

# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 17 February 2014

*The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Storey:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you give guidance to the House on a matter of concern? It is whether or not the Education Minister misled the House in a statement that he made on 4 February, when, in response to a topical question, he said:

*"I am now in a position where I can confirm that no school will lose any funding as a result of the changes that I have made." — [Official Report, Vol 91, No 6, p38, col 2].*

However, Members will be aware that, at the weekend, on the 'Sunday Politics' show, the Education Minister made reference to the fact that he was yet to make up his mind. That was in agreement with what the Education Committee was told on Wednesday by officials. Is it, Mr Speaker, in your power to ask the Education Minister to come to the House to clarify and inform Members what those changes are? To date, they have not been conveyed to the Education Committee and are clearly in contravention with what he said in this House on Tuesday 4 February.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member and other Members will know that, on 26 January 2009, I made a very firm ruling that the Chair does not have any role in, and certainly does not sit in judgement on, how a Minister might answer a question in the House. However, I can understand the frustration of Members when they feel that they are not getting the appropriate answer from Ministers to their questions. I encourage the Member to pursue the matter through further questions to the Minister or through the Committee structures. There are a number of avenues that Members can use to pursue Ministers if they feel very strongly that they have not got a satisfactory answer.

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget Bill: Consideration Stage

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Hamilton, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

*Moved. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

**Mr Speaker:** No amendments have been tabled. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

*Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.*

*Long title agreed to.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

## Committee Business

### Delivering Social Change: Signature Programmes

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is a motion from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on its report on Delivering Social Change signature programmes. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other speakers 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 report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on its event on the Delivering Social Change signature programmes (NIA 150/11-15); and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that meaningful and comprehensive engagement with practitioners and stakeholders is central to the development of any future signature programmes.*

It is a pleasure as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to move the motion, which follows on from an event that the Committee held with stakeholders in the Long Gallery a few weeks ago.

Delivering Social Change is the Executive's framework to tackle poverty and social exclusion. The signature programmes were set up to improve literacy and numeracy, to offer increased family support and to support job creation in local communities.

The motion that the Committee presents today follows a stakeholder event that was held in November on the Delivering Social Change signature programmes that were announced by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in October 2012. For the record, the programmes are as follows: improving literacy and numeracy, led by the Department of Education; nurture units, led by the Department for Social Development and the Department of Education; social-enterprise incubation hubs, led by the Department for Social Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; positive parenting, led by the Department of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety; family-support hubs, led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; and the community family-support programme, led by the Department for Employment and Learning.

There was a seventh programme, which was announced by junior Ministers in October 2013, with regard to £1.6 million of investment to enhance play and leisure opportunities for children and young people. It is unfortunate that the Committee was not advised of that until after the event in November, as it would have provided an opportunity for discussion on that programme as well as the other six that were discussed at that event. It is unfortunate, but perhaps typical, of the current communication channels between the Committee and the Department.

Although Delivering Social Change is an Executive-wide framework, with signature programmes being delivered by a number of different lead Departments, the £26 million budget for the programmes is allocated from a central ring-fenced Delivering Social Change fund, with governance arrangements and collaboration managed through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

In September 2013, the Committee agreed to gather evidence from stakeholders on the signature programmes. The Committee recognised the wide range of stakeholders involved and agreed to hold an event to gather evidence on their views and to provide a platform for discussion on potential enhancement of the programmes. The Committee convened an event comprising relevant Departments, non-governmental organisations, members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and stakeholders from the public and private sectors.

I would like to thank senior officials from OFMDFM and a number of other Departments for coming along and providing updates on the progress of their relevant programmes. I would also like to thank stakeholders for taking the time to come along and to provide very relevant and timely feedback on the progress of those programmes. Of course, I thank the Committee staff for making it all happen.

The stakeholder event was held on 13 November. Discussions covered these four key themes: experience of delivery and implementation to date; challenges and opportunities of the programme delivery mechanisms; innovative ideas to support effective delivery of the programmes; and

suggestions for potential future signature projects.

Committee members will agree that, at the event, we had considerable discussions on those key themes and input from our stakeholders. As is so often the case, it is in talking to stakeholders that we hear the reality of people's experiences of dealing with complex and often intergenerational issues of poverty and social exclusion.

Although each signature project is distinct, with its own objectives, a number of issues were common across discussions on each individual programme. Those common issues may have wider implications for the success of the Executive's Delivering Social Change framework. The Committee, therefore, wished to highlight those issues to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in order to support the Department in enhancing delivery and outcomes on those programmes.

The common issues included: a reported lack of joined-up working; a reported lack of consultation; difficulties in measurement of outcomes; a need for long-term planning; the importance of identifying best practice and information-sharing; and a need for clarity of message and awareness-raising.

As an aside, with regard to the measurement of outcomes, it was only last week that the Committee heard from officials about gender equality and the fact that they intended to rip up a 10-year strategy because of the lack, largely speaking, of measurable targets. The fact that the focus is on measurable targets there is to be welcomed.

The input from stakeholders allowed the Committee to make a number of recommendations to OFMDFM on the programmes, on the future of same and on additional programmes. Again, I pay tribute to the people who participated in the event. The Committee made a number of recommendations, and I will briefly go through those now.

One of the key issues identified was the perception of a silo mentality or a lack of joined-up working across Departments and agencies that had the potential to limit the effectiveness of the programmes. The Committee welcomes the fact that one of the key aims of the framework is to achieve a level of joined-up working in tackling poverty and social exclusion. The Committee highlights that effective policy design at the outset can include ways to tackle barriers to effective implementation. With that

in mind, the Committee recommended that lead Departments re-evaluate the policy design process for the signature programmes in advance of any future tranche of programmes.

The Committee also recommended that lead Departments further consider the establishment of working groups or project teams which include key providers, stakeholders and other relevant Departments, where information can be shared and early resolution of issues can be sought. That early engagement with other stakeholders can facilitate effective joined-up working.

Another key theme highlighted was the measurement of outcomes. The Committee believes that the tools for monitoring and evaluating the programmes should have been clearly defined in advance of initiation of the various programmes. A more comprehensive consultation with experienced practitioners and organisations in those fields would have assisted the Departments in identifying realistic, timely and measurable outcomes.

Stakeholders highlighted the necessity for, in particular, measuring the value added by the signature programmes, whereby evidence should be sought on how effective they had actually been in tackling societal issues, rather than perhaps duplicating services that are already in existence.

The Committee recommends that OFMDFM, as the overseeing Department, works closely with the lead Departments in defining measurable outcomes that can be used to determine the success of interventions, which can then be mainstreamed into Executive policy in the future.

On best practice and information-sharing, the Committee recommended in its report that lead Departments work with stakeholders to gather information on best practice and innovation in the domains of the programmes in order to develop an effective legacy for the sharing of information. The Committee believes that the capture of such information will be vital in the enhancement of current services and the development of future services. We heard clearly from stakeholders that it was not necessary to "reinvent the wheel" where there were existing examples of best practice.

### **12.15 pm**

Another important issue raised during discussions was the need for clarity of message and awareness-raising. Stakeholders told us that there was often a lack of understanding of

what each programme was offering and that those providing and those using the services often had very different interpretations of the programmes and their intent. For that reason, the Committee recommended that lead Departments consider how to raise awareness of their programmes. Consistent and clear communication of the programme aims would contribute to greater clarity on the programmes and support greater take-up of the services offered. Branding of the programmes with a clear identity would support delivery partners in highlighting the services offered and facilitate a greater level of signposting. That branding was particularly important to programmes such as the family support hubs, which do not have a physical presence.

The Committee's report highlights that a communications plan should have been an integral part of the implementation plan for the signature programmes and recommends that that element be included in any future plans for further programmes.

A strong theme emerging from the discussions with stakeholders was the need for long-term measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion rather than quick fixes and short-term projects. The issues are complex, deep-rooted and often intergenerational in nature, and the Committee acknowledges that the outcomes from the programmes will be longitudinal and therefore may not be realised over a number of government terms. The Committee recommended in its report that the Executive seek a cross-party commitment to the continuation of the Delivering Social Change framework for the next mandate in order to secure the longer-term focus on these complex issues.

The last common theme that I want to discuss is an issue about which stakeholders were most concerned and that was identified at all tables as a key issue: consultation, or, perhaps better put, a lack of consultation. That is the issue at the heart of the Committee motion. At the event, stakeholders highlighted the importance of consultation with existing providers, experts and service users to ensure that resources are sufficiently targeted at those most in need.

