised in the debate. There were excellent points in that last contribution from Megan Fearon on the role of women in public life. I am delighted to have just come from addressing the international women's business conference with junior Minister McCann. Six hundred women are taking part in that and taking the lead, ably chaired by Kate Marshall of Women in Business Northern Ireland.

I am always conscious that I was a working-class boy who went to university on a full grant and did not have any fees to pay. There are important points to be made to ensure that young people are not priced out of education.

We have come a long way as a society and the collective effort at a political, community and even individual level has to be commended. Work such as the peace monitoring report contributes to assessing our progress. I had the opportunity to discuss the report and its findings in detail with Dr Nolan and the chair and chief executive of the Community Relations Council.

The positive trend indicates that there is evidence of a broad consensus that Northern Ireland is now a stable and peaceful society. However, in a society routinely described as post-conflict, there are still those for whom the conflict is not over, although levels of violence are at their lowest for 40 years. This message of improvements and risks is highlighted in the report by facts such as for the period of the report not a single soldier, police officer or prison officer was killed, although it deeply saddens me that there was one security-related death.

The level of hate crimes and hate incidents in Northern Ireland has increased. Unfortunately,

we all witnessed evidence of that hate crime against our ethnic minority community in the past few weeks. That has to be condemned at the highest levels and has already been condemned by the First and deputy First Ministers.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the junior Minister for giving way. I share his condemnation of recent hate crimes. Is there any update on the re-initiation of the "Unite against Hate" campaign that the Department was successfully involved in?

Mr Bell: We are continuing to work through a range of forums with our partners in the ethnic minority groups that we support through the ethnic minority development fund. We will be reinforcing and re-engaging. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have meetings with the police and community organisations later on today, and I will be meeting the representative of the Polish Consul in Northern Ireland with the First Minister.

In 1989, I went as a young boy to Poland, at 19 years of age, to teach English for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. I went into a community that welcomed me. It was hard because I had no real grasp of the Polish language and no real understanding of Polish culture, and I was going to be there for a number of weeks. I was embraced and made hugely welcome by Polish people. Polish families, and I will never forget this until my dying day, had very little money in 1989, but what they had, they shared with me. They made me feel welcome and brought me to their homes to stay with them at the weekends, and I am deeply indebted to the Polish community for the care, love and immense kindness that they showed to me. I want our culture to afford our ethnic minorities the exact same as they afforded me.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: I will towards the end if I have time.

I want to take some time to clarify comments that were made in the House. I am glad that the Police Service of Northern Ireland has confirmed that there is no evidence whatsoever that the Orange Order has been involved in the racist incidents. In addition, the statistics clearly demonstrate that elements of racism exist across Northern Ireland, not just in one area, and they are not confined to any one community. The Police Service of Northern Ireland has confirmed that, in addition, this is too complex a problem to be ascribed to one organisation. It is a problem for all of us and

one that all of us must collectively tackle. However, in all categories, the number of incidents remains low against historic levels and comparatively low by UK standards. For the first time in a generation, residential segregation has diminished. I also note the point about the educational underachievement of young Protestant males.

I remind Members that OFMDFM commissioned research that was published in May 2006, which reported similar findings. To address those, we, along with the Minister of Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning, are putting in place robust action plans. Not least of those is the numeracy and literacy strategy that has put over 200 teachers into nearly 300 schools to specifically address underachievement in numeracy and literacy. The research, which was entitled 'Higher Education in Northern Ireland: A Report on Factors Associated with Participation and Migration' was done by Bob Osborne et al of the University of Ulster. The findings were based on an analysis of the school leavers' survey and focus groups with pupils. They suggested that boys in Catholic maintained schools regarded progressing to higher education as a goal to a greater extent than boys in controlled schools. The report also found that Catholic maintained schools do better for educational outcomes for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds than controlled secondary schools.

So we know that there is still work to do, and Mervyn Storey made some strong points about the work that was still to be done. The publication of the peace monitoring report underlines where there continues to be challenges for us all at an individual, community and, yes, political level. We will not shy away from those challenges. We remain committed to building a united, shared and reconciled community by continuing to improve good relations across our society.

As Members know, we published the new good relations strategy 'Together: Building a United Community' in May last year. The strategy is a significant step forward and provides the basis of a comprehensive programme of work to improve relations and tackle the root causes of community tensions. Our strategy focuses on four key priorities: our children and young people; our shared community; our safe community; and our cultural expression.

As part of the strategy, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a package of significant and strategic actions that will help build a prosperous, peaceful and safe society,

enriched by diversity and welcoming to all. The package is built around the education of our young people, who are sadly not in education, employment or training. It is based on regeneration, tackling deprivation, addressing housing and learning from the past. I think you will see that we have already identified a specific programme of interventions that will make a significant contribution to addressing the underlying causes of poor community relations, including those highlighted in the report.

Together: Building a United Community, with its clear framework for action, is a critical part of achieving our vision of a better future for everyone and supporting the work. Our key actions on United Youth, urban villages, shared sports, housing and education, which are year-round interventions, as well as on interface barrier removals demonstrate our determination to tackle the issues that impact on the development of a cohesive and united community. I am pleased that we have made significant progress on those issues.

Design groups to draw up detailed proposals to implement those actions have already made significant progress. It is our intention that the plans and proposals that arise from those design teams are robust. After the elections, we will discuss the programme with Executive colleagues who are leading on the delivery of the specific commitments. We hope to be in a position to update Members on progress towards implementation.

I am also delighted that a number of pilots have already been commenced. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have already made announcements on two of the four urban villages at Colin and the lower Newtownards Road, and they expect to make further announcements in the near future that will move key parts of the strategy to the implementation phase in 2014. The urban village concept seeks to revitalise urban areas by looking together in a joined-up way at education, retail, recreation, employment and the housing needs of communities. In doing that, a real sense of community and revitalisation will be forged, overcoming a legacy of piecemeal design and urban decay.

We have launched a pilot —

Mr Lyttle: Will the junior Minister give way?

Mr Bell: I will see how much time I have towards the end, because I know that Mrs Kelly also wants to intervene. I will try to leave some time at the end.

We have launched a pilot for the United Youth programme, which is funded under the central good relations fund. The pilot will inform the design of our commitment to create 10,000 one-year placements in our new United Youth programme, offering the young people in the NEETS category structured employment, work experience, volunteering and leisure opportunities, along with a dedicated programme that is designed to foster good relations and a shared future.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the junior Minister for giving way. I wanted to ask about hate crime. I appreciate his comments about the welcome statement, particularly where the Polish community is concerned. I also wanted to ask him about violence against women. A number of women have been murdered, allegedly by partners, over the past year. I want to ask about the support that the Executive may give to tackling that type of violence against women and, in particular, about support for Women's Aid centres, recognising that 35 incidents occur before a crime is reported to police.

Mr Bell: The lady makes her point very well. Junior Minister McCann and I have looked at a number of initiatives that support women who have been attacked and help people to prevent further attacks, given the levels of recidivism. We have also looked at initiatives in Londonderry that provide safe and secure placements. We visited residential facilities there, and we looked at where the opportunities are for women to receive proper medical attention and to have evidence gathered that could be used and sustained in court. So, it is a point that is well made.

To go back to this, the future of our society lies with our young people. We need to invest in them to ensure that they do not suffer from the legacy of past conflict. We need to support them and give them the skills to build a positive, shared and reconciled future. The 100 summer schools are also an important initiative, giving a range of opportunities for post-primary pupils to come together for academic and leisure purposes but as part of a shared education agenda that looks at a range of development needs.

DSD has taken forward work on 10 shared neighbourhoods, building on the work it has already done in social housing and responding to strong demand for it. The 10 shared education campus initiatives complement the work that was already done with the Department of Education. The initiatives are targeted infrastructure projects that are aimed at improving or facilitating sharing initiatives in

local schools. The programme will target schools that demonstrate that they can share facilities, enhanced facilities and campuses. Over recent months, there has been a great deal of interest in advancing opportunities for shared education, and we want to see those taken forward.

12.00 noon

In my last minute and a half, I want to turn to some of the Members' contributions. The honourable lady from Upper Bann rightly focused — it is a focus that we share — on jobs, growing the economy and creating a brighter future here, and I think that we have all been delighted at the hundreds of jobs that have been announced over the past six weeks, including the brilliant news for Wrightbus yesterday. We support you in terms of your childcare strategy and the approach for flexible and affordable childcare that takes into account the needs of rural dwellers.

The Member said that there has been increased support for bands, Orange halls and cultural expressions. I believe that that is right. We will look towards the issue of confidence, and where there is a problem with confidence, we will address that.

My colleague Kieran McCarthy said that educational achievement is key. That is why OFMDFM has spent almost £30 million in the past two to three years on initiatives that are specifically targeted at children and young people. Indeed, the Chair of the Committee and my colleague, Mike Nesbitt, made similar comments so well at the start of his contribution.

Our record of infrastructure investment and the fact that we have the most foreign direct investment of any region in the UK outside London, have the lowest household bills in the UK and have attracted more jobs to Northern Ireland —

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

Mr Bell: — in the past four years than at any time will hopefully address the point about bread and butter issues.

I want to finish with one thing. We have a big challenge ahead of us, and the circumstances are difficult. Martin Luther King gave us the advice that:

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

The report provides a challenge to us. We have to stand to it, and we will win. As Terry Paulson said — I will conclude with this, Mr Speaker:

"Winners lose more than losers. They win and lose more than losers, because they stay in the game."

The Northern Ireland Executive will be a winner. We will stay in this game.

Mr Lyttle: I am pleased to make the winding-up speech and that the Committee has put the debate on the agenda of the Assembly. I extend my thanks to all Members who contributed to the debate and say fair play to junior Minister Jonathan Bell for coming to the House and engaging in the debate. That does not always happen on OFMDFM issues, and I think that it has been constructive.

The report covers a significant breadth of topics, and we have encountered some of them today. Some of the indicators of good relations are a sense of safety, equality, cohesion and sharing and political progress. Dr Nolan refers to the report as providing:

"a year-by-year, dispassionate analysis of the dynamics within the society, looking not just at the surface events but at the deeper stresses within the society."

I think that it is extremely important that we do that. There are certainly some very stark statements in the report on issues that reveal the state of good relations in Northern Ireland such as equality, sharing and separation. For many of us, the truth is sometimes very challenging, and I welcome the fact that the junior Minister has accepted that some challenges have been laid down by the report.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue to devote time to examining how OFMDFM is tackling issues around equality and community relations. We are eager to see progress in that area, particularly on how exactly the proposed new equality and good relations commission will take place and work in practice. The Department's 'Together: Building a United Community' strategy document states that the Department:

"will seek to find an appropriate consensus around a definition of sectarianism",

which will be included in the legislation to establish the new body. So, we look forward to progress on required legislation in that area at this stage in the mandate and hope that the Department will introduce detailed proposals as soon as possible.

The Committee was briefed on the outcome of the consultation on good relations indicators to be used to monitor progress on the community relations strategy, and it is clear that there is work to be done in that regard — definition of terms such as "good relations", how exactly to quantify terms such as "favourable" and "influence" and how to balance the use of quantitative and qualitative data.

Some respondents also expressed concerns that the indicators of good relations do not go far enough to include all backgrounds in our society and ethnic minorities in particular. Indeed, the recent spate of racist attacks has been rightly condemned by the House today. I would be keen to see how the good work that is happening between elected representatives, the police and the community and voluntary sector could be coordinated, perhaps via the re-initiation of the Unite Against Hate campaign, which was a powerful communications tool that brought people together to take a firm stand, shoulder to shoulder, against racism and hate crime of any nature.

Feedback had also suggested some concern at the removal of any explicit reference to integrated education as an indicator of progress. I hope that the Department will take those views on board and effectively address that when it amends the final indicators.

In the Together: Building a United Community strategy, the Department states:

"we recognise that there is no room for complacency, and we must all face up to the difficult issues that stand in the way of further progress."

I am sure that everyone in the Assembly agrees with that statement. The peace monitoring report is a useful tool that will shine a bright light on the state of that progress. I hope that the debate provides focus and renewed urgency on the work to be done, which, if we are to step forward as a society, is needed.

I will turn to Members' contributions. The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

rightly raised the question of where future funding for this type of report will come from and the priority that needs to be given to engaging with young people. He raised concerns about inconsistency. I hope that he would agree, however, that having a report of this nature, even with inconsistencies, is much better than having nothing at all.

Stephen Moutray raised concerns about negative comments and unreliable conclusions. He also referenced, as did other Members, the topic of and comments on a cultural war. Dolores Kelly, however, questioned that. Indeed, she agreed with the report that a cultural war could be talked into existence; be a self-fulfilling prophecy; or, at worst, be used to manipulate insecurities for political gain. We have heard statistics on the increased number of parades, funding, respect for Orange cultural events and the increase in bands. Therefore, I think that there is useful evidence to speak into that area of concern.

Rightly, Bronwyn McGahan emphasised that good relations must extend to all, regardless of sexual orientation; the need to progress the sexual orientation strategy with urgency; and the importance of dealing with the past.

Kieran McCarthy listed some outstanding issues, as many others did, such as concerns about inequality in educational outcomes, which must be addressed; poverty; and the importance of addressing literacy and numeracy issues in order to empower people to feel confident in their identity and to be able to establish good relations in the community. He expressed concern, as does the report, about how devolution, at times, fails to address the bread-and-butter issues that matter to so many.

Our ability to achieve when we work together was evidenced in the City of Culture and, at the weekend, in the Giro d'Italia. In Northern Ireland, we have much potential and many talents, which are showcased when we work together and build trust with one another. Mr McCarthy also mentioned the importance of peace monitoring and concern about the adequacy of the proposed OFMDFM good relations indicators as they stand.

Brenda Hale also referenced the concern about a culture war brewing on the streets. I think that was the language she used. However, she helpfully went on to reference the large-scale covenant centenary parade, an increase in loyalist marching bands and the positive cultural expression that can occur as well. She stated that the DUP would not be bullied into decision-making on victims, flags and the past. I

certainly do not want anybody to feel bullied on those issues, but I do want them to feel that there is an urgent need to address them.

Alex Maskey recognised the report as an admirable effort and useful attempt to examine the state of community relations in Northern Ireland. I support his call for a more in-depth analysis of the report and a mechanism by which to do that regularly.