In its report, the Committee recommended that OFMDFM seek to ensure that effective and timely consultation is undertaken. That would include engagement with organisations, groups and individuals who are experienced in the respective fields of future programmes. In chairing one of the discussions on the initiative on education, it was put to me by all stakeholders that, although the initiative would

yield positive results, it would have been possible to yield even better and more lasting positive results had there been a different and more engaged form of pre-consultation on behalf of the devolved Government.

As the overseeing Department, OFMDFM should also seek to ensure that all lead Departments for delivery of the programmes can evidence a sufficient level of consultation. The Committee believes that a greater degree of sustained engagement and joined-up working between Departments and stakeholders can potentially address some issues for the current programmes as they go forward. The Committee also recommended that, in advance of any announcement of a future tranche of signature programmes, should that happen, comprehensive consultation be undertaken with practitioners in all the relevant fields.

I thank Members for their contribution at the event and in anticipation of their contributions to the debate today. I am particularly pleased to see junior Minister Bell here to respond to the motion. I thank stakeholders and departmental officials for their input at the event and hope that the issues raised will be addressed by Ministers and the Department so that the programmes and future programmes have every opportunity to succeed and meet the needs of those people and families facing poverty and social exclusion.

As I await the response from the junior Minister, I am minded of the liaison between the Committee and the Department on the historical institutional abuse inquiry and the legislation, where there was exemplary cooperation between Department and Committee. I hope that we can replicate that here.

Finally, the Committee undertook the event with a view to identifying how any future programmes could be as effective as possible. The Committee has been very pleased with the positive and receptive responses to date from the relevant Departments on the issues that are specific to their programmes and, indeed, those from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee is heartened to note that its recommendations have all been welcomed, and, indeed, it is pleased to see that, in line with our recommendation, the Executive ministerial subcommittee recently agreed a communications strategy for Delivering Social Change.

Mr Speaker, I thank you for your time, and I look forward to Members' contributions today. I

will finish by commending the motion to the House.

**Mr Moutray:** At the outset, I welcome the opportunity to take part in today's debate. Poverty and social exclusion are words that we hear so often within these four walls. I, for one, am very glad that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has, in the form of the Delivering Social Change programme, not just spoken about these issues but put in place initiatives and measures to help to tackle the problem.

Obviously, the six signature project programme that was launched in October 2012 is aimed at delivering improved numeracy and literacy throughout Northern Ireland through the provision of nurture units; development of social enterprise incubation hubs; positive parenting initiatives; the creation of family support hubs; and the community family support programme, all of which are delivered from Departments across the Executive. The Committee's role is to scrutinise and ensure that progress has been made. I feel that this report raises some valid points, but, at the same time, we must bear in mind that with such a wide portfolio, which stretches across the entire Executive cohort, there will always be hitches, issues that need to be addressed and lessons that can be learned.

The Committee was keen to engage public and stakeholders' opinions on the programmes so far. Therefore, as the Committee Chairman outlined, on 13 November 2013, it hosted a feedback event for stakeholders. I thank those who took the time to attend. However, I believe that, in these consultation events, it is incumbent on us to drill further down and to go right to the very heart of those who have been helped by such initiatives. That includes those who are obtaining one-to-one tuition and those who have obtained some experience, through the initiative in teaching, that has led to employment. I think that, all too often, we focus on the statutory groups, and although I appreciate greatly and commend them for their input, such a consultation must go further.

During the event, stakeholders raised the issue of silo mentality and said that they felt that it was a problem. I am not convinced of that argument on this particular occasion. Given that these projects do, in fact, take a holistic view of making changes in people's lives, I believe that this is a true joined-up government approach to tackling issues that go right to the core of our society. Unfortunately, we are not just there yet in having every Department buy in to joined-up government. However, I believe

that, through time and work such as this, it can become much easier and more achievable.

Further consultation with stakeholders is an important element in the report, and we cannot underestimate the power and value that stakeholders bring to the table. I again go back to the fact that, in the past, there have been many conferences, seminars, pilot programmes and discussions but a lack of action. Delivering Social Change is about tangible initiatives, such as the employment of 230 young teachers to help with one-to-one tuition and to improve numeracy and literacy and the creation of 20 new nurture units in school settings to help to address barriers to learning among children that arise from social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Through positive parenting programmes that provide guidance, training and information to up to 1,200 families, the parenting programme takes forward additional support to new and existing parents living in areas of deprivation. These types of programmes and initiatives cannot be underestimated. They are vital, and I believe that they can really change a society and address the trap that some find themselves in today.

Measurement was also raised. I believe that that is important, and I welcome the stakeholders' desire to see long-term measurement of the initiatives, bearing in mind that many children will not reap the benefits of the improved numeracy and literacy and nurture units until some years down the line. I believe that the comments from some stakeholders who attended were unfairly negative, with a lack of viable solutions put forward. One line that I am really surprised at is that children are fed up with numeracy and literacy. If that is the thought of professional stakeholders, we have a long way to go in educating them.

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

In conclusion, I ask everyone around the House to focus on what is being delivered through the Delivering Social Change six signature projects and the £26 million that has been invested to deliver them. The social change framework is how we, as an Executive, will help to tackle poverty and deprivation, and I support the call to note the comments of the report.

**Mr Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for tabling the motion and speaking to it this morning on behalf of the Committee, and I endorse, more or less, all his

commentary. I also thank Committee officials for putting a lot of work into making sure that the event was well attended and representative in its attendance. It was a very successful example of how the Assembly, through the Committees, needs to engage with a wide range of stakeholders to make sure that we can follow through, in some substantive depth, the types of policies that we are referring to in the debate.

Delivering Social Change has been described by Mr Moutray and the Chair, and, for me, it is a flagship policy of the Executive, and, although it is relatively early days, it is about changing the way in which many of us work. We all have long experience of talking about a silo mentality in how Departments and other agencies work, and that is true to a large extent. We are talking about a real cultural shift in the way in which Departments will work together, and it is worth reminding ourselves that OFMDFM's role in Delivering Social Change is to drive forward the policy and make sure that it is doing so in conjunction and cooperation with all the relevant Departments. There are six signature projects in the policy and, hopefully, as time goes on, we will add to that and learn from the experience of the early days.

It is important to say that this cultural change has to impact on the stakeholders. I do not necessarily agree with Stephen Moutray that a lot of comments during the evening were negative. There was some negativity, and that is fair enough. Some members of stakeholder organisations were really concerned about duplication. When we refer to the need for clarity of message and so on, that is important. A number of organisations were one step behind the Department, because the Department is basically saying, "We will all have to muck in here and work together." We may not always necessarily pool resources but we must make sure we are going in the same direction, pooling energies and putting whatever resources we have into this collectively. However, that will also have to apply, in the longer term, to stakeholders themselves. A justifiable criticism was raised on the day when people said that the project was opening up in premises very close to their current premises as a stakeholder organisation. We need to be careful that, in joining up the Department's work with key stakeholders, we do not displace others. At the end of the day, if we are just displacing people, that will not give us any added value.

The stakeholder event was very important. It gave us some very important lessons from the ground even though some of them were

negative. Generally, most people who attended the event and the people who Members and the Committee engage with on ongoing basis would acknowledge the need for joined-up working, and that has to translate to the stakeholders themselves. Many of them have been working for many years and sometimes in adverse conditions, and we have to recognise that they have been at the coalface for a long time. We should not come in bright-eyed and bushy-tailed to some projects when people are already working on them. This is about OFMDFM working with Departments and stakeholders in a cooperative way and making sure we get the best of everybody's efforts.

One of the lessons from all this has to be about sharing best practice. This means that we do not duplicate and that we work with one another. Duplication was one of the key concerns raised with me at the event. The issue of consultation has been addressed. It is important that we get consultation exercises right, and while I do not think that we should have never-ending consultation, this process is relatively new and challenging, and it provides us with very good opportunities. Consultation on this kind of work should be ongoing to ensure that we learn and tweak our processes as necessary. The event was successful and important. When Committees engage with stakeholders, just as the Social Development Committee engaged with fuel poverty organisations, we can learn an awful lot and then input to the Department.

I support the motion.

### 12.30 pm

**Mr Attwood:** I apologise that, after I speak, I have to leave for a short while but I intend to return. I welcome the debate and the report, but, most of all, I welcome the contribution of stakeholders. As Mr Moutray said, the event demonstrated the "power and value" of the input of stakeholders into government practice and policy. That is evidenced by the content of the report.

We also need to recognise that the report touches on the lives of six Departments. Given the scale and range of stakeholders' views, we need to take what stakeholders said fully on board. As Mr Maskey said, the people who were present at the event, which touched on the lives of six Departments, are at the coalface when it comes to deprivation, exclusion and disadvantage. Contrary to what Mr Moutray said, the conclusion that we have to draw is that we should take those views fully and absolutely on board.

Let us be very clear. The SDLP perspective is that, if there are good projects that require funding, through this scheme, which is in operation, or through the social investment fund, now that it appears to be in operation, they should get funding. Bad projects should not get funding. When projects are funded, that should be done on the basis of very best practice and process. That is the standard against which we should judge. If there are good projects in the six areas of the Delivering Social Change signature programmes, they should get funding.

We should not dilute or diminish anything that was said by the stakeholders. Measured against any standard, what the stakeholders said was an indictment of the design and processes around Delivering Social Change. They recognised, as we all do, that there are projects that require funding and should get it, but they were withering in their criticism of the design and processes of Delivering Social Change. Evidence of that can be seen in the report's conclusions, which are informed by people's contributions at the event. A common issue, although not particular to any one Department, is the perception of a silo mentality. The report states:

*"A widely held view among stakeholders was that there had been insufficient consultation with stakeholders and experienced practitioners".*

That is not a partial or selected view but a widely held one. The report also states:

*"There were concerns from stakeholders that any future mainstreaming of specific interventions could be at risk as the evidence base to support this mainstreaming would be absent ... There was also frustration that evaluation of outcomes and measurement of success of the Signature Programmes ... may not present a true picture of how effective these Programmes have been".*

In my view, the history of this part of the world, the politics of exclusion and the lack of participation by citizens in the life of the state were all meant to have been changed by the watershed moment of 1998 that introduced new standards of inclusion, democratic participation and consultation, as laid down in law under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. How is it that, 12 or 14 years later, when it comes to the design of this process, despite those standards of democratic participation, consultation and inclusion and after a very

successful stakeholders' event, the scale and ambition of which was recognised by everybody, they drew that conclusion? The reason is that there are Departments better placed than OFMDFM to do the work — that is the conclusion to draw. Politically, that conclusion should be recognised by all those in government.

**Mr G Robinson:** For the best chance of introducing effective, enforceable and workable programmes, they must be based on evidence. That especially includes front line experience via consultation with those who know best practice. As the motion states, that is best done by:

*"comprehensive engagement with practitioners and stakeholders".*

If the correct people are consulted, we can be assured of the highest possibility of workable signature programmes. I commend all those who attended our stakeholder event in Parliament Buildings recently.

With areas of high deprivation in my constituency, I would like specific concentration on projects that ensure educational attainment for children, with the literacy and numeracy of children being of special interest. Good education gives individuals the best opportunity to attain employment and improve their quality of life. The current scheme benefits 230 teachers on a fixed two-year contract and is improving the literacy and numeracy skills of primary and post-primary children. It is good to hear that the programme is moving ahead, and we look forward to seeing the benefits in years to come. I also welcome the nurture units in schools, which help to break down numerous barriers and aid the greatest achievement of each individual pupil. This means that approximately 480 children will benefit, and 20 teachers and 20 classroom assistants will be employed. I welcome the progress already made, not only in areas that I mentioned but across the board. I look forward to further positive reports in the future.

In conclusion, we should make sure that consultation is very prominent. I commend OFMDFM officials for all the work that they put in to make sure that the recent stakeholder event here in Parliament Buildings was so successful.

**Mrs Hale:** I declare an interest as a member of the OFMDFM Committee. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today. I stress the importance of continuing to pursue

the delivery of positive social change. The report supports the work carried out by OFMDFM, and it is enlightening on where some key policy and procedural changes may need to be made when planning future signature programmes. The First Minister and deputy First Minister should be congratulated on paving the way for the signature projects. Ministers with a remit in that area should also be praised for their work to date. After years of conversations, talks and discussions, it was time for some positive action on many of the social problems facing local people. The signature projects have begun to make a positive contribution to the multitude of social issues.

It is clear from the report that the DUP is at the forefront of delivering positive social change for many in Northern Ireland who need help and support. Four of the current six DSC signature programmes are being led by DUP Ministers. Many will have felt the huge benefits of the family support hubs, parenting support and the social enterprise incubation hubs.

I acknowledge that some say that consultation was patchy, but the signature projects did not come through a traditional form of consultation; they were based on hard evidence and engagement with professionals who understand the complex issues. We heard about the OFMDFM Committee consultation event on 13 November that gathered evidence from stakeholders on the signature projects. That gave recognition to a wide range of stakeholders involved and provided an opportunity to gather evidence on the views of stakeholders and a platform for discussion on the potential enhancement of signature programmes in the future. The clear message from many stakeholders was that we should continue to drive from the centre an agenda of cross-effective departmental working that seeks to enhance a multiple objective approach. For example, as we heard, the teacher scheme targets educational underachievement in maths and English, but it also addresses another problem of low employment among our newly qualified teachers. The report is clear in stating that the signature programmes may not be an answer to all the problems but are a collection of cross-departmental actions that are indicative of the new approach of trying to source cross-departmental solutions to complex societal problems.

I think that we should be positive about the developments to date and continue to remember that, although consultation is an important element of future development, we must ensure that action and, indeed, positive

development are our primary aims when it comes to tackling things. We can consult, engage, talk and discuss, but, ultimately, it will be our actions in dealing with our socio-economic complexities that the people of Northern Ireland will be most concerned with and will judge us on.

**Mr Cree:** The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed that the scrutiny of the Delivering Social Change signature projects would be a strategic priority during 2013-14. The six signature programmes were announced by the Ministers in October 2012. They are the responsibility of several Departments but will be carried out under the management and governance of OFMDFM. As part of the Committee's scrutiny, it arranged a stakeholder event on 13 November 2013 in Parliament Buildings. As other Members said, the event was very successful and a number of recommendations were developed from it. A seventh signature project was added recently, but, as the Committee had not been briefed on that programme, it was not included in the discussions. The additional project seeks to address play and leisure opportunities for children and young people, and some £1.6 million has been allocated to it.

At the stakeholder event, the Committee decided to focus on four key themes to do a stocktake of current delivery, to discover stakeholders' views on how delivery could be enhanced and to identify suggestions for the development of future signature projects. Many common issues were identified, and the Committee forwarded a list of recommendations to OFMDFM to support it in enhancing the delivery of the programmes and their outcomes. The problem areas have been referred to by other Members, which included joined-up working; consultation, which was a major concern; the measurement of outcomes; long-term plans; best practice and information sharing; clarity of message; and awareness raising.

It is no credit to OFMDFM that it has taken years to develop the projects and to see money being spent where it was intended. Unfortunately, that is typical of how the office literally takes years to develop most projects and strategies, and there is a list of strategies that have not been finalised since the Programme for Government was introduced seven years ago. That really is not good enough, and more effort is required to tackle and achieve the targets that have been set. The £80 million in the social investment fund is probably a good example of a failure to deliver.

How many mandates will it take to complete the Programme for Government that was agreed as far back as 2007?

Finally, the recommendations show common sense, and the support and advice from stakeholders was much valued and appreciated. Those people are involved in the various areas and at the point of delivery. I trust that the several Departments involved will take the recommendations on board, which are intended to improve design and delivery.

**Mr Spratt:** At the outset, I thank the Chair of the Committee for presenting the report to the House, and the Committee staff, who put a lot of hard work into it. I welcome the debate and the report that resulted from stakeholder engagement. I think that we have to very much take into account what they had to say. They raised some very valid points. One of the issues raised by the stakeholders was that of duplication, which could probably be raised about most programmes. They were worried about the duplication of the various schemes by work that was already being done, and it is important that we look at that.

#### 12.45 pm

It is obvious that Departments must work together to ensure the effective delivery of projects across the Province through the Delivering Social Change programme. For example, the social enterprise incubation hubs are led by DETI and DSD, so it is absolutely essential that those Departments work together. I was pleased to hear that Sandy Row in my constituency was selected as one of those hubs. The programme is designed to regenerate buildings that have become derelict while encouraging social enterprise, which will have the knock-on effect of creating much-needed jobs for local people. It will have a real and visible impact on that area, and it is a positive development that is much welcomed by the local community.

Similarly, the nurture units are led by DSD and the Department of Education. It is great that, also in my constituency, Taughmonagh was chosen to have one of the units. It is very positive that a number of teachers and classroom assistants have been recruited. The nurture units have been operational since the start of the current school year. In many primary schools in deprived areas, up to 50% of children have special educational needs. The nurture units will benefit children who find learning difficult because of social, behavioural or emotional difficulties through the provision of

individual learning plans agreed by parents and teachers. It stands to reason that DSD and the Department of Education should work together to deliver these valuable projects.