Mervyn Storey, with his expertise as Chair of the Education Committee, gave an in-depth analysis of qualifications and underachievement, and, in what were fairly forceful remarks, I heard an appeal for truth. That is it what a lot of people in our community are asking for and is an appeal that everybody in the Assembly, whatever background they are from, needs to hear and respond to.

Megan Fearon rightly focused on the need for long-term solutions on the issue of flags, parades and the past and also for us to improve the representativeness of participation in public life. She mentioned the need for gender equality in the economy and in public life to build good relations. Her party holds significant power in OFMDFM around the gender equality strategy, child poverty and the racial equality strategy, and I trust that she will be lobbying hard for progress on those issues.

Junior Minister Bell mentioned the need for the inclusion of women in public life and the contribution that the report has made to assessing our progress. He also called for everybody to work together. That is a call that we need to hear in the Assembly, and we have a collective responsibility to sell education at secondary, further education and higher education level as a goal for which everybody in the community must aim. He also set out progress on the Together: Building a United Community strategy and actions that, to be honest, I do not regard as actions at present. I want to hear more detail on what exactly the urban villages will be and where they will be located —

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

Mr Lyttle: — and I still have concerns about the administration of the central good relations fund. There are a lot of areas in which progress needs to be made, and the report has shone a useful light on those key areas. We hope to see the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister showing leadership on the progress of those issues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report Number Three produced by the Community Relations Council and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 June 2014, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill (NIA Bill 33/11-15).

The Committee Stage of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill began on 9 April this year. The Bill, which is a key part of the wider programme to reform the legal aid system in Northern Ireland and, as such, is supported by the Committee, consists of 13 clauses and three schedules. It is largely technical in nature and will require supporting subordinate legislation, some of which will involve the affirmative resolution procedure, which will provide further opportunities to scrutinise the detail of the proposed changes.

The Committee is also considering an amendment to the Bill, proposed by the Attorney General for Northern Ireland, to confer on him a power to obtain papers relevant to the exercise of his powers under section 14 of the Coroners Act (Northern Ireland) 1959 to direct an inquest when he considers it advisable to do so. The principal focus of his concern is deaths that occur in hospital or when there is otherwise a suggestion that medical error may have occurred.

As I indicated during the Second Stage debate, the Minister of Justice had raised the possibility of keeping the Committee Stage of the Bill as short as possible to enable it to receive Royal Assent in the autumn, and the Committee had agreed in principle to a 10-week Committee Stage. The Committee has now received 20 written submissions from a range of stakeholders and will hold an oral evidence event in the Long Gallery tomorrow to explore the key issues. At our meeting on 7 May, the Committee agreed that it could complete the required scrutiny of the Bill within the planned

10-week Committee Stage and therefore agreed to seek an extension until 20 June. Although that is an ambitious target, particularly given the other justice issues that the Committee will be considering in the coming weeks, it is achievable and will enable the Minister to schedule Consideration Stage before the summer recess. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 June 2014, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill (NIA Bill 33/11-15).

12.15 pm

Standing Order 56(1)

Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 56(1) and insert –

"There shall be a standing committee of the Assembly to be known as the Public Accounts Committee to consider –

(a) accounts laid before the Assembly;

(b) reports on accounts laid before the Assembly;

(c) reports to the Assembly under Article 11 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987." — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim an rún. On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to the House today, which proposes an amendment to Standing Order 56(1) relating to the functions and work of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

In January 2014, the Committee on Procedures considered correspondence from the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee requesting amendments to Standing Order 56 so that it more accurately reflects its work and functions. Standing Order 56(1) currently provides for the Public Accounts Committee in its consideration of accounts and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly. Those

accounts and reports on accounts are laid before the Assembly by the Comptroller and Auditor General, who is the independent auditor of the public sector, and his office, which is the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The Comptroller and Auditor General, who I shall refer to as the C&AG, also has power under the Audit (NI) Order 1987 to consider the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of publicly funded bodies and to report to the Assembly on those matters. Therefore, in practice, the PAC not only considers accounts and reports on accounts but also reports and memoranda laid by the C&AG under the 1987 Order. On behalf of the Assembly, the PAC addresses the full range of reports written by the C&AG, whether within the scope given to him by the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as described in the current Standing Order, or the scope of the 1987 Order. Consideration of reports made under the 1987 Order forms a significant part of the PAC's work. Standing Orders, however, are silent on that important aspect of PAC's work. The purpose of today's motion is to rectify that.

The Committee on Procedures agreed to bring forward the motion so that Standing Orders more accurately reflect the functions and work of the PAC. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Boyle (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate on the amendment of Standing Order 56(1), which relates to the work of the Public Accounts Committee. I speak today in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, and I speak in support of the motion.

The PAC began the process of seeking amendment to the Standing Order in January. The Committee has corresponded with the Committee on Procedures on a number of occasions, most recently, to consider the formulation of words presented today in the motion for debate by the whole House. The PAC was unanimous in agreeing to the wording and is united in support of the motion today. The PAC sought a revision to the Standing Order in order to provide greater clarity as to the work of the Committee and the remit of the work it can undertake.

The proposed amendment refers specifically to article 11 of the Audit (NI) Order 1987, which details the areas in which the Comptroller and Auditor General can lay accounts and reports

on accounts in NI Departments here, public bodies and other bodies being supported by public funds before the Assembly. The PAC is able to consider the full range of reports produced by the C&AG to the Assembly within the limits of the 1987 Order but, as has been noted today, that is not apparent in Standing Order 56 in its current form.

Amending Standing Order 56(1) will serve to clarify the remit of PAC by removing any potential ambiguity that exists around the Committee's work. I, therefore, support the motion and commend it to the House.

Mr Clarke (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the PAC, but I am speaking today as the Deputy Chair of the Committee on Procedures.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. The debate has been short, with the Chairperson's introduction being the only other contribution. It is a straightforward amendment to Standing Orders, as you heard, Mr Speaker. It is worth remarking that another amendment was suggested in Committee. However, those who thought it worthwhile to bring forward that amendment did not attend the Committee meeting for the debate on that particular subject, nor are they present here today to put their thoughts forward. I am not sure what their motivation or reasoning at that time was, but they did not have many convictions in the argument that they wished to put forward at that time as they have not seen fit to come to the House to speak to that amendment today.

I support everything that has been said by the Chairperson of the Committee and support the motion.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Leave out Standing Order 56(1) and insert –

"There shall be a standing committee of the Assembly to be known as the Public Accounts Committee to consider –

(a) accounts laid before the Assembly;

(b) reports on accounts laid before the Assembly;

(c) reports to the Assembly under Article 11 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987."

Mr Speaker: As there are ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.21 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that question 6 has been withdrawn.

Economic Data: Quality and Timeliness

1. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his plans to address the deficiency in economic and fiscal reports, which have been highlighted in a recent report by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, regarding the quality and timeliness of economic data. (AQO 6099/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Northern Ireland benefits from a wide range of economic data that are produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and other UK Government Departments, such as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Virtually all the economic statistics have been independently assessed and designated as national statistics, so they are fit for purpose.

I welcome users' views so that the development of our official statistics can be informed. However, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) report fails to recognise that the quality and timeliness of economic and fiscal data are as good as, if not better than, those of most of the other jurisdictions and regions of the United Kingdom. Continuing to develop our economic and fiscal measures is simply good practice. That is not the same as saying that Northern Ireland does not have adequate economic and fiscal data for our required purposes, and I reject any such views.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you. The report clearly shows that the local economy is run on guesswork and departmental experience, rather than on measures of economic growth. Saying that it is as good as, or better than, England, Scotland or Wales is no justification. I wonder how you propose to address the fact that the local economy is run on guesswork.

Mr Hamilton: I reject entirely that the local economy is run on guesswork. We are very clear on what our expenditure is as a Government. Clearly, there will have to be guesswork on our income and inputs, given that HMRC is not set up to produce regional data, although it is making good attempts to do so with tax receipts. Staff from NISRA, along with their Scottish counterparts, are working with HMRC to ensure that there is uniformity across the United Kingdom in the way in which those tax receipts are analysed regionally.

Understandably, estimates will be used in circumstances where you do not have the hard and fast data. I have tasked my officials to work very closely with HMRC, the Office for National Statistics and their counterparts in Scotland to try to ensure that the figures are as robust as possible in the absence of definitive regional figures. Unfortunately, HMRC is not set up to produce numbers in that way.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister agree that the real story behind our economic and fiscal data is not down to their timeliness but rather to the fact that they illustrate the importance of Northern Ireland remaining as a member of the UK?

Mr Hamilton: That is the elephant in the room, certainly for Ms Ruane and her party. I do not hold myself out as some sort of special analyst of what is in the minds of people in Sinn Féin, but I would hazard a guess, since we are talking about guesswork, that there is an attempt to try to undermine the contribution that the UK Exchequer makes to Northern Ireland annually. Whatever Sinn Féin thinks the figures might be, there is undoubtedly a deficit between what we raise and what we spend as a region.

As the Member will appreciate, we are the net beneficiaries of a very sizeable annual subvention from the Exchequer. The 2011-12 net fiscal balance report, for example, shows that Northern Ireland's deficit was £9.6 billion. That is down slightly from the previous year's adjusted figure, but we still receive a very sizeable chunk of money every single year from Westminster. That accounts for 33.1% of our total gross value added. It is the equivalent of £5,311 per head in this population, compared with a UK average of £2,133. So, whatever way you look at, and whatever NICVA, Sinn Féin or anybody says, there is a deficit between what we raise and what we spend in Northern Ireland. That is an undeniable fact. Whatever about the quality or timeliness of figures as judged by Ms Ruane or Sinn Féin, the Member is absolutely right to say that this country, Northern Ireland, benefits considerably from the

subvention that we get from the Exchequer on an annual basis.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister accept the report's recommendation that, along with the relevant UK agencies, the Executive should provide income/output data at a level that allows a more detailed understanding of the import/export relationship that exists between the North and GB?

Mr Hamilton: I am not against refining and changing the figures in the economic and fiscal data that we produce in Northern Ireland. I have absolutely no qualms about saying that it can always be changed, refined and improved. I am very keen to see that happen. In fact, in and around the date that the NICVA report was published, NISRA published a scoping study that looked at the feasibility of producing our own national accounts for Northern Ireland, which allies somewhat with what the Member is saying. That is out for discussion at the minute. We are hoping for a broad range of feedback from everybody — from political parties to NICVA to stakeholders in the business community — to see whether there is merit in doing that. The merit in doing it will obviously have to be balanced against the cost of doing it and whether producing those figures has much benefit beyond what we currently produce. However, I am certainly not against doing it. It is something that NISRA is actively engaging with stakeholders about as we speak.

INTERREG V

2. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any proposals to reduce the processing time of applications to the INTERREG V programme. (AQO 6100/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Firstly, the INTERREG V operational programme has not yet been launched, and there are no projects under consideration. It is somewhat difficult to reduce processing times when there is, as yet, nothing to process. That said, it is worth noting that, using the current assessment process, the existing INTERREG IVa programme has achieved full programme allocation, met all expenditure targets to date and is on course to meet the objectives outlined in the operational programme. Nonetheless, improvement in the area of application processing is required.

Development of the new programmes provides the opportunity to make improvements where possible, and the Department of Finance and

Personnel is keen to achieve simplification and efficiencies. For the new INTERREG Va programme, I have tasked my officials to ensure that project applicants experience a streamlined and more efficient process, whilst still ensuring rigorous assessment in adherence with Northern Ireland public expenditure guidance.

My Department, in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the Irish Republic, the Scottish Government and the Special EU Programmes Body, is, therefore, currently considering a range of options and mechanisms for improving the INTERREG Va assessment process and wider programme administrative issues so that any improvements can be made before the new programme opens for applications, which is expected to be in early 2015. Ongoing discussions on improvements include the role of Government Departments, appropriate and proportionate effort in respect of economic appraisals, the means of assessment, and a range of administrative improvements.

It is important to note that all Northern Ireland EU structural fund moneys are subject to the Northern Ireland public expenditure and appraisal rules. It is right that this remains the case to ensure value for money in what is, after all, public money.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for his reply. Can the Minister assure us then that lessons have been learned from the existing programmes and that that will smooth the way for future programme applications from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?

Mr Hamilton: Much like I said in my answer to the previous question from his party colleague, I think that, no matter what we are doing, there is always scope to improve what we are doing and, even if there is not much room for improvement, to at least look at and assess what we have done so that lessons can be learnt. It is worth repeating the point that INTERREG IVa has been fully committed, met all its time and expenditure targets and spent that money on some very good projects. It has done its job in that sense, but I accept that there is some justification for the criticism that the process from lodging an application to getting it approved has been a slow one in some instances.

I am sure that the Member appreciates, as I do, that it always has to be rigorous and robust and that, sometimes, it has to be a little bit more so, if a little bit more work in delving into the scheme is required. I am sure that, in wanting

to streamline the process and cut down on the time that it takes from application to a scheme getting passed, we would not want to lose any of that rigour or robustness.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí. Will the Minister update us on any proposals that he or his Department has to ensure the maximum drawdown of INTERREG funds locally in the future?

Mr Hamilton: There have been debates in the House from time to time about the drawdown of EU funds. That is more focused on competitive funds for which we compete against other regions or, indeed, other member states. INTERREG Va has a similar size of fund to INTERREG IVa. Around €282 million is available to Northern Ireland over the period of the scheme. Obviously, it will be subject to N+3 targets over its lifetime, but the overall drawdown target is €282 million. The totality of the scheme is our drawdown target. With INTERREG IVa, we were able to commit all of the funding, and we hope that, similarly, with INTERREG Va, we will be able to spend all of the money allocated to Northern Ireland.

Mr G Robinson: Will the groups and projects currently funded under Peace III be given mainstream funding to enable them to keep going through any delay between Peace III and the start of Peace IV?

Mr Hamilton: This issue has come up in the House before. Some Members have corresponded with me about it, and I know that it has caused concern among some groups funded by Peace III.