As of 13 November last year, five of the six projects had been implemented. I understand that much work has been completed since then on the incubation hubs, which is very much to be welcomed. The programmes are time-limited, with an end date in 2016 to coincide with the end of the current Assembly mandate. Many people have expressed concern that the projects will simply end at that point and possible future outcomes will be lost. However, the Committee recommends in the report that the Executive seek cross-party support to continue the Delivering Social Change framework into the next mandate. That would allow communities to build on what they have already achieved.

Many times in the past, short-term projects were delivered that, unfortunately, had only minimal impact. However, the Department has clearly taken that on board and is seeking to make these projects sustainable in the long term. For example, the social incubation hubs should be self-sustaining if local enterprises are established within them. For other projects, there is the possibility of mainstream funding if they have tangible outcomes.

All the projects will have a positive impact on families and young people in deprived areas. I commend colleagues in OFMDFM and, indeed, other Departments for the work that they have done, because these efforts will address many issues that lead to poverty and isolation. I thank my colleague the junior Minister for being in the Chamber to respond to this important report.

**Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** The Committee for Education welcomed the announcement of the signature projects when they were launched in October 2012. Of particular interest to members of the Committee were the literacy and numeracy and nurture unit projects. The Committee strongly felt that literacy and numeracy were the foundations for learning and progression at school and that additional support for pupils was therefore timely. Members also welcomed the Department of Education's subsequent decision to expand the number of graduate teacher places on that scheme. The Committee also noted the growing body of research that emphasises the value of the intensive work undertaken in nurture units. As with the other signature projects, the Committee felt that more support

for that could really only be something to be valued and welcomed.

Although the Committee welcomed those interventions, members had some concerns about the continuity between those and other similar programmes. Members also expressed concern on the eligibility criteria for participating schools and around the restrictions applied to unemployed graduate teachers. As timescales and funds were limited, it was perhaps unsurprising that the design of the signature projects was somewhat less than perfect. The Committee noted, for example, feedback from the Northern Ireland Nurture Group Network in which stakeholders complained about the absence of continuing funding for some existing nurture units and the lack of a buddying scheme for new nurture units established under the signature project.

Stakeholders also called for, in the longer term, central advice, support and guidance for all nurture units in Northern Ireland. The Committee also noted suggestions from the Nurture Group Network for eligibility criteria that would be based on multiple deprivation measures rather than simply free school meal entitlement, which is something that I will return to in a moment or two.

Additionally, in terms of the literacy and numeracy project, some members commented that the academic criteria served to exclude some struggling children who had made recent improvements, particularly in attainment. Those schools needed the support and had demonstrated the capacity to make good use of the project in that regard, yet they found themselves outside the programme, which was regrettable. There were also issues associated with the literacy and numeracy programme for recently unemployed teaching graduates.

In my comments as a Member in the moments that are left to me, I turn, in particular, to the point that was raised by the Northern Ireland Nurture Group Network, which does commendable work in Londonderry, Coleraine and many other parts of Northern Ireland. However, a concern has been raised, and it was included in the report:

*"Area-based approach does not allow for inclusivity of all pupils in need, e.g. not only children entitled to free-school meals, not all children in need of a nurture unit have access to school with one."*

That goes to the heart of what is being deliberated on and of what I referred to in the House today in regard to possible changes to

the common funding formula. We need to ensure that in any project, whether it is a signature project or any departmental approach to addressing a need, we have not created another element of children who are excluded and cannot access a particular project.

I welcome the fact that, albeit belatedly, the Department of Education came to embrace the issue of nurture. I welcome that and congratulate my colleague in DSD, Nelson McCausland, on the work that he and his Department have done. OFMDFM has subsequently picked up that need and, through the nurture provision in the signature project, is recognising that there is an intervention that can be made through the use of nurture that can be advantageous and beneficial to children in our communities.

I generally welcome the tenor of the comments in the report, and I look forward to the Department's response.

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

I welcome this opportunity to respond to today's motion and acknowledge the OFMDFM Committee's report on the implementation of the Delivering Social Change signature programmes. We welcome the Committee's engagement with the key stakeholders, and we have read with interest the report and the recommendations from the event last November. The Executive are fully committed to the Delivering Social Change framework, which represents a new level of joined-up working across government to achieve real and long-lasting social benefits for those in our society who need them most.

Delivering Social Change is a new way of doing business. We are moving away from the lengthy action plans that list existing activities and focusing instead on a small number of projects that can really make a difference. We know that Delivering Social Change is not something that the Executive can deliver on their own. We appreciate that it will require partnership working with the wider public sector, with our community and with the voluntary and community sector. In recognition of that, we have been committed to engaging with stakeholders from the outset to seek their views on how best to tackle the complex social issues that face all of us in our society.

Indeed, it was following consultation with stakeholders in 2012 that the 'Delivering Social Change Children and Young Persons Early Action' document was developed. It outlined five key priority areas that Delivering Social

Change should focus on in the coming years, including early years and early interventions; literacy and numeracy; transitions; integrated delivery; and joined-up planning and commissioning. Very much in line with the identified key priorities, the initial six signature programmes, announced in October 2012, focus on early interventions to tackle issues before they develop into problems and to give children a good start in life. Let me be clear that our engagement with stakeholders has not stopped following those initial events. We have continued to engage with stakeholders on an ongoing and regular basis.

In June last year, junior Minister McCann and I hosted a two-day conference that was attended by over 200 delegates from the third sector, the public sector and the wider community. Since then, Jennifer and I, as well as senior officials, have attended a wide range of events organised by stakeholders to further raise the awareness of Delivering Social Change and the difference that it is making. They included events organised by Belfast City Council, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), the Centre for Effective Services (CES), the Department for Employment and Learning, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), to name but a few. Nearly 900 stakeholders attended the events, and that demonstrates our commitment to engaging with stakeholders and our determination to further raise awareness of the difference that Delivering Social Change is making.

As well as continuing to participate in events organised by our stakeholders, we are actively arranging engagement events with interested parties for specific elements of Delivering Social Change. For example, we are seeking the views of stakeholders — including the vital views of children and young people themselves — on our Delivering Social Change children and young people's strategy. We are working with the Departments on the best way in which to assess the effectiveness of Delivering Social Change programmes and have already provided guidance to them for the six initial signature programmes. We are investigating the establishment of oversight groups to include representatives of the third sector and end users. That will be an invaluable mechanism for evaluating the programmes and informing future policy in those areas.

I am pleased to report that the signature programmes are progressing well. Twenty new nurture units have been rolled out across Northern Ireland to help address the barriers to learning among children arising from social,

emotional or behavioural difficulties. The units play a key role in improving the lives and educational attainment of our most vulnerable children by targeting the support where it is most needed. Over 200 teachers are now in post in primary and post-primary schools providing additional teaching support to the children and young people who are most at risk of underachieving in English and maths at the critical stages of their education.

### **1.00 pm**

The early support is critical when families need it most and when it can have the greatest impact. In recognition of that, a suite of parenting support programmes have been developed. They provide the additional, high-quality intervention support to new and existing parents. In addition, 16 existing family support hubs now benefit from continued support. Work is ongoing to establish the 10 new hubs. The hubs will provide assistance in a friendly, local environment and will help families to overcome the challenges that could otherwise be overwhelming and unmanageable.

From January to June last year, an intervention supporting parents and helping young people who are not in education, employment or training was successfully piloted with 44 families in east and west Belfast, Cookstown, Strabane and Newtownabbey. Positive outcomes from the pilot included family members moving into employment; young people returning to school to complete their GCSEs; family members participating in structured training programmes; and improved school attendance. An upscaled version of the pilot was launched in November last year targeting 720 families in disadvantaged areas.

Before I move on, I will turn to some of the comments that were made. I welcome much of the Chair's positive comment. I noticed that some claims were made about the gender equality strategy. Of course, the strategy runs from 2006 to 2016. We either attempt to implement the changes now for the remaining 18 months or we refocus now to effect the change that is required. I do not think that it is helpful for the Chair, in noting issues that are to be addressed, to slip in a criticism while ignoring the work that is already under way to resolve the most critical issues. I will also correct for the record the Chair's comments and say that the family support hubs have a physical presence and all 10 will be in place by summer 2014.

Members raised the issue of consultation, and it is important that consultation is meaningful. We

have extended the children's consultation. We are already under way, and we are assured that the sector's passion, dedication and commitment will come through strongly.

The Chair raised the need to link funding and delivery. Delivering Social Change has sought to link Departments to ensure that the signature programmes integrate with their existing mainstream programmes. Next week, officials will bring together a range of other matters with a view to progress in their own Departments.

Mr Attwood discussed OFMDFM being the lead and a silo. Of course, it is always important to look at the facts that lie behind statements. All six signature programmes are led by a Department with a policy and operation locus in the field and not, Mr Attwood, by OFMDFM. In delivering, Departments work together with us in OFMDFM. However, they also work out with other Departments, agencies and third sector bodies to start breaking down what have been historical silos.

Mr Cree mentioned delay. The additional teachers were announced in October 2012 and were mostly in place by September 2013.

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

**Mr Bell:** I want to address a number of contributions made by Members when you were out of the Chamber. It is only fair that I respond to them.

Looking forward, we recognise that Delivering Social Change is not only about delivery and immediate actions; there is also a need for longer-term planning. Many of the issues and problems that societies face are multifaceted and require a genuinely joined-up approach in and outside government. As we are aware, signature programmes alone will not eradicate issues such as poor health, low educational attainment or chronic unemployment. We need to look, in the longer term, at how services can be mainstreamed.

The signature programmes were intended to have an impact in their own right and act as a catalyst for change and for encouraging and driving change in mainstream services. We do not have unlimited money, so it is crucial that we get the evaluation of the Delivering Social Change programme right. We must identify what works and what measures have greatest impact and focus our efforts there.

An important aspect of the evaluation process will be the dissemination of the learning from the Delivering Social Change programmes. We

wholly agree with the Committee's recommendation that the Executive should seek a cross-party commitment to the continuation of the Delivering Social Change framework for the next mandate. In fact, a Delivering Social Change policy project board was established in recognition of the fact that reducing intergenerational poverty can be achieved only by all Ministers working together with a longer-term view to the next Programme for Government period and beyond.

It is intended that the ongoing work to create a collaborative and longer-term social policy framework, aligned with our economic strategy, will be a major contributor to tackling poverty and social exclusion effectively. We believe that, through the Delivering Social Change framework, we can and will make a difference, but we accept that we cannot do it alone. It is only by working together, breaking down the old silos and creating the new partnerships that we can hope to effectively support the most vulnerable members of our society.

I hope that the House will be reassured that many of the recommendations contained in the OFMDFM Committee's report are consistent with the approach that we are taking already. We will continue to develop further in order to achieve the aims and objectives of Delivering Social Change.

I am sure that the House will agree that the work related to the Delivering Social Change framework illustrates a level of commitment by Ministers and Departments to work together in partnership with our key statutory, community and voluntary sector partners. That is what we are about. If this House is to be real and meaningful, we have to ensure that outcomes are maximised and there are improvements in the lives of everyone and, most particularly, our children and young people.

**Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** I, too, welcome the debate and the publication of the Committee's report. It is a good example of how Committees have a significant role to play in the Assembly. We have had a positive engagement with stakeholders and have had a positive debate today. It has uncovered the complexities of dealing with poverty and social exclusion. As junior Minister Bell has said, it is important that Departments work together but also that the Assembly and its Committees work together. The number of contributions shows how many MLAs are interested in working together to tackle the issue, so it is important that the policy

and framework are put in place to allow that to be achieved as effectively as possible.

We must not underestimate the scale of the problem that we face. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, relative child poverty is forecast to increase by 8.3% to 29.7%, and absolute child poverty is predicted to increase to 32.9% in Northern Ireland by 2020. This means that official targets are unlikely to be met. Under the Child Poverty Act 2010, the targets for relative and absolute child poverty were 10% and 5% respectively by 2020. The challenge is huge. We have to be serious about this, and we have to work together.

I will set out, as the Chair did in his opening remarks, what Delivering Social Change is. It is the Executive's delivery framework to coordinate efforts across Departments to take forward work on priority social policy areas. The framework seeks to coordinate actions between Departments to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages; to improve the health, well-being and life opportunities of children and young people; and to break long-term cycles of multigenerational problems. Delivering Social Change is also intended to complement much larger social and economic policy and programmes operating against poverty.

I turn to the structures that are in place. The framework is being led by OFMDFM junior Ministers through the Executive ministerial subcommittees on children and young people and on poverty and social inclusion. All Executive Ministers are members of those two subcommittees, and, once a year, the First Minister and deputy First Minister co-chair a joint meeting of the Executive ministerial subcommittees. The subcommittees are also being supported by Delivering Social Change programme boards, which are also co-chaired by the junior Ministers, with key Departments represented by key officials in our Civil Service. There is also a Delivering Social Change fund, which is a consolidated and integrated fund that subsumes the childcare fund, the social investment fund and current and future signature projects. According to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the fund is:

*"to respond quickly, and in a flexible manner, to urgent social needs as they arise and address the specific needs of some of our most in need individuals and families."*

We have heard in detail about some of the specific signature projects. They are focused on improving literacy and numeracy, nurture

units, social enterprise hubs, positive parenting, family support hubs, the community family support programme and a play and leisure programme.

I turn to Members' contributions. All Members recognised that this is an attempt to tackle some of the most serious issues in our community. Alex Maskey recognised that it needed to represent a cultural shift to change the way in which government responds to these issues. Alex Attwood was slightly more critical in saying that it was an indictment of policy design and the silo mentality in our government. He recognised, however, the positive power and value that the input of stakeholders can have into the formulation of government policy. Brenda Hale said that this was an example of action and positive social change rather than just strategic thought, and Jimmy Spratt went into detail about the extent of the problem with regard to special educational needs. It is also positive that the Chairperson of the Education Committee, Mervyn Storey, contributed, which demonstrates that it is positive that we debate this issue on the Floor. I regret that this type of report is not, at times, as forthcoming from the Department. As Members, we have shown that we can deal with these issues in a responsible and joined-up manner, and I would welcome further opportunities to get into more detail on the issues.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for giving way — unlike the Minister. The point that I was going to make to the Minister is that, although Departments have responsibility, does the governance and management responsibility not fall to OFMDFM?

If there are failures in joined-up government, consultation or the measurement of outcomes, is that not a commentary on issues of governance and management? Is that not a comment on OFMDFM?

**1.15 pm**

**Mr Lyttle:** I take the Member's point. I cannot speak on behalf of the junior Minister about why he failed to give way, but I am sure that he will do that himself. I was about to turn to the junior Minister's contribution, in which he cited a number of examples of delivery, such as the 20 new nurture units that deal with the social, emotional and behavioural needs of children and young people. That is a positive policy introduction. He mentioned the 200 teachers who are working on literacy and numeracy, parenting support, family hubs and the community family programme. I take on board

that he said that evaluation will occur, but, a year later, we are entitled to expect responsibility to be taken, and we need to see the outcomes.

The junior Minister was complimentary of the community family programme, which is a Department for Employment and Learning programme that the Minister for Employment and Learning is taking the lead on. He said that there are positive outcomes, with family members moving into employment, returning to education or taking up training opportunities. Those are the types of outcomes and examples that we want to hear about. Hopefully, the junior Minister will also take responsibility for governance in securing outcomes in other departmental areas.

The junior Minister also commented on the new level of joined-up working that the signature projects were to represent. He said that it would bring real benefits and move away from lengthy action plans. From my point of view, there is still some concern about whether moving away from lengthy action plans is wholly positive and well intentioned in respect of securing outcomes, or just about making life a bit more difficult for those of us on the Committee or Members of the Assembly to be able to see in detail where the actions are and follow them to assess the outcomes that they do or do not achieve. We can give people the benefit of the doubt and see what other details come forward.

The junior Minister also mentioned the importance of consultation and the extension of the consultation on the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People strategy. What he said was slightly lacking in detail, because there was an outcry from the Committee and the sector about the wholly inadequate time that was to be available for the consultation on this hugely significant strategy. It was to run from 20 January to approximately 21 February, but, thankfully, it has been extended to 31 March.

As chair of the all-party group on children and young people, I am sponsoring an event on Wednesday for children in Northern Ireland and will have a round-table discussion on the issue. All Members are more than welcome to attend the event, which was organised at very short notice because of the short notice of the consultation. I think that such events are positive. The report on the event that the OFMDFM Committee hosted shows that there is a wealth of expertise and experience in the children and young people's sector and the community and voluntary sector. As the junior

Minister said, the Department must work in partnership with them to ensure that we achieve improved outcomes for our children and young people and for everyone in greatest social need.

The report makes specific recommendations, and the Chair went into those in good detail. A year after the introduction of the signature projects, the report found that there was still a lack of a joined-up approach in government and that improvements in consultation were needed. I cited a very recent example that is still there. A greater focus on outcome measurement is needed. The Chair rightly referred to the gender equality strategy and the shortcomings that we have seen in the lack of outcome measurement on that strategy. The Committee was encouraged by officials' recent work on the gender equality strategy, and I think that there are officials in the Department who are genuinely committed to improving an area in which there has been a lack of delivery in recent years. However, there is a need for long-term planning to identify best practice, and for clear messages and awareness raising.