In response to Mr Robinson, I make the point that there is no guarantee that, just because a project got funding under Peace III, it will automatically get funding under Peace IV. Groups currently funded under Peace III could apply for funding under Peace IV for work similar to or different from the work that they are doing under Peace III. However, everyone who applies and receives funding knows that they are being funded for separate and distinct programmes and projects, so, in that sense, when Peace III ends, the project also ends. Therefore, there is no gap in funding. Although there may be a gap between Peace III and Peace IV, there is no gap in funding between them because they are separate and distinct projects. There is no need for mainstream funding, for example, to be given to groups performing those functions because they should

have understood the rules when they applied for and received Peace III funding.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give us an indication about economic appraisals? One of the significant burdens of INTERREG IVa was that, sometimes, a series of economic appraisals was required for a single project. Is there any mechanism to reduce that number and ensure that only one economic appraisal will be required for each application?

Mr Hamilton: It does not matter what type of appraisal it is. I do not think that there should be more than is absolutely required. I make the point to the Member that it is critical that economic appraisals are part of the overall assessment process, not least because Executive Departments are, in many cases, the conduits through which European regional development funding or, indeed, match funding from their departmental budgets will go to the schemes.

It is absolutely right that Departments do economic appraisals so that they can ensure that, first, there is a need for the project that they are being asked to fund and, secondly, that the quantum of that funding represents good value for money. I think that everyone will agree that that should not be done to the nth degree or over and above what needs to be done to ensure that there is need and value for money. As I said in response to Mr McKinney, given that this is public money, both the European segment and the Northern Ireland Departments' contribution, it is important that we still have the rigour and robustness that comes from economic appraisals.

Corporation Tax

3. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on any discussions he has had with HM Treasury regarding the devolution of corporation tax. (AQO 6101/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Government will make their decision on whether to devolve responsibility for corporation tax in the autumn, with an announcement to be made no later than the 2014 autumn statement. The Government have previously indicated that, if they did decide to devolve responsibility for the rate of corporation tax, a stand-alone Bill would be introduced in the normal way, with the aim of it becoming law before the prorogation of Parliament prior to the 2015 general election. That is a very tight timescale, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have

previously highlighted the need for an early decision to the Secretary of State.

2.15 pm

In the meantime, preparatory work is ongoing for the development of the proposed technical design of a devolved regime, and Northern Ireland officials are liaising with their Treasury counterparts on that. That will inform the content of the necessary legislation and follows on from the previous work by the joint ministerial working group on rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Ross: The House will be aware that we are moving closer and closer to September, when we will not only find out the result of the Scottish referendum but, hopefully, find out the decision by our national Government on whether they will give us the power to lower our rate of corporation tax. The House will be aware that there have been a number of successful job announcements in recent weeks and months, including in my constituency. Will the Finance Minister advise the House of his assessment of how much greater a tool it would be if we had a lower rate of corporation tax when we go overseas and try to attract foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right to point out Northern Ireland's success over the past five to six weeks in attracting around 3,000 new jobs, with announcements by firms such as EY, Concentrix and, yesterday, Wrightbus, among a wide range of firms. It amounts to some 3,000 jobs in a very short time, which shows that Northern Ireland is already an incredibly attractive place for foreign direct investment.

As I am sure that the Member will appreciate, the key to success through corporation tax is to get Northern Ireland up the value chain in the type and quality of jobs that we attract. The Enterprise Minister's economic advisory group's (EAG) report suggested a figure of some 58,000 new jobs by 2030 as a result of lowering corporation tax. There are other estimates, some of which are even higher than that 58,000.

The other day, my attention was drawn to comments by my friend and counterpart the Irish Finance Minister, Michael Noonan, when he was quizzed in the Dáil about increasing its rate of corporation tax. The Member and the House will appreciate that the Irish Government have been under constant pressure over the past number of years to increase the rate of corporation tax. Mr Noonan pointed out that,

based on the argument of the geographical peripherality of Ireland within Europe — obviously, it is similar for Northern Ireland — a competitive corporation tax rate is a tool to address the economic limitation that comes with being a peripheral country. I agree with him.

Michael Noonan also said that any increase in the 12.5% rate could, unfortunately, result in a behavioural change on the part of taxpayers and could have a resulting negative impact on economic growth. He estimated that every 2.5% increase would result in Ireland's inward investment decreasing by nearly 10%. The corollary of that is also true. If we reduce our corporation tax to a similar rate, we will get similar growth in our economy. What the Irish are doing in fiercely defending its 12.5% rate, as articulated by Michael Noonan, is indicative of why it is so important that Northern Ireland also gets the power to reduce corporation tax to similar levels.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I hope that the Minister does not accept the Treasury's estimates of the costs of corporation tax as readily as he does the deficit figures that were referred to earlier. The Member who spoke previously referred to Scotland. The experience in Scotland has shown that the block grant offset can be negotiated year on year until an accurate final figure can be agreed. Will the Minister update us on the negotiations on the cost of corporation tax over the next number of years after the decision in the autumn? After Scotland makes a decision — yes or no — in September, how will that influence the British Government's decision?

Mr Hamilton: Without wishing to go back and fight question 1 all over again, the figures that I quoted for the deficit were Northern Ireland figures not Treasury figures. The Scottish referendum has clearly had an impact on the timing of the decision, which is regrettable. As someone who wants Scotland to remain within the United Kingdom, I think that, by devolving corporation tax to Northern Ireland, the Prime Minister could have argued that, on the basis of a very good case being made by Northern Ireland in exceptional circumstances, it showed that devolution within the United Kingdom actually works and could work further for Scotland. The Prime Minister chose not to do that, which is his prerogative, but he has at least committed to a decision being made in the autumn, and no later than the autumn statement.

As I said, we have a very tight window. However, the very fact that preparatory work

has been ongoing for some time, the fact that it has been very extensive and that it is at an advanced stage is an indication of the seriousness with which Downing Street, the Treasury and those in positions of power in London are taking this. It nudges towards a more favourable outcome than perhaps we might have expected a number of years ago when the campaign started. I think that we have made considerable progress in pushing the case, and the argument has been well and truly won over the past number of years. It is now a matter of waiting to see what happens in Scotland.

Some of the preparatory work is looking at the initial cost, and one of the areas of discussion that is still ongoing is the formula used to adjust the block grant on an ongoing basis. That is still being discussed between officials in my Department and other Departments in Northern Ireland and their counterparts in Treasury.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his very interesting answers. He is right about Scotland: it is the key issue, it has to be determined, and that is what has delayed the process. Has the Minister discussed any of those matters that he referred to with Mr Noonan regarding the implications that there might be for both jurisdictions in jointly attracting investment into Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: As you would expect, Mr Noonan and I have discussed corporation tax at our meetings. I was present in Titanic Belfast when he spoke to the annual Confederation of British Industry (CBI) launch last autumn. At that event, I was very pleased to hear him affirm the Irish Government's support for Northern Ireland to have the power to reduce corporation tax. Knowing that that would put us in a much more competitive position against them, in some ways it might have been easy for the Irish Government, if not to be anti it, to at least take a fairly neutral or quiet position on it, and I welcome the fact that he has supported it. I still think that, ultimately, the decision will be taken in Downing Street, and it will be influenced quite considerably by the result of the Scottish referendum in mid-September.

With regard to working with our neighbours in the South to attract investment into Ireland, that has been done on a UK-, Ireland- and Northern Ireland-wide basis with the recent joint trade mission to Singapore. We have to accept and recognise that, just as we are economic competitors with the Irish Republic, we are every bit as much in economic competition with Scotland, Wales, England and regions within England. That will always remain the case,

even if we have the power to reduce corporation tax here in Northern Ireland. However, that does not stop us on economic development any more than it stops us on tourism or on any other areas where there are mutual benefits and mutual interests for us to work together with our counterparts in the Irish Republic.

Private Sector Investment

4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he plans to create better leverage in private sector investment to promote higher levels of infrastructure provision. (AQO 6102/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am determined that we seek to access all suitable funding sources to maximise infrastructure investment in Northern Ireland. That will not only drive long-term economic growth but support our construction sector in the short term. I have become convinced that funding from private sector sources, such as the European Investment Bank, can play a greater role in supporting infrastructure investment in Northern Ireland. I intend to consider how to maximise private sector funding sources and improve infrastructure delivery here in the coming months.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is he doing to improve infrastructure delivery?

Mr Hamilton: Mr Hilditch raises a critical point with respect to infrastructure. It is one thing to have increasing amounts of capital to spend in Northern Ireland, whether that be conventional capital coming through our block grant or raised in the rate, or whether it be accessing private sector sources. It is one thing to have all that, and the quantum that we have to spend is increasing. For the first time in three years, we entered this year with over £1 billion to spend. With assets sales and reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, we will have around £1.5 billion or £1.6 billion to spend this year. However, it is one thing to have all that and maybe not get it spent. I accept the criticisms that we are not as speedy at getting projects on the ground as we should be. I have studied carefully very considered contributions from the likes of the CBI in respect of infrastructure delivery.

I studied best practice from around the world, particularly in places such as Canada and Australia, and I have come to a clear conclusion when it comes to improving infrastructure delivery, which is that there are three things that

we need to advance quite urgently in Northern Ireland. The first is to better prioritise projects, to get that pipeline of infrastructure projects that you hear spoken about quite often — a pipeline of projects that are strategically and economically beneficial to Northern Ireland.

The second thing that we need to do is to much better centralise procurement and the delivery of projects. Sometimes, what we do at the minute is too disjointed, and that is where you get some of the problems.

Thirdly, we need to have a culture change within procurement and infrastructure delivery. I was with the Cabinet Office a few weeks ago, and it is very clear that, in the UK, government as a whole has gone down the route of getting much more commercial skills embedded in government. That is so that, when you are going in to negotiate and discuss the delivery of infrastructure projects with some huge private sector companies, you have people with similar experience to go up against those individuals. That has been somewhat lacking and is something that I am keen to see developed, and I hope to advance that through the work of the procurement board subgroup in the next weeks.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Both those questions were very good and got very good answers, but I remind the Minister that there is a two-minute limit. I do not want to starve Members of the vital information that you are sharing.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his extensive answer. It has gone some way to answering my supplementary, but I would like you to elaborate. You talked about the infrastructure deficit. In my area of west Tyrone, there is a high infrastructure deficit. How does the Minister propose to address such areas?

Mr Hamilton: Members are welcome at any time to come to get even more extensive answers from me privately if they so wish. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that there will not be a long queue of people waiting to hear those.

I accept that this is a criticism. I was in Fermanagh with the Enterprise Minister last week, and there was similar criticism about the infrastructure investment not seeming to make its way outside Belfast. There is a lot of evidence to refute that that is the case and that there is investment in infrastructure outside Belfast. Of course, there will always be

demands for more and more, and, with a limited budget, it is hard to address such demands.

With a growing capital budget and the potential to avail ourselves of new private sector funding sources through various mechanisms, I hope that we may be able to invest in more infrastructure, and that will be spread across Northern Ireland. In priority bidding terms, I am just the guy who handles the money and gives it out to prioritised projects. It is up to Ministers — whether for roads, housing, health or whatever — to come forward with their own priorities. That is why they need to be clear, as Ministers, about what the priorities are within their departmental areas and then within geographical areas across Northern Ireland.

I suppose that one of the areas that we may be able to address in a much more specific subregional way is local government getting the powers that they will through RPA to borrow more money, regenerate, plan and community plan. There is a role for them. They are not restricted in the same way that we in central government are in accessing, for example, European Investment Bank funding. There is an opportunity for them to start to take a role in driving forward infrastructure investment in a way that they have not been able to in the past.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He knows that I am passionate about getting better leverage out of funding. Has he put or is he putting in place a structure to make sure that all the different Departments that want to lever more funding know how to do it quickly, so that we have that in place, whether for councils or other Departments?

Mr Hamilton: The Member raises an issue that I have identified for some time as a bit of a deficit, never mind in funding but in capacity and knowledge of what is there. We have had, underpinned by considerably less capital being available, a lowering of ambitions over the past couple of years. There has been a bit of a black hole deficit about the knowledge of funds that are potentially there and what Northern Ireland can do. One of the things that I have tried to do and to drive personally has been to engage with local government to ensure that it understands what is there. That conversation has been started with representatives of local government to whet their appetite and to, for want of a better phrase, hold their hand in taking them through some of their options.

I obviously want to engage — to follow up on Mr Hilditch's question — better delivery mechanisms in central government as well. Even though you would expect there to be a lot

more knowledge there, there is, I think, sometimes hesitancy, even at central government level, to go out and probe the possibilities of different sources of private sector funding.

2.30 pm

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

Cycling Infrastructure: Stormont Estate

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will consider increasing the cycling infrastructure on the Stormont estate, such as cycle paths and cycle racks, given that he will surely congratulate everyone who was involved in the Giro d'Italia, making it the success that it was, including individuals, councils and community groups, particularly in the glens of Antrim, which played a big part in the success of day two, and on this estate, which also played a big part in the success. (AQT 1101/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: First, I echo what the Member said about the wonderful success of the Giro d'Italia coming to Northern Ireland for the Big Start and its first three stages. As we speak, the fourth stage is under way in southern Italy. I am sure that we have all got the fever and the bug and will be watching to see who wins the fourth stage. I agree with him that it showed Northern Ireland at its best. We can arrange everything except the weather, but the event highlighted and showcased Northern Ireland as a great place to visit. The fact that the race went through some of our most fantastic tourism assets bodes well for future visitors to Northern Ireland.

I am very pleased that the estate here was able to host a family fun day. We estimate that between 20,000 and 25,000 came into the estate over the course of the day to watch the race and avail themselves of some of the activities that were put on. I am very glad that so many people were able to come to Stormont to watch the race.

I understand the point that the Member makes. We see a lot of cyclists coming in and out of the estate anyway, given that there are no public roads and it is a safer environment for cycling than the Newtownards Road or other surrounding roads. I am very keen to follow up on the success of the Giro in the estate. It is already a successful destination for cyclists of

all ages, and I will ask officials to look at the infrastructure in the estate with a view to improving it and attracting even more people.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for that. Does he agree that the Executive are now committed to the legacy of the Giro d'Italia and taking things forward? Now is the time to install more cycle lanes in the estate. That would send out the message that we are taking cycling seriously and not just making a token gesture.

Mr Hamilton: I am very keen to capitalise on the success of the Giro and do whatever I can with the fairly limited number of roads that I am responsible for as Finance Minister. Many more roads are the responsibility of the Regional Development Minister, who is developing a cycling strategy. I am keen to support that, particularly through investment in better and safer infrastructure for cyclists all over Northern Ireland.