I had the privilege of chairing a round-table discussion about the positive parenting programme. Some of the feedback that I gathered was that there is a lot going on to tackle poverty and social exclusion in our community, but there is real need to get clear messages out, to coordinate people and to raise awareness of the projects that are available there. As Mr Attwood said, there is a responsibility on OFMDFM to show leadership in that type of coordinating effort.

I will make a few short comments as an Alliance Party Member of the House. In our most recent Assembly manifesto, we stated that there was a need for a statutory duty to cooperate among all Departments. The debate today has shown that there is a real need to consider that type of statutory duty. Significant progress has been made in recognising the need for a fundamental shift in how Departments work together, but I think that statutory duty to cooperate would develop that further.

I was interested to read an answer from the Agriculture Minister recently, who also recognised that that could be a positive addition to government here in Northern Ireland. She said:

*"The introduction of a statutory duty on public authorities here will help underpin the existing collaboration that takes place and encourage further joined-up working and*

*where possible, the sharing of resources across government too."*

That sharing of resources is another passion of mine as well, from an Alliance Party MLA point of view, as is the need for children's budgeting. I noted with encouragement that OFMDFM is undertaking a children's budgeting pilot. That type of children's budgeting across all Departments would help us as MLAs and would help the public identify how much money is being spent on our children and young people on those types of issues, how well it is being spent and what outcomes we are achieving. I think it is possible to deliver that, and I look forward to hearing more detail about the children's budgeting pilot that OFMDFM is taking forward.

In conclusion, this is no doubt a complex area of policy that we are striving to improve in the Assembly and Executive. It is vital to achieving equality and tackling need across our community here in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Department takes its responsibility seriously in that regard and that, as a result of today, it sees the positive role that the Committee can play in engaging in the areas of policy that it is working on. I look forward to developing that relationship further with it to achieve better outcomes for everyone in Northern Ireland.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on its event on the Delivering Social Change signature programmes (NIA 150/11-15); and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that meaningful and comprehensive engagement with practitioners and stakeholders is central to the development of any future signature programmes.*

## Private Members' Business

### Shared Education

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

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

**Mr Kinahan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes with approval the concept of shared education; believes sharing between all types of school could lead to better educational and community relations outcomes; further notes with disappointment the failure of the current Minister of Education to effectively facilitate sharing across the sectors; believes that the current area-planning process has not been conducive to sharing between schools and that the ministerial advisory group report on advancing shared education was a missed opportunity; expresses disappointment at the continuing failure to introduce a shared education premium; and calls on the Minister of Education to take practical steps to promote and facilitate sharing, so that a single education system can become a realistic policy goal.*

This is probably one of the most important subjects that the Assembly can debate, and one on which the whole of society's future depends. We have all heard the quotation:

*"The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."*

That is, education is the key to making our society the world success that it should be.

After the appalling, disastrous year of protests and the ongoing division over Haass, we — that is all of us — need to show society, not just in the United Kingdom and Ireland but in Europe, the USA and the rest of the world, that Northern Ireland can put in place a total, all-

encompassing educational framework that will help resolve our differences. I say it again: a total, all-encompassing educational framework.

The Ulster Unionist Party's driving policy is to put education first and, within that, to push for a single shared education system. The key word is "single": one; solitary — a sole shared education system. The Ulster Unionist Party follows the leadership shown by Lord Londonderry in the 1920s, Sir Basil Mclvor and Brian Faulkner in the 1970s, and many others, in wanting and working for shared education. After 90 years, we still have not got there.

Today is a test for all of us. Do we want shared education? The public do: 68% want desegregation of schools and 79% of parents see integrated education as the right way forward. In his 22 October statement, we saw the Sinn Féin Minister show that he wants shared education. Indeed, Sinn Féin reinforces that in its amendment. Almost all the other parties have shown that they, too, want it to some degree. Today is your test. Do you want shared education?

The motion should not be difficult for anyone to accept. We start by noting with approval, by all, of the concept of shared education. However, it is essential that we define what we mean. It is a mechanism, a total concept, of which integrated education is an absolutely key part. It is about creating a wholly inclusive educational environment that focuses totally on education. It means aligning every educational policy towards that one goal, including funding; the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), in an acceptable form; sectors; inspection; early years; the curriculum; exams; higher and further education; vocational and academic education; all other fields; and especially the *bête noire* that is the present area planning policy.

The area planning initiative must stop now and be completely rethought. It could fit into the overarching aim of a single shared education system if it were completely rethought. That would not be a backward step for the Minister, but a chance for a fresh look after so many other changes have been agreed. The Minister acknowledges that development proposals are written as if the school up the road does not exist, so he is already amending the initiative.

Shared education, as my party leader has often said, can happen totally for some schools now, for others in the next few years, and for all schools in the longer term. We all need to start putting a framework in place that ensures that that will happen so that "the next few years" becomes five or six years and "the longer term"

becomes 10 or 15 years. That is our test today. I wonder whether everyone here will put that in place. It is in the Programme for Government, but in such a woolly way that I feel Shaun the sheep from 'Wallace and Gromit' should become the Executive's mascot.

Last year's 'Advancing Shared Education' report set out some excellent recommendations, except the final three. We believe that we missed an opportunity then in not grasping those. We should put in place the first 17 recommendations. Bring on the statutory duty and the establishment of a central unit to drive forward a strategy with targets and goals, regional structures, research and evaluations. However, that needs suitable funding. It needs a shared premium, funding for training, and so much more. Let us not go into all that today, because it is all in the report.

I pause for a second to congratulate the Education Committee and remind everyone that it has not forgotten that initiative and will be holding an inquiry on the matter later in the year. However, it concerns me that we have put that off until later in the year when so much change to policy and action needs to be put in place now. That is why we are having today's debate.

The debate is not just a call on political parties to support shared education, but a call to all involved. Many groundbreaking bodies are already working on it today. I pick out the examples of the Fermanagh Trust and the excellent work that the area learning communities are doing to set examples in sharing. In my constituency, we have Moneynick and Duneane Primary Schools, which benefited from PíEE, Atlantic Philanthropies funding and, of course, the North Eastern Education and Library Board's support. However, the funding has stopped for the latter and is being reduced for the former. That is why this is a timely debate.

### 1.30 pm

We must use all that we have learnt and preserve and expand on it, rather than let it fade. Sharing is not just shared sports games or music lessons, facilities or transport to and from: it is shared teaching, shared teacher training and development, shared curriculum, shared classes, shared parents' meetings and shared governors and trustees. In the future, it could mean federations and groupings of all different types, especially in the sectors. It is everyone from the maintained sector, controlled sector, voluntary sector and library boards: this comment applies to all. Throw off your

shackles and free yourselves — no more '12 Years a Slave'. Mark Twain said:

*"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."*

In the DUP amendment, we see just two areas of sharing being tackled. We need more. There is much to be praised in Together: Building a United Community. However, it is just one part of the whole jigsaw. There is much in the signature projects, too. We praise them. However, we need them to really happen. That is not really relevant to this debate: nothing to do with sharing. Indeed, I am concerned as to whether the DUP really gets shared education. Its leader said that segregated education was a form of benign apartheid. Do they get it? They talked about a commission on shared education, yet not one of the education and library boards has ever been contacted about it. We need courage, determination and resolution to put that in place, but as part of a single shared-education drive — starting today, a total, all-inclusive drive.

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

**Mr Kinahan:** No. You will get your chance in a second. Thank you.

We see much in Sinn Féin's amendment No 2. There is much that we can agree with, especially the opening sentence:

*"the current area-planning process must be conducive to sharing between schools".*

It is not. We need to see it changed. Where we really differ is not expressed in words; it is in the dogma. Sinn Féin wants everyone to have the same excellent education by making the opportunities to all equal. We also want everyone to have an excellent education, but we want everyone to be given equal opportunities to excel in every field they can. Sharing the best that is — or, in some cases, was — in the grammar system is the way forward, not the divisive battle that each of those party's policies support. Today, what I call for is bigger than all of that.

Let us explore the suggestions by Professor Borooah and Professor Knox as part of the whole, total drive towards a single, shared education system. To all of you: throw off your

shackles, drop your amendments, support the main motion as it includes all of your aspirations, catch the wind of change and give your children the chance to explore, dream and discover. The UUP proposes the motion and opposes both amendments.