Scottish Independence

4. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given that we are now four months away from a vote on Scottish independence, should that vote go through — it is too close to call — what effects he thinks it will have on Northern Ireland's block grant, whether he has had any discussions with the Treasury and whether he is looking five months hence to that dire situation. (AQT 1104/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am perhaps a lot more optimistic than the Member, although I am sure that he and I would be on the same side of the argument if we had the franchise in Scotland. I believe that the Scottish people will ultimately see the benefit of remaining part of the Union for a whole host of reasons. The Member is right to identify that there will be issues and ramifications if the vote does not go in what he and I would see as the right way. I remain optimistic about the result and, therefore, do not want to engage in speculation on what the consequences for Northern Ireland might be. There will be time enough to deal with that when the vote happens. In the same way, the Scottish National Party does not have a very clear plan for what will happen if it wins on, I think, 19 September.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for that answer. We are very much on the same side of the argument. However, we should always prepare for the worst. For example, in the health service, we prepare for traumas that we hope will never happen. In this situation, we

should prepare for the possibility of the vote going against us. I am aware, and the Minister is aware, that things such as Barnett consequentials, which were designed, I think, specifically with Scotland in mind, with all those Labour MPs, will have dramatic effects. Therefore, there will be major effects on our finances, and the concern is that, if a subvention of around £20 billion is withdrawn from Scotland, the Treasury will look to do something here. That is the point that I was making.

Mr Hamilton: I know entirely the point that the Member is making and accept it. I do not want to get into speculation on the vote because I think that it will go against independence. However, there has long been a discussion about Barnett, and that may be reignited irrespective of the outcome in September. I have always cautioned against, and will do so again, Members of the House or, indeed, anybody outside thinking that opening a discussion on Barnett will be good for Northern Ireland.

Barnett is far from perfect. It was a temporary measure and has been temporarily with us now for close to 40 years. However, it has served Northern Ireland reasonably well. Any opening up of Barnett by the Treasury would not necessarily be to the advantage of Northern Ireland.

Cost of Living

5. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has any proposals to tackle the continuing fall in standards of living, the decrease in disposable income and the rising cost of living, given his comments earlier about the 3,000 jobs that have been created, which are very welcome. (AQT 1105/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Significant economic data on an almost month-by-month and week-by-week basis show that Northern Ireland is doing much better and that we are not only on the road to recovery but starting to head down the road to recovery. Whether you are looking at economic output, the unemployment rate or claimant counts, things are improving across the board. That we have been able to attract so many jobs over the past weeks is testimony to the product that Northern Ireland has to offer to investors, no matter from where they come.

I accept, however, that, even though there are many good headline economic indicators, perhaps the last place in which people will see improvement is in their own pockets and

household budgets. What the Executive have done and been mindful of over not just the past couple of years but right back to 2007 has been to control as best they can what they can control, and that is primarily our rates bill. We are the envy of many in the UK for having the lowest household bills in the United Kingdom. We have an average rates bill in Northern Ireland of £825 for domestic customers. That is roughly half the average household tax bill for English householders. Of course, we have collectively agreed not to introduce water charges, again recognising that to do so would hit some of the hardest-hit families in Northern Ireland

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for that answer. It is obvious the impact that rates reductions and water charges have on people's standard of living. Belfast City Council has taken the decision to support the idea of a living wage. Is that something that the Minister's Department could examine and recommend across the board?

Mr Hamilton: I raised that issue with officials not long after taking up post. I think that there was a debate in the House at the time about it. The issue with a living wage for civil servants whose pay I am directly responsible for is that the evidence is that very few are not on a living wage. That does not mean that it might not be looked at in time, if opportunities arise. Of course, the Member will be aware that we have a limited budget. We have tried to show some pay restraint over the past number of years to fit in with that very tight budget.

The living wage is a concept that is still developing as an idea over and above the minimum wage. It is certainly something that I am keen to keep under observation.

PSNI/NIO: Equal Pay Claim

6. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on his work on the PSNI/NIO equal pay claim. (AQT 1106/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Member and I have discussed equal pay before. He will appreciate that it was shown in court last year that there was no entitlement for the individuals who were former NIO or PSNI employees to access the Civil Service equal pay settlement. I have spoken in the House several times about that, and I have committed myself to looking at the issue and to carefully studying it to find out

whether, even if there were no legal argument, there might be a moral argument that could be addressed in some way. I can update the Assembly on some recent progress on the matter. I have circulated to Executive colleagues a paper in which I have outlined a recommendation that, if agreed by the Executive, will result, I hope, in a successful and satisfactory resolution of the issue.

Mr Newton: I am pleased to hear that a paper has gone to the Minister's Executive colleagues. That is a piece of good news, in that some solid work is being done. When does the Minister think that a final resolution of the matter might be arrived at?

Mr Hamilton: I cannot go into the precise details of what is in the paper, because, as the Member will appreciate from his time in the Executive, it is a matter of confidence between me and other Ministers. However, the paper has issued. It requires Executive colleagues' agreement to the recommendation and, obviously, to any expenditure of resources that is required to deal with the issue in regards to a payment to the staff who are affected. All that I can say is that, as I promised, I have examined the issue and have made a recommendation that is aimed at resolving it. It is now over to my Executive colleagues to decide whether they want to follow the recommendation that I have put before them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Pat Sheehan is not in his place.

Economic Recovery

8. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he noted the publication of the Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index and agrees that it shows yet another sign of economic recovery in Northern Ireland. (AQT 1108/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Following on from some of my comments in response to Mr McCartney's question, I think that the Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index (PMI) is another of those indicators that is useful in showing where Northern Ireland is headed economically. When the economy was headed in the wrong direction, most commentators certainly heralded it as a very authoritative work. It is only right that, when the economy is going in the right direction, we equally hold the index up as an authoritative work. The Member is right. The index shows that output is up for the tenth month in a row. It also shows the fastest growth in Northern Ireland since 2002, which

was when this report began. It shows that the service sector is very much taking a lead but also that sectors that have been hard hit, such as construction, also show that work is up. With those new orders going up, employment is also going up, according to the PMI. So I agree with the Member that this is yet another sign that economic recovery has arrived in Northern Ireland.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Does he agree that the recent raft of economic data and his revelation today that 3,000 jobs have been created over the past number of weeks clearly show that the Executive's economic strategy is, indeed, working?

Mr Hamilton: I have articulated this a few times in the House and elsewhere. The Executive have a strategy of investing very heavily in skills and infrastructure, including telecoms infrastructure in particular. They also have a strategy of going around the world and selling Northern Ireland as a place for people to invest in and of using the Giro and other events to showcase Northern Ireland as an attractive place. That is starting to work. Local firms are looking outside Northern Ireland. They see not just Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland or the British Isles as their only available market but the world, and particularly new and growing markets, as places to do business. That is very important. I think that our strategy is beginning to pay off. It has been slow and arduous, but it is, at last, paying off. That is affirmed by the Northern Ireland composite economic index, which, for quarter 4 last year, showed that annual growth in the economy was at some 2.6%, with the services and production sectors leading the way. What that shows, which is affirmed by the latest Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index, is that, at long last, our private sector is leading recovery in Northern Ireland. That is what we want to see happening. It is very good news for our people.

2.45 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 5 and 15 have been withdrawn.

Health Service: Salary Payments

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the problems with administration and payment of

health service staff salaries and expenses will be resolved. (AQO 6114/11-15)

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the extent of any missed salary payments experienced by health service staff across the region in the past six months. (AQO 6116/11-15)

11. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he will address underpayments and wrong tax code issues relating to health service salary payments. (AQO 6124/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 3 and 11 at the same time, and I would like to request an additional minute to respond.

All Health and Social Care (HSC) trusts have introduced a new human resources, payroll and travel and subsistence system (HRPTS) over the past year. Although the vast majority of payments to HSC staff have been made correctly over this period, unfortunately there have been problems for some staff in receiving the correct pay and expenses, particularly in relation to allowances rather than basic pay. In addition, a system issue emerged at the start of the new tax year, which meant that a number of staff had additional national insurance contributions deducted from their pay in error.

I am extremely concerned and disappointed at the difficulties that some staff are experiencing in receiving the correct pay. I expect departmental officials, trusts and Business Services Organisation (BSO) management to work collectively to ensure that all outstanding payments are made quickly and that, on a case-by-case basis, urgent consideration is given to any losses experienced by staff arising from employer responsibilities. BSO and the trusts have already implemented a range of measures to correct any mistakes, including running additional payment cycles to make good any underpayments. Where this has not addressed the problem — where there is hardship, for example — emergency payments have also been used.

The April pay run was supplemented by an additional payroll cycle, with payments reaching staff accounts on 2 May or 6 May 2014. There is also a plan in place to fix the issue of incorrect national insurance deductions for future pay runs. The testing of this solution is

under way with the aim of implementing it as soon as possible and before the next monthly pay run on 28 May. In the meantime, an off-cycle payment run was made to ensure that affected staff had the corrected pay in their bank account by 6 May. In addition to this, my Department has approved further expert support for the HSC payroll functions over the coming months. This will provide additional resource to help with the familiarisation of the new HRPTS system and will also help staff to develop solutions to staff queries.

The issue of the application of emergency tax codes by HMRC is not due to the HRPTS system. Notwithstanding this, I have required the HSC to take all necessary steps to resolve this issue for staff. Therefore, the BSO and trusts are urgently liaising directly with HMRC on behalf of HSC staff to investigate this issue and establish an appropriate resolution to it. The primary focus of HMRC and HSC is to remedy this position as soon as possible and address the resultant pay issues.

Mr Beggs: We have a very heavily pressed health workforce, some of whom have carried out additional shifts and have not received appropriate pay on a timely basis several months — four or five months, I understand — after they carried out that work. Who is responsible for that and who will pick up the additional costs that some of those staff will have incurred through bank charges because of missed debits? How will we ensure that this never happens again?

Mr Poots: My answer to the last part of the question is that it has been 35 years since the last system was introduced. All being well, it will be a very long time before a new system is introduced with the teething problems that this one has caused us.

It is totally wrong that staff are not paid for the work that they have carried out. Let us not beat about the bush: that is wrong and should not be the case. However, mistakes have been made, and there have been issues and problems, largely relating to overtime or payments to people who are putting in travel and subsistence claims and so forth that they are very well entitled to receive but have not been receiving.

The system was established through the BSO and was put out to the trusts. The responsibility for the running of the system is now with the trusts, and therefore they have to account for what has been happening. It is for the trusts to give every assistance to members of staff who have found hardship as a result of this and to

help them deal with those issues and overcome them. That may involve financial support and other kinds of support.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, I have to declare an interest: I have a sister awaiting a payment of £1,200 and a niece awaiting a payment of £700. Only last week, we were told that it would be the end of the month before they receive their correct entitlement. The Minister is right to point out that people should be paid for the work that they do. Of course, it is not just nurses; it affects a range of healthcare and auxiliary staff. Does the Minister believe that the system is fit for purpose? Was it the right decision to pay off a number of back office support staff who were skilled payroll staff?

Mr Poots: I understand that a series of tests was carried out on the system, which has been installed and worked successfully elsewhere, so it should be fit for purpose. A system is only as good as the information fed into it. That appears to be where the issues have arisen. Irregular information has caused the problems. In some instances, that may have been due to when time sheets came in. However, in many others, it will have been the fault of the people on the trust side who administer the system and not the individuals who are making claims and should receive their money.

Belfast Trust has established a dedicated payroll helpline for queries and is holding drop-in clinics across its sites to ensure that solutions are agreed quickly. There is a much greater focus on getting the issue resolved now than there has been for some time.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. If the Ulster Bank was doing this, we would all be going mad. The situation has been unacceptable. Does the Minister accept that low-paid workers and those on zero-hour contracts have been disproportionately affected by the situation? Will he outline to the House how he intends to put right the problems faced by those individuals in the coming period?

Mr Poots: It is not just low-paid workers who have been affected but workers across the range. People working overtime, people working unusual hours and so forth have been hit hardest. As I said, the Belfast Trust, which has had a lot of problems, has a dedicated payroll helpline, and other trusts have extended the phone hours of their payroll department. One of the issues was that people could not get through to talk to someone. Payroll departments in trusts have been working hard

to ensure that all staff receive their correct pay in a timely manner.

A lot of this has been resolved, but I want all of it resolved. It does not matter whether 90%, 95% or 98% are getting their rightful pay: I want 100% of people to get it. I have made it very clear that that is what needs to happen and what needs to be done. I understand that the people in the system are working very hard to resolve this. In many ways, they are all in this together. The people delivering the service recognise that their colleagues are losing out and need to be correctly paid, irrespective of their code or field of work.

Mr Ross: We recognise that the trusts are working hard to resolve the issues, but it is right to acknowledge, as the Minister has done, that many members of staff have found themselves in hardship. Will the Minister outline to the House the process for staff looking to claim additional payments?

Mr Poots: Pay is adjusted from the notifications received from line managers. They could be for enhanced payments such as overtime, on-call or unsociable hours payments, absences, changes to contracts or starters and leavers. Those are generally communicated to the payroll departments in the form of time sheets, and, if they are not received by agreed deadlines, errors will be reflected in the payroll.

The majority of the pay issues experienced by the HSC in the past six months relate to enhanced or amended pay. Staff and their line managers need to ensure that their forms are sent in on time, but those on the administrative side who feed the information into the system also need to ensure that everything is correct.

We have had the additional problem of national insurance being incorrectly applied. That was not a system fault; it was an HMRC issue. It caused additional stress for people who had already received less pay than they should have. We are working closely with HMRC to resolve its end of things so that that issue can be tidied up quickly as well.

North-west Health Innovation Corridor

2. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what progress has been made on the north-west health innovation corridor. (AQO 6115/11-15)

Mr Poots: I support this cross-border initiative and the contribution that it can make to promoting and taking forward healthcare innovation. In response to a previous question on 19 March 2013, I said — I repeat it now — that it is important that the initiative is complementary to the broader e-health and innovation agendas being taken forward by my Department and Invest NI. I encouraged organisations associated with the initiative to become members of the Northern Ireland Connected Health ecosystem.

With the Western Health and Social Care Trust and other organisations, my officials are exploring opportunities that could be taken from a Northern Ireland perspective to support the further development of the initiative. It will also be important that organisations associated with the initiative have in place a clear development path and strategy and that they work with Invest NI to identify opportunities for potential financial support. Finally, as it is a cross-border initiative, it will be important that communication also takes place with the Department of Health in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer and the update on the project. He has discussed the process: has he any indication or outline plan about the resources that his Department will bring to the project?