**Mr Storey:** I beg to move amendment No 1:

*Leave out all after "outcomes;" and insert*

*"welcomes the initiative by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in progressing this work through the signature projects; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively assist in this work through the development of shared campuses so that a single education system can become a realistic policy goal."*

At the outset, I have to say to the Member who moved the motion that I in no way feel that I am in shackles and that somehow I have to shed those shackles to become subservient to another political party. He does himself, his party and his cause no good by coming to the House trying to paint the picture that somehow the only answers and solutions are to be found in his party's approach to the issue. I will deal with the detail of that in a moment or two.

At the commencement of my remarks, let me, in supporting my party's amendment, pay tribute to certain schools. We very often come to the House and talk in general terms. We somehow forget that there are teachers, schools, governors, parents and organisations who work tirelessly, year after year after year, to ensure that their schools are inclusive, shared facilities.

I have to pay tribute, for example, to Ballycastle High School and Cross and Passion College in my constituency. Way before it was ever popular to use the phrase "shared education", those schools recognised their geographical location and the challenges that they had. Did that prevent them from trying to bring forward something that was of meaning and value to their pupils and community? No, it did not. I pay tribute to them today. I trust that the Minister will very shortly be able to announce funding that will be of benefit to Ballycastle High School and Cross and Passion College. That will, for the first time, show them recognition for the work that they have done.

In coming to the amendment, let me also pay tribute to my party leader. I can say, without any fear of being contradicted, that it was he who made those comments when he went to Castlereagh, despite everybody, from the

bishops down, attacking him because his words were somehow seen as an attack on Catholic education. Let us remember that those comments were made. Let us also remember that a week after my party leader made those comments in Castlereagh, we heard a different tone from the bishops.

Let us tease out the issue by, for example, looking at the statement made by the Education Minister back in October 2013. He said:

*"shared education is not a bolt-on or optional extra. It is fundamental to delivering good schools and central to my vision that every learner should achieve his or her full potential." — [Official Report, Vol 88, No 8, p1, col 2].*

That is to where we want to ensure that we move in the weeks, months and years ahead.

The mover of the motion rightly paid tribute to work done by the Fermanagh Trust, the North Eastern Education and Library Board, the PíEE project and Queen's University and the excellent work it has done.

Here is where we have an issue. Shared education means all things to all people at certain times of the week or year, but it all depends on when you ask and quiz them. When it comes to other sectors, it is interesting to note the responses that we in the Education Committee sometimes get. The Member, in moving the motion, referred to Moneynick and Duneane, and he will be aware that we have a letter from Bishop McKeown about shared provision for Moneynick and Duneane. It is amazing that said gentlemen was not aware of any of the new arrangements between the two primary schools. Bishop McKeown went on to say — this sometimes goes to the heart of organisations that have vested interests — the following:

*"We are all aware of the proposed collocation of separate schools on the Lisanelly site. However, since we have never had to reflect on the issue of a shared building, NICCE"*

— the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education —

*"has currently no views on the design of such shared education arrangements."*

Does that not give you an insight into an organisation that reportedly wants to be inclusive and to extend its remit for how it

interacts with other elements of the community? Does that not give you an idea of what its real view of sharing is?

Let me take it down to a level that is a little bit more personal. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School and as a past pupil of Armoy Primary School. As everybody knows, Armoy is in the heart of my North Antrim constituency, and it has been involved with the PíEE project for a number of years. The PíEE project gave Armoy, St Olcan's, Barnish and Straidbilly — the four schools involved — an opportunity to share. In fact, St Olcan's and Armoy had a shared teacher. That was welcomed by the boards of governors at both schools and the community, because it was not a threat to either.

Depending on the figures that you use for the sustainability of a school — we all have concerns about the Bain figures, but let us set that issue aside for the moment — if you accept that there was to be further sharing and collaboration with Armoy, you would expect that those with an interest in the process, such as a governing body, would want to see that being progressed.

I have to say that, to date, it has been regrettable that others, not the two schools, St Olcan's board of governors and Armoy Primary School board of governors, have been making noises about where sharing should go. I think that that goes to the very heart of the issue. The Member who made that proposal today made the comment about everybody coming up to the plate on the issue. It is about people stating clearly what it is that they want in future provision.

I will give another example. It is on shared campuses, which we refer to in our amendment. Let us go to Lisanelly. There has been a lot of talk about the Lisanelly project, and the Minister has allocated a lot of money to it. However, we need to be absolutely sure about it, and there needs to be no doubt, no mist, no fog, no confusion, no doublespeak and no double standards so that whoever moves onto the Lisanelly site moves there on the same basis, with the same arrangements and with the same contractual arrangements for ownership of the site so that none can claim advantage over another. I pay tribute to the fact that a special school is moving onto the site in the first place. Special educational needs is showing the way in shared education; special education has never been in a position where it is a maintained or an integrated provision. It is a controlled — a state — provision, and I pay

tribute to those in special educational needs, who, despite all the problems and challenges that they face, continue to deliver for our young people and children who have particular challenges. It is a light to us, in a sense, that a special school will move first to the Lisanelly site.

The Minister knows my view on this already. We watch with interest to see how others will follow onto the Lisanelly site and whether they will follow on the same basis and with the same criteria. I beg to say that that may not be the case.

No doubt, others will say much more as we progress —

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

**Mr Storey:** No, I am concluding.

In conclusion, there is undoubtedly an appetite in our community to ensure that education continues to flourish and to progress to the benefit of all our young people, not just some.

**Mr Hazzard:** I beg to move amendment No 2.

*Leave out all after "outcomes;" and insert*

*"believes that the current area-planning process must be conducive to sharing between schools and that the ministerial advisory group report on advancing shared education provides an opportunity to advance these aims; calls on the Minister of Education to introduce a shared education premium and to take practical steps to promote and facilitate sharing across the sectors and the entire education system."*

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate this very important issue and to move amendment No 2, which is in my name and that of my colleagues.

There has been an increasing interest in our education system and the wider public on the growth of shared education projects. So, it is important that we as an Assembly play our part in that growing conversation.

With that in mind, we ask Members to support our amendment. We feel that, unlike the motion, which does not sufficiently recognise the emerging success of sharing education projects or, indeed, the commitment and dedication that various schools, governors, teachers and the Minister has to shared education projects, our amendment

acknowledges that appetite for increased sharing between our schools. We also feel that, given the appropriate support and investment, we should see a flourishing of sharing across the system in the months and years ahead. That was laid out specifically in commitments 71, 72 and 73 of the Programme for Government, which specifically mention shared education and call on the Minister to ensure that:

*"all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015"*

and to:

*"Substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015".*

On the back —

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

**Mr Hazzard:** Go ahead.

**Mr Lyttle:** Is the Member able to provide us with an update on how the Department of Education is performing against the targets that he outlined?

1.45 pm

**Mr Hazzard:** I thank the Member, but I am not a spokesperson for the Department, so I will leave that update to the Minister in his statement later.

As the Member rightly pointed out, we had the launch of the shared education campuses programme in January, which will see the development and delivery of 10 shared education campuses locally. However, as outlined, I suppose, by the previous Member to speak, government is not leading the way on this as much as local schools, communities, teachers and, indeed, families, who have already invested a huge amount of work in sharing in our education system. Again, we, as a party, do not feel that the UUP motion pays significant recognition to those who are leading the way in sharing education. I point to a local example in Ballynahinch, where St Colman's High School and Ballynahinch High School have grasped the nettle and taken the lead to deliver the entitlement framework. I again pay tribute to the schools involved.

As has been said, the centre for shared education at Queen's University and the Fermanagh Trust continue to lead the way on

shared education in many respects. The Committee will visit Fermanagh in the months ahead to have a closer look at how things are progressing in the county. Indeed, one latest example was a teacher exchange scheme that facilitated a number of primary schools exchanging teachers for one day a week to assist with curriculum delivery. It was a great success, as it enabled schools to access a wider range of teaching expertise and resulted in improved educational outcomes for many young people across Fermanagh. Moreover, given the rural dynamics of many of the participating schools, the growth of such schemes throughout other rural areas of the North could be of huge benefit.

The growth in, and advancement of, shared education is, perhaps, the most significant development in education policy in the past number of years. Importantly, it is also one of the most sensitive areas of change. If this process of change is to be successful and sustainable into the years ahead, we must all embrace the process equally. There must be a shared readiness to engage between schools, sectors and political parties.

When we stand in the Chamber and talk about bringing pupils and schools together, we must always bear in mind that we are talking about hugely complex issues of identity and ethos. We are asking local communities to buy into a process of change while balancing community values and expectations. So, when we discuss the need for increased sharing and demand it be delivered as soon as possible, we should keep these very sensitive dynamics in mind.