Mr Poots: We see Connected Health as a key strategic area in which we can move forward. It creates a lot of opportunities for the Health Department to move to a different plane in its delivery of services. In May 2013, my permanent secretary participated in the launch of the north-west health innovation project. Officials have been liaising with the Western Health and Social Care Trust, the University of Ulster and Invest NI to consider the support that might be made available to the initiative. Consideration is also being given to the funding of a post for an initial three-month period, subject to a review and a possible extension for up to an additional 21 months maximum, to help to secure funding and to coordinate and progress the initiative. One option that is being explored is to have that post placed in the Clinical Translational Research and Innovation Centre (C-TRIC), which, as the Member will know, is a unique facility based in the north-west that promotes and facilitates translational research.

Mr G Robinson: How does the Department's memorandum of understanding contribute to innovation in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: My Department established a memorandum of understanding with Invest NI — that is quite unusual — on the Connected Health ecosystem. Other places are looking at Northern Ireland's leadership on the issue. It will provide strategic leadership across government in that arena. We have targeted R&D and innovation funding; the development of a Northern Ireland Connected Health ecosystem; collaboration with other European and North American regions; and the promotion of the Connected Health agenda internationally.

The MOU led to the launch in September 2012 of the Northern Ireland Connected Health ecosystem, which brings together universities, the health and social care sector and the business sector to translate issues and problems into solutions that are then deliverable in the marketplace. The Executive's commitment to healthcare innovation is expressed in their Programme for Government and their economic strategy. An innovation strategy, which will be published by the Executive later in 2014, will reinforce that commitment.

Ulster Hospital: Car Parking

4. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has any plans to increase car parking capacity at the Ulster Hospital. (AQO 6117/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has purchased the former Tor Bank School site adjacent to the Ulster Hospital. Work is ongoing at present to create a car park that will hold approximately 250 additional vehicles. It is anticipated that the facility will become operational in August 2014.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his answer. My understanding is that the Tor Bank site car park is only a temporary measure. When the mental health facility is approved, it will take over that site. Is a long-term car-parking facility planned for the Ulster Hospital?

3.00 pm

Mr Poots: The trust is looking at how it provides mental health services in the south-eastern area and at developing mental health services at the Ulster Hospital as opposed to at Lagan Valley and, indeed, the Downe. That is

an ongoing issue that we do not have a final paper on yet. We will look at that in the future. In any event, the 250 additional places at the Tor Bank site will give us considerable easement at this point. Providing car parking at the Ulster Hospital is a major issue that has been ongoing for some time. We very much welcome the move to have those places available in August this year.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What factors does he believe are contributing to the extra demand for parking on the Ulster site?

Mr Poots: One of the reasons is the ongoing major construction work. We are spending almost £200 million at the Ulster Hospital to make it a state-of-the-art facility in conjunction with the works that have already happened at the intensive care side of the hospital. We find that most of those who attend, either patients or visitors, do so using private transport. So, we would encourage greater use of public transport. There is an increase in provision of services as a result of reconfiguration in changes to services across the wider Health and Social Care, and many potential patients are not served by direct public transport to Dundonald. Perhaps Translink could assist us with that. The Department approved the business case for the trust to purchase the former Tor Bank school, and we were able to acquire it from the Department of Education last year. Work is ongoing to ensure that those spaces are available in summer this year.

Mr Gardiner: I want to ask the Minister about the car parking charges at the Ulster Hospital. Apart from the income from the machines for people parking their cars, what further finance is available as a result of car parking that can be put towards improvements in the Ulster Hospital?

Mr Poots: Our task is, first and foremost, to provide healthcare, and people will use car parking to access that healthcare as they will use car parking in many other instances to access services. We, as a public body, will pay rates and will have to maintain those facilities. Having a charge on it enables us to concentrate the money that we have on providing services. So, it is important that car parks pay for themselves, and we are doing that. It is being considered in some other hospital sites, and I know that a lot of people are perhaps unhappy with that. However, we should be very clear that our first focus must be on providing services to the public, and car parking spaces is not one of the services that we, in the

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, are there to provide. It should be paying for itself.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for his answers thus far. Minister, I will follow on from your previous answers. Given the concerns expressed by unions and the general public, do you believe that the current pricing structures for the car parks in the North is feasible for patients and their families?

Mr Poots: In many instances, the car park charges are very low compared with what people are paying for town car parks, and the trusts generally have policies in place to enable reimbursement for the long-term ill so that you are not punishing people who are very ill. We have sought to ensure that the car parking charges are fair, reasonable and measured, and, where somebody identifies that people are being overcharged, we are happy to look at that and respond.

Medication: Prescription

6. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures his Department is taking to permit health professionals, other than doctors, to prescribe medication for patients. (AQO 6119/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has supported and taken forward the necessary legislation to enable that to happen, in line with the rest of the UK, and continues to do so. Non-medical prescribing is an important part of my Department's commitment to modernise health and social care. Such developments enable new roles and new ways of working to improve the quality of services and deliver safe, effective services that are focused on patient experience. That makes it easier for patients to get access to the medicines that they need.

Changes made to date have enabled nurses, pharmacists and optometrists to train as independent prescribers, and have enabled physiotherapists, podiatrists and radiographers to train as supplementary prescribers. Nurses working in the community may train as community practitioner prescribers. Further changes are in hand that will permit physiotherapists and podiatrists to train as independent prescribers.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. What are the benefits to the system of non-medical prescribers? I want to use one typical example. Several months ago, I spoke to a

gentleman who was put in hospital. He had been on a regime of 22 or 23 tablets per day, but after speaking to the pharmacist in the hospital, the regime was reduced to four tablets per day, which was a dramatic help. He said that he had not felt as well in many years. He should only have been on some of that medication for a short time.

Mr Poots: It is important that people receive the appropriate medication and that patient safety is not compromised. We believe that, by using a range of prescribers, we can improve that patient care without compromising patient safety. It will make the process easier and quicker for patients to receive the appropriate medicines. It will increase patients' choice in accessing medicines, make better use of the skills of our health professionals, which is very important, and contribute to the introduction of more flexible working across the health service.

Where we see it happening most is in the management of long-term conditions; the medicines management and medication review; emergency urgent care; unscheduled care; mental health services; services for non-registered patients, for example, the homeless; and, indeed, palliative care. A range of people can provide that. There are national plans to extend supplementary prescribing to dieticians and orthoptists, and independent prescribing to radiographers and paramedics in future. That is something that we will also look at.

Mr McKinney: Are all the health trusts fully complying with the HSC Northern Ireland Formulary on the distribution of drugs?

Mr Poots: That is something that we have been rolling out in recent days, and all our trusts will be supporting, developing and working with it. The formulary is a great opportunity to move forward in our drugs management and prescribing, which is a key area for us.

Addiction Services

7. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the future of addiction services. (AQO 6120/11-15)

Mr Poots: A public consultation by the Health and Social Care Board on the future model for tier-4 inpatient addiction services closed in January 2014. The board has taken due consideration of the full range of issues raised as part of the consultation before bringing forward final proposals on appropriate models for future service provision, which seek to improve outcomes for clients and cover the

wider needs of the overall Northern Ireland population. The board anticipates that it will be in a position to announce the outcomes of that work before the end of June 2014.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Given the increasing levels of addiction across the island, can the Minister outline the discussions that he is having with his Dublin counterpart in developing an island-wide strategy on addiction?

Mr Poots: We have been working quite closely with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland on the issue of alcohol. Indeed, we held an all-island conference on addiction last year. That is something that we regularly discuss at our North/South ministerial meetings. So, it is an area that we see as a priority. One issue that we are jointly and independently looking at is the minimum pricing of alcohol. That will certainly work much better if it is introduced in both jurisdictions, if not simultaneously then as close in time as possible.

Excess alcohol consumption costs Northern Ireland around £900 million each year, and we need to be very aware of that. In 2012, provisional figures showed that around 270 people died directly as a result of alcohol misuse, which is an increase of 28, or 11%, on the 2011 figures. Overall, the number of deaths increased since 2001, when there were 206 deaths, by around 30%.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What role does the community and voluntary sector currently play in this field in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: The community and voluntary sector makes an invaluable contribution to our efforts in addressing alcohol and drugs misuse. The recent consultation by the Health and Social Care Board rightly reflected that and sought to build on its role in preventing and treating harm and supporting recovery. The evidence shows that rehab can be undertaken effectively in that sector and is already happening through existing contracts with Northlands in Londonderry and Carlisle House in Belfast, for example. There might be an opportunity for other potential providers to bid to provide those services in due course.

It should be noted that using the third sector as a key partner is not about privatising alcohol and drug treatment services; it is about making best use of people who are out there at the coalface and who have great knowledge of local circumstances. I know that FASA, an

organisation in the Member's constituency, is doing terrific work. I had the privilege of meeting people who were walking across Northern Ireland to raise awareness of drug and alcohol problems. I met them on Saturday night, when they made it to Lisburn after walking 27 miles from Bangor. They are doing really good work in raising awareness of alcohol and drug issues.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answers. I fully appreciate the tremendous task of addressing the problems of drug and alcohol addiction. I am sure that the Minister will agree that schools could play a very large role, and perhaps do. What partnerships and strategies involving the Department of Education and his Department are in place to address the problem before people become addicts and, perhaps as in many cases, before it is too late?

Mr Poots: Minister O'Dowd and I have had discussions on these issues. Aside from that, we have a public health ministerial working group, to which the Department of Education contributes very valuably. Consequently, pieces of work are being carried out in conjunction with a range of Departments, including the Department of Education, to get messages out there.

We need to recognise that it is very often a challenge for those of us who are a bit older and appear to be a bit more sensible — too sensible maybe — to get messages across to young people. We are up against the soaps on television, a lot of the messages that are coming out on DVDs and videos and, indeed, the likes of pop stars, football stars and others, who young people look to as role models. When the message that they get from those people is that it is cool to get drunk, it is challenging for those of us who are a little grey headed to encourage young people not to participate. There is a lot of work happening, and I think that we need to have more positive role models for young people. I was at a couple of recent events at which Ulster rugby players were putting out really positive messages. That is good. We need more of our stars to make that impression on young people.

Residential Care

8. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following his recent announcement on the future of residential care, whether he will now remove the non-admissions policy. (AQO 6121/11-15)

Mr Poots: The non-admission policy currently in place in a number of health and social care trusts is being reviewed by the Health and Social Care Board. The board is also in the process of analysing responses to the recent consultation document 'Making Choices: Meeting the current and future needs of older people'. I will consider the board's review of admission policies alongside the final consultation report when I receive it in the early summer.

3.15 pm

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

Racist Attacks: Belfast

1. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps, if any, he has taken to ensure that social services support and assistance is provided to the families involved in the recent racist attacks by the UVF in Belfast. (AQT 1111/11-15)

Mr Poots: In all of this, people who need help from social services will find that they get it. If people approach social services or are passed to them from the PSNI or others, we will follow up on that.

It is absolutely appalling that we have racist attacks in Northern Ireland. Thankfully, the numbers are quite small. In cases in which support is required, it is wholly appropriate that we provide it.

Ms Fearon: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. Does he agree that the support provided by social services needs to be more targeted when there are such incidents? Has he been in contact to ensure that that support will be continued?

Mr Poots: I assure the Member that social services do not need to go looking for work: it comes to them. We have many issues, many problems and very stressful situations. I had the privilege yesterday of meeting the Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers as it launched its blueprint. One of the things that it is looking at is how it can have less documentation and paperwork to enable it to have more time to carry out the job in hand, which is responding to people's needs. We need to continue to work on that key area to make social workers more flexible and better able to be more responsive to all the needs,

and for them to manage caseloads in a more efficient way by spending less time behind a desk.

Hospital Deaths: Malnutrition

2. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is he doing to examine and remedy the extremely serious issue identified in recent statistics that show that, since 2008, seven people have died of hunger in hospital. (AQT 1112/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am aware of recent media reports about official statistics that show malnutrition as being a cause of death in seven people between 2008 and 2012. However, I am not aware of any evidence that that malnutrition occurred during a stay in hospital. If that were the case, it would be totally unacceptable. I have been advised that the Health and Social Care Board has not received any serious adverse incident reports in that regard. However, my Department has contacted the relevant trusts to ask them to carry out a check of the medical records of the deceased patients to identify whether malnutrition was in any way related to their stay in hospital. I understand that that will take a number of days to complete, as medical records have been stored off-site. It would be inappropriate for me to say anything further at this time.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his answer. Disturbingly, five of those hospital deaths were elderly people over the age of 65, and their deaths have been reported as being as a result of malnutrition. Do you believe that that is a damning indictment of how under pressure nursing staff are in our hospitals?

Mr Poots: I think that I said — the Member does not appear to have listened — that I am not aware of evidence that the malnutrition occurred during a stay in hospital. Let us not associate people's deaths — you cannot get any more serious than that — with malnutrition when we do not have the evidence to support the reports. That is very important.

In all these things, good nutrition is vital. We have been promoting a good nutrition strategy, which my Department launched in 2011. It aims to improve the quality of the nutritional care of adults in Northern Ireland through the prevention, identification and management of malnutrition in all Health and Social Care settings, including people's homes. Very often, older people suffer from malnutrition or dehydration in their home.

We need to be responsive to those issues, and we need to identify and address them at an early point.

GP Appointments: 48-hour Time Gap

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether, for Northern Ireland, he can make a promise similar to Ed Miliband's pledge of a 48-hour time gap to see a GP. (AQT 1113/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am flattered that the Member thinks that Ed Miliband's promises will be met; that is a new one. I am sure that Nigel Farage will be very pleased to learn that his members have such confidence in Ed Miliband to deliver.

People who urgently require to see a GP should see one within 48 hours. That does not mean that every single person who wants to see a GP either needs to see a GP within 48 hours or should see a GP within 48 hours. More and more people are seeing our GPs. Consequently, our GPs' workload is growing. We need to identify how we can best meet the public need so that they see the appropriate person and get the appropriate care to meet their needs.

Mr McNarry: I cannot resist passing on an invitation to the Minister: Nigel Farage will be in Belfast tomorrow, and I hear that he is inviting many people for a pint. So, you are very welcome to come along for that. I will pass on your best wishes to him if you are unable to make it.

In a more serious vein, Minister, I know that you said what should be, what will be and what might be, but what are the average times for people seeing a GP and GP appointments being fulfilled? What is necessary to be done to improve those waiting times?

Mr Poots: Our GP practices, which, I might add, are independent health providers, have their own protocols for delivery in place. There is an expectation from the Department that the people who are providing those services do so in a timely manner. One of the services is urgent care. If you urgently need to see a doctor, you should be able to see a doctor urgently, generally within 24 or 48 hours. I know that doctors keep slots available every 48 hours ahead. Although they cannot always see everybody who is urgent within 48 hours, and although there may be some slippage on occasions, more often than not, they are able to see people within that period.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Sewage

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he is aware of an adverse incident, if it could be called that, at Craigavon Area Hospital on 26 April, when raw sewage spilled from pipes into side wards in 1 North, with staff having to spend seven hours cleaning up the mess while patients wore masks; whether he accepts that morale in the health service is so low that nurses are considering balloting for strike action in the next few weeks; and what he plans to do to restore morale and confidence in the health service. (AQT 1115/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am not sure that the first incident led to a ballot for strike action, albeit that it was an appalling incident that should not have happened and something that health estates in the trust area needs to ensure does not happen.

Where morale in the health service is concerned, we have taken on more nurses, more doctors and more allied health professionals. We recognise that workloads are extremely high. Nonetheless, we have to ensure that we meet the needs of the public, because we are servants of the public, as are the staff in the health and social care system. We are employing and investing more in front line services to ensure that we have the appropriate numbers. That is not always the case, and it sometimes takes time to fill positions when somebody else falls ill or moves on from a particular position for whatever reason.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, you will be aware of the recent guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in GB on the number of nurses per patient. What are your targets or aspirations on the same?

Mr Poots: We seek to fulfil what NICE recommends on these issues. In many areas of a hospital, you will find that the nurse:patient ratios are much higher. That depends on the intensiveness of treatment that is required. We will be paying very close attention to NICE recommendations on ratios and will be seeking to fulfil them.

The qualified whole time equivalent of nursing staff has gone up from September 2011 to December 2013 by 640, which is an increase of 4.7%. On nursing support, the whole time equivalent is up by 142, which is a 3.7% increase. So we are not cutting nurses' jobs; we are employing more of them. We are

employing more doctors; we are not cutting doctors. We are employing more allied health professionals. We are investing more of the money and more of our budget into front line services, and, if the Member was happy to allow us to spend more money on health as opposed to welfare reform, I might have £70 million extra to be able to spend next year, which the Member does not want to come to the Department of Health. She wants to starve the Department of Health of funding, and the party opposite wants to starve the Department of Health of funding. We can have a further £70 million taken out of our Budget to spend on welfare reform — that has already been taken from the Budget — or we can invest it in health. The Members opposite do not want to invest in health.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Emergency Department

6. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the situation in the emergency department at the Royal over the past few weeks, albeit that Members can see what the Minister is at: trying to deflect from the fact that there are serious problems in the health service, and grandstanding will not do him any good. (AQT 1116/11-15)

Mr Poots: The emergency department in the Royal Victoria Hospital always faces its challenges and always faces spikes, but it is dealing with the issues as and when they come its way. So we have not been having as many difficulties in recent weeks in the Royal. There was an occasion very recently where 15 nurses came in because there was a large spike after the May Day holidays. That was not wholly unexpected.

The Member can seek to deflect all she likes from the fact that she wants to starve the health service of money. She wants to take £70 million from the health service next year, and that is the fact. If she does not want that money spent in A&E, why is she asking questions about it? She wants to spend it elsewhere.

Ms Ruane: I would love to be able to thank the Minister for the answer, but that certainly was not an answer. In fact, I got no answer to my question. Staff and unions have indicated that on Tuesday at 9.00 pm, there were 100 patients in the emergency department and 20 trolley waits. One person was waiting for more than 11 hours. Can the Minister confirm that this was the case? How will it be addressed?

Please, in your answer, do not use excuses and grandstanding.

Mr Poots: In case the Member did not hear the first time, it was resolved. It is not a question of how we are going to resolve it because it was resolved. Fifteen additional nurses came in and resolved the issue. She referred to a person waiting for more than 11 hours. We have absolutely slashed the numbers of people who have been waiting for more than 12 hours from what it was three, four or five years ago. Tremendous progress has been made there, and people will use extensively the health service and our emergency departments. It is important that we can respond to those people, and, yes, starving the Department of Health and, consequently, the trusts of the resources that they need by £70 million next year will have an impact on emergency departments and every other aspect of the health service.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. That brings an end to Question Time. The House will take its ease while we change the top Table.

3.30 pm

Mrs Cameron: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to take the opportunity to apologise to the Speaker's Office for not being in my place for question 12 to the Employment and Learning Minister, Minister Farry, last Tuesday. I was caught out. I thought that I had got in on time, but I had not. On the same day, I went to the Speaker's Office and made that apology, but I wanted to do so again on the Floor today.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank you for having that courtesy.

Mr Flanagan: On a point of order, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am just wondering which clock you judge the time by. There are three clocks, and each shows a different time, so it is hard for us to know when Question Time is coming to an end.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member knows that it is up to me to decide which clock I use. You are not challenging the Chair.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Social Housing: North Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr Humphrey: In the last election, in 2011, housing was clearly the number one issue in North Belfast. The provision of good, affordable housing is, in my view — I am sure that Members across the House will share it — a human and civil right. All Members should support that. As the demand for social housing grows, the Minister has committed to delivering some 8,000 new social and affordable homes in the Programme for Government. I ask the Minister, when responding to the debate, if he might update the House and outline his target and how progress is being made.

The Democratic Unionist Party is fully committed to delivering greater numbers of social houses for the people of Northern Ireland across every constituency. In my North Belfast constituency, some 5,000 people are on a waiting list for social housing, with half of those in housing stress. The House will be aware of the myths, inaccuracies, spin or maybe even untruths that have been peddled about some of the housing figures in North Belfast. I think that it was the former Prime Minister James Callaghan who said:

"A lie can be half-way around the world before truth has got his boots on."

However, the reality in North Belfast is that the waiting list figures are roughly 50:50. Similar figures apply to housing stress in the Roman Catholic and Protestant communities. Perhaps the Minister, in his reply to the debate, will address the issue across all of North Belfast's 14 wards.

The Minister will be mindful that building new homes is not just the responsibility of government; neither is it his sole responsibility. Regeneration is a key element that must also be addressed, particularly by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. In the greater Shankill, work has started, but it has only started. One example is lower Oldpark, where

26 former derelict properties have been given new life and brought into use. I welcome that development. How, in all conscience, could Girdwood proceed when neighbouring communities such as the lower Oldpark were ignored? Lower Oldpark is an area that has been blighted by the Troubles and by the loyalist feud. There have been years of dereliction, decay and neglect. It has been ignored by direct rule Ministers in Labour and Conservative Administrations and, indeed, was largely ignored by the SDLP Ministers. The area resembles something from the Blitz in 1941. When the DUP took the DSD portfolio, we were determined to address the multiplicity of issues facing lower Oldpark. They included housing, the environment, derelict housing, youth provision, street lighting, play areas, green space and antisocial behaviour. Working with the Lower Oldpark Community Association and government agencies, we have made a start and some limited progress. As I said, we have delivered 26 refurbished properties, a new park, better street lighting, a new play area and environmental improvement, with more to come. Yet, Members from other parties criticise the regeneration work in lower Oldpark. In my view and in my party's view, no community should have to endure what my constituents in lower Oldpark have had to deal with. In this day and age, no one should have to live in such conditions. Shame on the Ministers who failed to address the problems facing the lower Oldpark. I am proud to say that the DUP has started to address those problems.

I welcome the Minister's initiative of building sustainable communities. As someone who sits on the Lower Oldpark Neighbourhood Regeneration Group with Belfast City Council, the Department for Social Development, OFMDFM, the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO), the local community and other politicians, I believe that a joined-up approach across regional and local government is the way forward. Such initiatives will build confidence, increase competence and rebuild communities.

New housing developments in other parts of North Belfast — Woodvale, mid-Shankill and lower Shankill — are all welcome, but they are long overdue. Similar schemes are to be delivered in New Lodge, Tigers Bay and, as I mentioned, Girdwood. There can be no doubt that the 'Equality Can't Wait' report was deeply unhelpful, and, in my view, it added to intercommunity tensions and damaged community relations in North Belfast. I am glad, however, that the official Northern Ireland Housing Executive figures addressed the issue and clarified the position. Perhaps the Minister

will be good enough to update the House with the facts pertaining to North Belfast when he responds to the debate.

When the SDLP held the DSD portfolio, it had a lamentable record on delivering new housing in the greater Shankill. Some of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, indeed across the United Kingdom, such as Crumlin and Woodvale were simply ignored. The former SDLP Minister for Social Development, Mr Attwood, and his colleagues held up much-needed community housing in lower Oldpark, lower Shankill, mid-Shankill, Woodvale and Somervale for 13 years and ensured that that housing and, in particular, ground floor accommodation were denied to those people. Girdwood was a perfect example. As I have said in the House, it was used as a political football by the SDLP, first by its former leader, Margaret Ritchie, in her leadership campaign and then by Alex Attwood in the run-up to the 2011 elections. Sadly, both ignored the Dunlop/Toner report, which talked about a shared site. I am pleased to say, however, that the four political parties that represent North Belfast came together and agreed a way forward, only for the SDLP to withdraw from that process.

As I said, I welcome the Minister's initiative in building successful communities, because many of our communities have been ignored by direct rule. SDLP Ministers have —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I will, surely.

Mrs D Kelly: My colleague will deal with many of the false claims in your contribution. However, will the Member accept that the role of loyalist paramilitaries in downgrading, targeting and thuggish behaviour has had a large part to play in the state of affairs in many loyalist areas and the exodus of many good, decent people, not forgetting the loyalist feuds over the years and the way that they have led to people being expelled and pushed out of areas?

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for her intervention. She will note that I gave way to her when she would not give way to me in the previous debate. When it progresses, the debate will deal with the issue of whether my facts are accurate. In relation to loyalist paramilitaries, I am on record many times criticising them for debilitating their own community. At the outset of my remarks, you will have noted that I referred to the loyalist feud

in lower Oldpark. The Member must not have been listening.

As I said, I welcome the Minister's initiative. Newbuild is an essential part of the Minister's strategy, and I welcome his approach. However, many working-class communities across North Belfast face difficult economic decisions. Therefore, I welcome the Minister's decision regarding the installation of PVC windows in Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties and his push for energy efficiency and the warm homes scheme.

Lack of maintenance, particularly structural maintenance, in areas of North Belfast such as Silverstream has been a serious issue. Not long ago, my colleague councillor Gareth McKee and I visited homes in Silverstream, where we were confronted by the most appalling damp in Housing Executive properties. We were told that it was not damp but simply some condensation.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I will, yes.

Mr F McCann: In relation to that, I think that you miss the point in the whole thing. Those who sit on these Benches say that, where there are bad conditions they need to be met. However, there are bad conditions in many communities. There is dampness, and I went through the Divis flats thing, where there was the whole argument about condensation or dampness. If there are bad conditions, they need to be dealt with, but there are people in severe housing need who must be housed and are being missed in this.

Mr Humphrey: Poorly built homes in appalling condition are detrimentally affecting my constituents' health, particularly young people with respiratory problems. Nothing has been done up to now. We were told that the damp was simply to be accepted, as I said, as condensation.

Under the DUP Minister, these issues in areas of high social deprivation are being tackled. The quality of housing is a real issue, and single-skin properties in Silverstream, Tynedale, Westland and Shore Crescent must be addressed. The conditions in which many of our constituents live are not acceptable in this day and age. Cyclical maintenance is another issue that I believe the Minister has made real progress on. I welcome that progress.

The situation in tower blocks gives cause for real concern. Again, a lack of maintenance and investment by direct rule and SDLP Ministers has adversely affected tenants in all of Northern Ireland's 32 tower blocks, including the constituents of ours who live in New Lodge, Rathcoole and Rathfern.

The Minister is to be commended for the progress that he has made across a range of housing issues in Northern Ireland, particularly in North Belfast. There is no doubt that the Minister, despite the barrage of criticism that he faces, is delivering improvements on all fronts on behalf of Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants across my constituency and across the country. As I said at the outset, access to affordable, good housing is a basic social and civic or human right. For too long, constituents of mine living in Woodvale, Crumlin, lower Oldpark, Shore Road, Rushpark, Rathcoole, Rathfern, Glenvara, Harmon and Queens Park have been ignored. Why is that? It is because the figures that were used by the Housing Executive and the previous Minister were taken from one set of figures from the north Belfast Housing Executive office. They ignored the Shankill and Newtownabbey 1 and 2 offices. Those figures massively damaged the credibility of the Housing Executive in North Belfast. Those figures, because they were taken by politicians and used and abused, have meant that people in the areas that I have just spoken about have been condemned to living in poor conditions, and there has been little or no newbuild. That unacceptable position has been addressed by the Democratic Unionist Party.

It is time for equality to be given to the people of North Belfast — true, real, demonstrable equality. That is because equality delayed is equality denied.

No Member should be complaining about houses being built where there is need, repairs being carried out that should have been done years ago or the addressing of huge issues that face people in the social housing sector. However, it is wrong for people to peddle lies and untruths about the situation, because that means that they are content for the wrongs of the past to continue.

3.45 pm

I want to see everyone in north Belfast who is on the waiting list getting help, whether they are in housing stress, housing need or waiting for a newbuild. Last night, I visited a house while out canvassing and met someone waiting for a four

bedroom house. There are few of those in the Shankill.

Those are issues that must be addressed, and every one of us will deal with them in our constituency offices. They are issues that transcend political divisions across our society and our constituency. As I said before, the record of others is lamentable. What they did was wrong, clearly judged — ill-judged, potentially sectarian and certainly gerrymandering. It is simply not acceptable for people to live in the conditions that some in my constituency and your constituency have to endure; such conditions are not fit for human habitation in this day and age. That must be addressed, and it will be addressed. I have every confidence that the Minister for Social Development, my party and constituency colleague Nelson McCausland, will do that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for bringing the Adjournment debate to the House.

I listened with interest for 15 minutes to the Member's considerations of housing need in north Belfast. I agree with him on some points, but I part company with most of what he said. I will start with what I agreed with.

As Fra McCann pointed out, and you did give way to him, anyone, regardless of who they are, where they live, what their circumstances are, what culture they celebrate and what religion they celebrate or not, is entitled to live in good conditions and live in a place where they have access to facilities and support. That is where I agree with the Member. I part company with him on the rest.

I noted with interest, if not humour, the Member accusing this side of the House of almost gerrymandering figures. It is timely that 'The Detail' covered some of the points and allegations that the Member for North Belfast brought forward. In that excellent article, Barry McCaffrey also deals with, under freedom of information (FOI), some of the allegations by the DUP about gerrymandering. So, let us deal with the facts. When I say "facts", I mean that I am dealing with the Minister's figures.

After 12 meetings with the Housing Executive, the Social Development Minister and up to eight DUP politicians questioned Housing Executive officials over matters that were considered to be operational to the Housing Executive. Housing Executive staff were interrogated by the MP for North Belfast, Mr Dodds, and asked to make operational changes to:

"part of a peaceline interface, which senior Housing Executive officials regarded as a controversial 'boundary change'."

Gerrymandering? Perhaps.

Housing Executive officials also asked for, but were not given, access to minutes of the meetings. Housing Executive officials were asked by the Social Development Minister for the religious breakdown of the applicants on the north Belfast housing waiting list. The MP for North Belfast told Housing Executive officials that the Housing Executive's system for identifying housing waiting figures was providing perverse outcomes and that the system was broken. Indeed, he went further and asked about a constituency in the lower Oldpark, the need in which the Member quite rightly described.

Where it gets perverse, I have to say, and where you can see quite clearly where the Minister is moving the goalposts, is when he attempted to move the Lower Oldpark into the Shankill district in west Belfast. If that is not gerrymandering, I do not know what is. I will go on. Unfortunately, the list does go on.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to make my point. I remember, in 2003 and 2004, the deliberations over the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) and the designation of social housing, particularly around Sailortown, the docklands, Frederick Street and Nelson Street. I remember some of the Member's colleagues, who were then members of Belfast City Council, saying that their biggest concern was that those routes could have an impact on parades, so that was probably the main reason the DUP would object. Lo and behold, an area in Frederick Street that was earmarked under BMAP for social housing was sold to the University of Ulster, which was then granted planning permission by the Department of the Environment to build a car park on an area that had been designated for social housing. At a Planning Appeals Commission hearing, which I attended for 10 hours, DSD officials admitted that, yes, it was earmarked for social housing but now it was not. More gerrymandering.

Indeed, an old PSNI station in Glengormley was again marked for an area that is not seen to be in the same housing stress as North Queen Street. DSD and Housing Executive officials said that the PSNI station at Glengormley should be used to meet the needs of people in Queens Park and Rathcoole, despite the fact

that the same need was not presented as elsewhere.

I also note the careful crafting and manipulation of figures around the North Belfast parliamentary constituency as opposed to the north Belfast housing area, where the majority of people on the housing list are, and will remain, deemed to be from the Catholic community. That is another example of how claims of gerrymandering from the DUP are nonsense.

What we have seen and will continue to see is a manipulation of data to obscure greater Catholic housing need, to dismiss these concerns as nationalist myths, to claim Protestant disadvantage in north Belfast, to refuse to meet the UN special rapporteur and disparage her and her report, disparage Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) and its report, and disparage the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and its report, and disparage the 84% of people on the housing waiting list and their experience.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will close with this. In the words of Maya Angelou:

"If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

And in the words of Albert Einstein:

"If the facts don't fit the theory, change the facts."

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is what gerrymandering looks like; that is what you are involved in. Shame on you.

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

Mr A Maginness: I think it was Humpty Dumpty who said, "When I use words, they mean whatever I want them to mean." When the Minister brought forth new statistics in relation to north Belfast, he created a situation that Humpty Dumpty would be very proud of because he uses statistics in whatever way he wishes to come to the conclusion that, in fact, there is very little disadvantage for Catholics in north Belfast vis-à-vis housing. Of course, that is completely untrue, as has been shown.

Ms Ní Chuilín referred to the detailed report into housing in north Belfast, and it is perfectly true that the Minister used different boundaries to dilute the figures in order to reach a preconceived and predetermined outcome that shows that relative disadvantage in housing is equalised between Catholic and Protestant communities in north Belfast.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, thank you. The reality is that need is need. I do not care whether it is Protestant need or Catholic need; we want to address that need. We believe that that need is not being addressed — it is as simple as that — and that the Minister likes to evade and avoid responsibility for addressing need in north Belfast for what I believe to be political reasons.

It is interesting that, in his speech, Mr Humphrey concentrated purely on loyalist, Protestant areas of north Belfast. He did not talk about the wider needs of the whole community, Catholic and Protestant. I and my party take that very seriously. We need a non-sectarian approach to the problem.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I am not going to take any interventions. The fact is that our Ministers Margaret Ritchie and Alex Attwood thoroughly addressed housing right across Northern Ireland and, in particular, in north Belfast, and they did so on a non-sectarian basis. I reject any criticism of Ms Ritchie or Mr Attwood about their tenure of ministerial office. They were even-handed and went out of their way to ensure that they delivered on need in north Belfast and elsewhere, because they saw the pressing need for housing, particularly for newbuilds throughout Northern Ireland.

What is this Minister doing? According to 'The Detail', this Minister is interfering in the operational activities of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. He has intervened through meetings, emails, and so forth, at least 12 times, if not more. Those are only the ones that have been documented by 'The Detail' online newspaper. That is unacceptable. It is not right that a Minister should do that.

It is clear from the remarks of the former Northern Ireland Ombudsman Dr Maurice Hayes that the Minister is acting outside normal ministerial behaviour. Dr Hayes is critical of what the Minister has been doing, and I think that the Minister should reflect very carefully on what he is doing. Dr Hayes said that a Minister

for Social Development should primarily engage in dialogue with the Housing Executive only through its chairperson. The Minister has consistently failed to do that. He has directly interfered with the activities of the Housing Executive for political reasons, and that is entirely wrong. The Minister should reflect very carefully on that.

The issues that have been raised about operational interference raise serious questions, and I think that this matter will go further. The Minister should now give a commitment to the House that he will no longer directly interfere in operational considerations and that he will use the normal protocol, which is to go through either the Housing Executive board or the board's chairperson. That, I believe, would be a step forward.

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

Mr A Maginness: The final point that I make is this: need is need. Social need should be satisfied, not political need or political gain.

Ms P Bradley: I rise as a Member for North Belfast. I thank my colleague William Humphrey for securing the Adjournment debate. I have represented the Newtownabbey area of north Belfast for nine years as a councillor and an MLA. I have been inundated over those years with requests for housing assistance from both the Antrim Line and Macedon district electoral areas (DEAs). I take great offence when I hear that those areas are almost rejected by some people when it comes to being part of the overall figures on housing need in north Belfast. Indeed, I thank Mr Humphrey for stating earlier that, yes, there are 14 wards in North Belfast, and the Newtownabbey area must not be ignored. I intend to not let it be ignored. It is the area that I grew up in, live in and predominantly represent.

4.00 pm

My DUP colleague Councillor Phillip Brett, who represents the Antrim Line DEA of Newtownabbey Borough Council, the majority of which lies in North Belfast, recently submitted a freedom of information request to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. That resulted in the knowledge that it had not built one single dwelling in the past five years in that DEA, despite the area being among the greatest in need in the entire Newtownabbey area.

There are several social housing areas, unionist and nationalist, in the Newtownabbey part of North Belfast. However, based on the Housing Executive's own figures, it will have met only 19% of housing need, the majority of which is in the unionist community, in the Antrim Line area by 2015, compared with a staggering 402% in the predominantly nationalist areas of Bawnmore and Longlands.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive social need assessment for 2011-16 states that projected need in Glenvarna/Glengormley was 65, yet that was met by the building of 20 units. The projected need in Queen's Park was 35 units, which was met with a total of zero. The projected need in Hightown was five units, but again, it was met with a total of zero. What is even more disappointing is that there are no plans at present to meet any of this housing need in Newtownabbey.

Other examples in the Macedon DEA show that, as I stated, 402% of need has been met in the predominantly nationalist community, but in the predominantly unionist areas of Rathcoole, Rushpark and Rathfern, there is a met need of 55%, 37% and yet again, zero respectively.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: Yes, certainly.

Mr F McCann: I just want to make two points. Taking in Newtownabbey 1 and Newtownabbey 2, it was their job to assess need in that part of North Belfast. For ever and a day, the way that it has operated is that, within the Belfast boundary, the Belfast district offices dealt with it. It was only when serious problems were brought up about housing in nationalist communities that the thing was extended. Do you not agree that most of the housing need in the areas that you mentioned is met by re-lets?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member, and I agree with some of what he said, but his last point is certainly not the case. From the number of people who come through the doors of my constituency office, I know that that is not the problem.

At this point, I thank the Member on the opposite Benches for bringing up the issue of Glengormley PSNI station. Anybody who knows Glengormley or who is from Glengormley knows its demographics. I certainly do; I have lived there for 44 years. I

know that, no matter what they did with that PSNI station in the centre of Glengormley, it would most definitely not meet any housing need in Queen's Park, Glenvarna or Harmin. As someone who grew up there, I know that, even 30 years ago, I could not go down to that part of Glengormley in a school uniform for fear of being beaten up. The situation in Glengormley is the same at this stage, albeit that we are trying to eradicate that problem and that a lot of good work has been done.

There is another issue in that. I was contacted by people who live adjacent to the PSNI station. They are not unionist voters; there would be very few unionist voters there. The first that they had heard about this was when Mr Kelly put his article in the media to inform them of it. They contacted me to find out who this had gone through and whether it had gone through planning. Of course, it did not go through Newtownabbey planning; it went to Belfast by mistake. Those people were also in uproar over it, because they had not been consulted by anybody. As I said, they were not unionist voters; they were nationalist voters who came to me.

If you look at the Glengormley master plan, you will see that the area behind the PSNI station and to the side of it is zoned off for leisure and recreation. That is what the people who live facing that area want to see. They were up in arms and contacted my office, even though they are not my voters, to ask me what we were going to do about that. Maybe when they are out electioneering around that part of Glengormley they might want to ask a few questions at the doors about what the people who live there want.

Housing inequalities in Belfast has been a highly contested issue of late. The figures for the area that I represent show, quite clearly, that those inequalities most definitely exist and need to be addressed as a matter of great importance for the people of Newtownabbey.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If the Minister has not read 'The Detail' website, I would urge him to do so. It is an award-winning website, and he should read it. It is quite appropriate for today.

I welcome the debate. I am a bit surprised that you had the brass neck to table it, but that is for another day. I think that you have to call a spade a spade. What the Minister, the DUP and the MP in the area were involved in was not just intervention. I would call it interference. At the very minimum, there is clearly a conflict of interest in the type of meetings that went on.

In dealing with the reality of the discrimination that has been presented here many times, the Minister — it has been said; he said it, I think, in February that his complaint is that it has been brought to the Assembly many times — instead of trying to fix the problem, went away and tried to fix the figures. The Minister, Nelson McCausland, is often accused of micromanagement, but only it seems when it comes to his constituency — our constituency — of North Belfast. That is the only place that he seems to put that type of effort in. When he found that the Housing Executive districts did not work, were not good enough and that the figures did not suit what he wanted to have as an argument, he called in members of the DUP, including the MP, and had something like 12 meetings over a fairly short period.

That could easily be viewed as a process of intimidation, and it is not a new thing either. Since I started to represent North Belfast, from 1996 and again in 1998, Housing Executive officials have told me many times that that is the way the DUP deals with these things. So, they brought the officials in and interrogated them on the facts over a period of at least 10 months. We know about that, thankfully, through the FOIs, but in my view it has been going on for years.

The demand or request from the MP — whatever you might call it — that the Oldpark area should be shifted in housing terms into the Shankill area says it all, and Members who spoke also mentioned that. I was wondering, as there was some doubt, about who used the term "gerrymandering" in those meetings. We now know, as William Humphrey used it again today. There is gerrymandering if ever you wanted it. The ironic thing is that they did not want the Oldpark ward to be shifted into West Belfast for voting. They said, "No, don't be doing that, we need those votes here. We'll just shift it in there so that we can change the figures for housing." That is what they were at. When —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Kelly: No, I will not. You had 15 minutes, and it was hard enough to listen to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Humphrey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the interests of clarity and accuracy, we did not ask for the Oldpark ward to be removed. That is totally inaccurate and is misleading the House. It was the lower Oldpark area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr G Kelly: That is great. It was the Oldpark area; OK. It was still gerrymandering.

It is interesting because you then ask whether the issue is really about votes. When you look at all this, there seems to be some paranoia in north Belfast, maybe from the MP, about the building of houses. At one stage, he accused the Housing Executive of pushing unionists out of Belfast, by which he meant pushing them out of north Belfast, when officials were trying to explain to him that there were places in Paula Bradley's area, for instance, where they were going to build social housing. It then became a whole issue about moving them out.

That story is not new either. I remember the late David Ervine saying at one stage that it was republican violence that had created all the dereliction. I pointed out to him that he should look at an aerial photograph of the lower Shankill — I have seen them. In any area that is denuded of houses that were once there in the centre and that only has houses on the outside, that is clearly not an effect of sectarian attacks. Sectarian attacks are attacks by bigots, and they are cowards.

Whether Catholic or Protestant, they attack the outside of an area; they do not go into the area.

If an area is denuded from the inside, it is a different issue. The issue is clear. Time and time again, the Minister makes the mistake of not dealing with the issue that denuded those areas. It was not the Housing Executive that sent out the people who voted with their feet; it was the paramilitaries. Young families were forced to decide: "Am I going to keep my children here, when there are paramilitaries dealing in drugs, racketeering and all the rest? Can I fight them? If I can't, am I going to move out of the area?". Now, the Minister is trying to rebuild houses there, with the view that, if they are built, people will come. Instead of the DUP having a relationship with these paramilitaries, you need to deal with them before trying to invite people back. I, for one, would love to see the regeneration of some of those areas, but, if you do not deal with the paramilitary issue, you will be dealing with empty houses yet again. The Minister is building houses where the need is negligible —

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

Mr G Kelly: OK. There are lies, damned lies and statistics. We will all use statistics today, but that is because this became a big issue. It is true that we used all sorts of statistics over the past number of years because there were all sorts of reports, but the one thing that was consistent —

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

Mr G Kelly: I will finish with this. The one thing consistent throughout all of this is —

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

Mr G Kelly: — the huge gap between waiting lists and lack of housing in nationalist and unionist areas.

Mr Copeland: In all honesty, I am equipped with little or no knowledge of the social housing situation in North Belfast. I can only assume that, in many ways, it reflects the situation in East Belfast, South Belfast and West Belfast, which is that the city of Belfast, over many decades, changed in its nature and structure.

Although we talk constantly in here about houses, in all of that conversation, the word "homes" becomes slightly forgotten. There is a difference between a house and home. A house is a place of shelter; a home is a place of shelter and sustenance, where families, neighbourhoods and communities can grow. I despair sometimes because only here in Northern Ireland could the religious composition of a housing list apparently generate more focus and division than the size of the list itself.

I understand the demographics of North Belfast from many years ago. According to the Housing Executive, it runs from the city centre in the south up to Whitewell, Ligoniel and Crumlin in the west to the Shore Road in the east. The Housing Executive, in a 2013 report, stated:

"The distribution of housing stress by religion has remained fairly constant. The nature of housing need differs between the communities" —

as it would. It goes on to state:

"In general terms Catholic communities are characterised by higher waiting lists and longer waiting times for housing. There has however been a significant increase in housing stress applicants in Protestant areas."

Those are their terms, not mine.

I think that, sometimes, we need to remember that there is a difference between an application and an applicant because, on occasion, "applicant" can apply to one, two, three, four or five people. It is when you lose sight of people in these equations that the answers become muddled.

It is true that, in East Belfast, a nationalist from the Short Strand "couldn't" take a house on the Newtownards Road or the Albertbridge Road. However, it is also true to say that someone from the right-hand side of the Albertbridge Road would have difficulty taking a house on the left-hand side because they are not from there, and we are an innately territorial people.

In my view, the old structure of the city of Belfast — avenues, streets and roads with ribbon development for economic activity at the end — worked much better. Even though it had developed without the benefit of planners, we demolished it with very little thought and replaced it, in many cases, with a maze of streets, alleyways and entries so convoluted that bin lorries cannot even get in to take away the rubbish.

Housing must be addressed by assessing need and by servicing need. That will bring with it major difficulties because the Chamber has not matured to the degree that those who represent this society can always agree on everything, and that is reflected on the streets outside. "Communities" is a funny word that appeared only three or four years ago. We had communities before we called them communities. We had relationships across those communities before there was an industry in reinforcing those communities, and I always think that things that develop naturally over time last longer and are more durable than answers enforced from above. If everyone had homes, where those homes are would not be of particular relevance.

4.15 pm

My wife was born in Toomebridge in County Antrim, which is not remarkable. However, for the first years of her life, she lived on the Oldpark Road, just on the turn of the road that is now a vacant site. Her father was a sergeant in the police and walked to work every morning. All that changed in 40 years of madness. If anyone thinks that we can set aside the history of that 40 years of madness with a piece of paper and a pen and plan some wonderful solution, they are kidding themselves. We can

create the circumstances and the understanding whereby these things can come to pass. But talking of houses without giving the people who will live in those houses the wherewithal to make those houses into homes will simply replicate the problems and, I am afraid, possibly repeat them.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to put the record straight on housing inequality in north Belfast. It is with regret that I note that one of my constituents, the MP for North Belfast, is involved in such horrendous manipulation of statistics. I would have thought that his needs would be better served by representing all the people fairly, equally and without fear or favour.

The fact is that the Housing Executive figures for the north Belfast housing district show that there are 678 Protestants and 1,823 Catholics on the waiting list. Some of the need in the Protestant community is often met by relets, but there is no such opportunity for many of the Catholics and nationalists living in that housing district.

Many Members referred to how the Minister and his colleagues in the DUP have attempted to "fix the figures". Mr Kelly is quite right to use that term, because that is exactly the sort of game that is being played. Others have commented, as I have over the past number of months since I became a member of the Committee for Social Development, on how this is nothing short of political gerrymandering and the protection of parade routes. I also understand that the Minister, in his capacity as an MLA, has tried to put pressure on Clanmil Housing Association — I challenge him to confirm or deny that — in order to protect a parade route, and he does not want houses to be built on the land vested by Clanmil for housing near the Carrick Hill area. I challenge him to refute that allegation.

I am very grateful to the excellent investigative journalism from 'The Detail' website and online newspaper in its search for the truth. We now know why the Minister was so ill-tempered during Question Time in February when I made those accusations. At that stage, he and his colleagues had already had a number of meetings with the Housing Executive, during which they attempted to distort the housing plan, interfere in the operational plans of the Housing Executive and bypass all the protocols in the Housing Executive. Members need to bear in mind that this is a Minister who is under investigation by the Social Development Committee for his handling of his portfolio and, unfortunately, his singular failure to address

housing need across the North of Ireland is exemplified in north Belfast.

He has had to hand back millions of pounds, hand over fist, to the Executive because of his failure to deliver on new housing. Moreover, I think that I am right in saying that, in a recent monitoring round, he had to hand back £10 million in a buy-back scheme. He was not even able to deliver on that, at a time when the construction industry is crying out for assistance to get it back on its feet, never mind the needs of the people who are living in poor, overcrowded, hostel accommodation and in homes that are not fit for purpose.

We can have debates across the Chamber, but we want to see a housing strategy and a plan for north Belfast in particular as a consequence of the debate this afternoon. It is long past the time that the Executive called the Minister into the Executive and asked him to account for some of the controversial decisions that he has been making. He has failed — failed — to apply a full equality impact assessment on his Facing the Future strategy and is under investigation by the Equality Commission. I lodged a complaint with the Equality Commission regarding that failure last November, and I understand that the commission is assessing whether it should use its powers to force the Minister to fulfil his ministerial obligations to equality.

The Minister also tried to set up all sorts of policy directives by way of pilot schemes without having to do full equality impact assessments. The Minister has been an abject failure. He has many questions to answer in his commitment to all the people not only of north Belfast but to the many employees of the Housing Executive who work extremely hard. Many of them are low-paid and are being asked to work alongside the political manipulations of him and his colleagues and, no doubt, under duress. It is well past the time that the Executive, who have called Ministers to account in the past, call this Minister to account, and I call on them to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: And I now call on the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, to respond to the debate.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Housing has been a contentious issue in Northern Ireland for many years, but, since taking up office, I have championed the development of social and affordable housing to meet need across the Province, and the Housing Executive has

allocated social housing without departmental or ministerial interference.

Social housing in north Belfast has been a hot topic of late. The Participation and the Practice of Rights reports that keep coming up try to justify a particular propagandist view, and, regrettably, they give a misleading impression of the very complex housing issues facing north Belfast. They also inaccurately and erroneously allege that there has been discrimination against Roman Catholics in the allocation of housing. That has been followed by negative media commentary, and an example has already been given of that, and Assembly questions along the same lines. So, today, is a timely opportunity to put the record straight.

First, I want to turn to the provision of social and affordable housing across Northern Ireland. Since taking up office, I have consistently supported the delivery of increased levels of social and affordable housing and will continue to do so. The Programme for Government commits me to delivering 8,000 social and affordable homes by 2015. Three years in, almost 7,000 have already been delivered, with a further 2,500 planned for the current year. That will see over 9,400 new homes delivered against the original target of 8,000. We are not just meeting targets; we are exceeding targets.

Output on social housing starts has been running at around 1,350 new social homes per annum in recent years. Plans that I approved as long ago as December are predicated on increasing that to 2,000 in each of the next three years. It is the first time in over a decade — taking us back to the days of direct rule and the days when the SDLP ran the Department — that delivery is in line with the Housing Executive's recommendation. I am pleased that I have been able to make that happen on my watch. It is something that the SLDP blatantly failed to do.

On top of that, the motion passed by the Assembly on 24 March called on me to go even further.

That is a big ask at short notice, given that land purchase, planning permission and construction can take up to 24 months, but we are well on target for our objectives.

Secondly, I want to turn to the focus of the debate and the North Belfast constituency in particular. Here we get to the core of the matter. For so long, the SDLP, Sinn Féin and certain propagandists in the nationalist community have taken the view that the focus

should be on only one small part of the constituency, and they ignore the other three offices: the Shankill office, Newtownabbey 1 and Newtownabbey 2. Why should you go for the constituency rather than just a Housing Executive office, which is purely an administrative area? First, people understand what a constituency is. Secondly, when I checked back, I found that, of the 176 questions that were asked in the past year by MLAs about statistics from the Housing Executive, the overwhelming majority — 143 — related to the Assembly and parliamentary constituency, because that is how MLAs across the Province think. They think about parliamentary and Assembly constituencies. Nineteen related to councils, and only 14 out of 176, less than 10% — about 7% or 8% — related to a Housing Executive office. By going for the constituency area, which people understand, you bring clarity, certainty and transparency through looking at all 14 wards. That is not to dilute anything, but to make sure that we include everything — the whole of the constituency. I see Alban shaking his head over there. It may be that he does not care about people who live out in Newtownabbey; it may be that he does not care about people who live on the Shankill. I have an interest in providing housing for everyone across the constituency.

We talk about waiting lists. It is worth looking at them, because the figures are quite clear. Members made reference to the waiting lists this afternoon. If you look at the people who were on the waiting list in the North Belfast constituency, in the most recent figures, for December 2013, you will see that there were 1,994 Protestant people and 1,988 Roman Catholic. The need was roughly the same in both communities. When you say that, people try to move on, and they say, "That's OK; that's only the waiting lists", although that is what they have quoted for many years. In fact, at one time, some people claimed that the waiting list for North Belfast was almost entirely Roman Catholic. The figures are roughly 50:50.

I move now to stress figures. There were 970 Roman Catholic applicants and 772 Protestant applicants. So, again, substantial need within both communities needs to be met. Sometimes, people move on from that, and they talk about waiting times. There is a myth that, if an applicant lives in a nationalist area of North Belfast, they have to wait far, far longer than someone from the Protestant community has to wait. The fact is this, and these are the Housing Executive's figures —

Ms Ní Chuilín: Which ones?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCausland: On 31 December, the median waiting time in the north Belfast area office — the area that is being described by Members opposite as being predominantly Roman Catholic — was 18 months. However, if you live in Newtownabbey 1 or Newtownabbey 2, it is 19 months and 22 months; if you live in Bangor, it is 26 months; it is 22 months in Castlereagh; and 22 months in Ballymena. In other words, the average waiting time to get a house in north Belfast is shorter than it is in any of those other areas. Those are not my figures. You can simply speak to the chairman, chief executive or anybody you want to go to in the Housing Executive and you will get those figures, because they are the Housing Executive's figures, not mine. They also make absolutely clear that the waiting time is no different for people from the unionist and national communities.

I could deal with a number of other issues, such as the people who are waiting in hostels. There are claims that that is evidence of a massive waiting list. The fact is this: when you look at the figures there, you see that they do not stack up with what is being claimed.

Again, Mrs Kelly quoted figures on the back of a FOI from St Patrick's and St Joseph's housing committee. Again — same thing — she quotes about one part of the constituency and ignores the people who live in Newtownabbey 1, Newtownabbey 2 and all the other parts of North Belfast. Those constituents do not seem to matter to the SDLP; they do not care about the need of those people; they have no concern for those people; they are happy to wipe them out. That sort of sectarian approach from the SDLP has characterised the entire efforts of the SDLP with regard to housing.

Modest provision has been made, and 50 homes are planned, over three years, in Rathcoole. At the weekend, Carál Ní Chuilín was criticising and challenging that in the 'North Belfast News' as though, somehow, that is terrible.

Actually, 50 houses are going to be built in Rathcoole over three years. Quite clearly, there is a need there. Thank goodness that need is now being met.

4.30 pm

It is not just about quantity; it is about quality. If you look back over the years, particularly under the SDLP, there was an abject failure to

address the issue of maintenance in the Housing Executive stock. That is why people in areas such as Dunmurry are living in houses with mould growing on the walls on an incredible scale. I visited a tower block not long ago in the Dales and saw the conditions, which are ridiculous and appalling.

We have issues with the maintenance of stock. There is a mantra that we have the best stock in Europe. Members are right in saying that there are issues with dampness in tower blocks in the New Lodge. There is also an issue with dampness in quite a number of the tower blocks. We have 32 tower blocks in Northern Ireland, of which 15 are in the constituency of North Belfast. It is interesting that Glasgow was able to deal with 260 tower blocks.

Look at the efforts of the Housing Executive over the years. I met the chief executive and the chairman this afternoon to talk about this. Thank goodness we are now seeing some action coming very quickly to assess the need and develop a strategy for tower blocks. The Housing Executive did not even have a strategy to deal with tower blocks. It is only since the DUP came into the Department that we are addressing something that has been an issue for more than a decade. There have been properties with no-fines concrete and properties with no cavity wall insulation. Once again, what do we see? Years of neglect — 10 years of denial and delay that are now being addressed.

I was asked whether I had read 'The Detail'. Of course I have. In fact, I posted it on my Facebook page so that others could read it. There is some interesting information. The fact is that I met the Member of Parliament for North Belfast and certain other politicians, and quite rightly so. If any politician asks me for a meeting, they will get it. I met Mr McCann and Jennifer McCann about housing issues in west Belfast. If other politicians do not bother asking for a meeting — they are not doing their job well enough by not asking for a meeting — that is their problem. They cannot condemn people who do their job properly. We now have a focus on some of those issues. I am glad to say that we are now getting to the bottom of them.

As for the UN rapporteur —

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

Mr McCausland: — the only issue is that, when she came to Belfast, she went to only one community in north Belfast. She was taken

there by PPR because there was obviously no interest in the needs of others.

The final point about housing and regeneration is that the Department for Social Development is not going to be in the business of condemning people to live in dereliction for years in the way in which people in Glenbryn were condemned to living beside dereliction —

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

Mr McCausland: — because the Housing Executive sold land that lay derelict to property developers who could not even build on it. We are now in the business of regeneration, and quite rightly so, because that is what DSD is about.

Adjourned at 4.32 pm.



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