Today, we are faced with an education system that is built upon having many different types of schools, each with their own rights and entitlements and each with their own proud identity and supportive community. For many across the North, this choice in our system is a great strength. However, many others see things differently. They believe that such choice in our system reflects social and communal divisions, scars of conflict that need to be addressed as soon as possible. Although many sympathise with either narrative, it is important that we focus on the educational case for sharing.

This debate, and all future conversations on the advancement of shared education, must not be allowed to get sidetracked. Effective educational sharing must have an impact on standards, outcomes and the learning experience on our young people. There can be no doubt that to raise standards and improve outcomes our schools need to change. How

we think about and understand education in the 21st century must change, and increased sharing within the system is undoubtedly central to such reform. That is because choice is important; we all accept that.

However, choice must not come at the expense of a good school, a good education and equal opportunity. Indeed, such inequalities in our system are bad for children and for society. Such inequity is damaging and unnecessary and we all have the power to eradicate it, if the will exists. Sharing is needed: not merely in the ethno-religious context that we are all so used to hearing about but within parameters of socio-economics.

If are to build a truly shared education system and society as a whole, we must move beyond the traditional narrative of religion and ethnicity and tackle the ever-enduring issues of social inequality and elitism. We need to challenge those who claim to support integrated and shared education yet support socio-economic separation in our system. How can religious division be wrong on the one hand yet economic division is acceptable on the other? I call on the Minister to introduce a shared education premium in the months ahead. I also urge him to continue to actively oppose and remove any barriers to integration in our system, be they religious or socio-economic.

Finally, I turn to the issue of the single education system, which I believe is too important to be a throwaway line at the end of any motion, particularly one on shared education. It is a very important programme of reform in its own right. A single education system is certainly a goal for many of us, but those of us who advocate such a policy goal have a responsibility to lay out the vision. Where is the detail in the Ulster Unionist contribution today? Where is the detail in the Democratic Unionist Party's contribution today?

We must all travel this journey together, yet the two unionist parties throw that line at each other without ever presenting a plan for change to inform us all of what this would look like. Indeed, when we discussed issues such as ESA, a body that would undoubtedly help to shape a united and cohesive system, the two unionist parties have merely sought to block and stall. They appear unwilling to act as a positive force for change.

Any future development of a single education system must be built on the protection of rights and parity of esteem for all citizens. Complex issues of ethos, identity and community values need sustained and sensitive contemplation.

When unionists run away from a bill of rights and a sexual orientation strategy, and given the irrational antipathy towards Irish-medium education and Irish language rights and the complete failure to tackle socio-economic inequalities and divisions, how could anybody blindly accept the throwaway line at the end of motion?

**Mr Rogers:** I welcome today's debate on shared education. We must think about where shared education happens. It happens in our schools across the North, and I want to highlight and acknowledge the great work in schools that are really advancing shared education. A wide range of schools adopt a shared system for learning and are real assets to our education system. Across the North, there are examples of good practice, with schools working together and sharing resources between and across the different sectors.

Twenty-six schools have already benefited from the primary integrating/enriching education project, which was funded by the International Fund for Ireland and Atlantic Philanthropies. We listened to the benefits of that project in Committee recently, and I was struck by the sharing of education and the fact that it led to better community cohesion. The Fermanagh Trust project, which Members mentioned, demonstrates good practice that could be rolled out to other areas. A number of primary schools, for example, engaged their teachers for one day a week to assist with curriculum development in their partner school. That enabled schools to access a wide range of teaching expertise and resulted in improved educational outcomes. The scheme could be of particular benefit to small rural schools throughout the region. The practices highlighted in Fermanagh should be incorporated into the mainstreaming of shared education and made available to all schools.

If truth be told, for shared education to be effective, we must bring our communities with us. Different communities are at different places with the level of acceptance of shared education. That is the reality. I can go back to the early years of education for mutual understanding (EMU) and our attempts to bring young people in Kilkeel from two traditions together for a soccer match or a ramble in the Mourne. Today, that has moved on considerably but still has plenty to do to catch up with Limavady High School and St Mary's, which the Minister visited recently. There are various examples of good practice that demonstrate how pupils from different backgrounds benefit from being educated together. The learning partnerships are a good

example of that. However, we can do much more to ensure that all schools work collaboratively.

Shared education can become an opportunity for keeping education alive in our rural communities, be it cross-community or cross-border. For rural schools under threat of closure, shared education offers a viable and practical alternative to closure. We believe that it is perfectly possible for schools to provide a quality education without meeting the enrolment threshold if a school engages with a neighbouring school. That is a practical solution, and it can help to improve community cohesion in remote areas.

The SDLP recognises the advances made in shared education and urges the Minister to ensure that the promotion of shared and integrated education in all varieties and forms is a priority for the Department. The Minister must avoid any attempt to prioritise one form of education system over another. We should work together to ensure that a diverse range of schools is supported and empowered.

The last line of the DUP amendment and the Ulster Unionist motion refer to a single education system, but if we are to move shared education forward, we must focus on achievable short-term goals. We must have more sharing. We should work towards supporting a diverse range of schools and helping them to deliver a quality standard of education for all our young people. I agree with the Sinn Féin amendment that efforts at area-based planning to date have not been conducive to developing shared education, and I hope that a shared education premium will become a reality.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Rogers:** Yes, I will.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Will the Member, like me, acknowledge the enormous contribution that schools with a faith-based ethos make to the progression of children's education?

**Mr Rogers:** Thank you for that intervention. I certainly acknowledge it. The point that I am making is that, as we move ahead with shared education — this came across very strongly in a recent presentation to the Committee — we must bring our communities with us, and we must protect the ethos of schools.

Building a truly shared future must include prioritising respect for the rights and choices

made by parents. The ethos of various communities and schools must be protected as we move forward. I see great opportunities with the Lisanelly campus and similar proposals. We must continue to strive for the highest standards in learning and give our young people access to a broad range of high-quality educational institutions. We fully support and recognise the merits of promoting shared education. In doing so, it is also important to acknowledge the particular ethos of participating schools.

A number of commitments were made in the Programme for Government to help to advance shared education, with specific undertakings to:

*"Ensure all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015".*

Secondly:

*"Substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities".*

Shared education can help us to maximise resources and improve community relations.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I was remiss. I ought to have informed the Member that he had an extra minute. Have you anything further to say quickly?

**Mr Rogers:** No, thank you.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** OK. As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Trevor Lunn.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Finance and Personnel

#### Equal Pay: PSNI/DOJ/NIO

1. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the equal pay settlement for staff in the PSNI, Department of Justice and Northern Ireland Office. (AQO 5542/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel):** Members will remember that it was clearly established in court that there is no legal liability for any payment in relation to equal pay in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Department of Justice or, indeed, the Northern Ireland Office. As I said before, I understand the genuine feelings that people have on the matter. I am working hard to find some way in which those feelings can be recognised. Since I last spoke on this issue in the Assembly, I have spoken with the Minister of Justice, and officials from both our Departments have met. I am consulting with officials to investigate whether there are any possible solutions to the issue that could be considered by the Northern Ireland Executive.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He outlined that there was no legal requirement on his Department. Equally, however, in the past, there have been situations, such as with the Presbyterian Mutual Society, where there has been no legal obligation, but there has been a moral obligation on the Executive to act. Does he not accept that, in this case, because of the inequalities that exist in our current Civil Service, there is such a moral obligation?

**Mr Hamilton:** I do not accept that there are inequalities. If there were inequalities in pay, I would expect the requisite Department, whether the Department of Justice or any other, to come forward with a case of an unequal pay situation needing to be rectified. He is right about the language I have used: I have stressed that, although there is no legal liability and, therefore, it is not an equal pay issue, even though we continue to refer to it as such, there is a moral responsibility on me to investigate opportunities or potential solutions for a recognition of the moral responsibility that may well be there.

I appreciate that the Member is not asking me to step outside the legal responsibilities that I or Executive colleagues have. However, looking at the news over the weekend, if the Member's party — the Green Party — had its way, perhaps it would add the extra stipulation that anybody who denies the existence of climate change should not be paid any money, whether moral or legal.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Obviously, Minister, in the opinion of many of the workers concerned, there has been a lot of toing and froing in this case for far too long. The Minister has touched on this already: how has he sought the support of the Executive for a financial resolution in this case? In the coming weeks and months, what plans does he have to bring further cases to the table?

**Mr Hamilton:** I am not sure that I agree with the language of "toing and froing", but I accept that there is perhaps a frustration. I sense that frustration from talking to some members of staff affected by the issue. I certainly see it in correspondence that I receive from them, as well as from talking face to face with them. At this stage, I have sought to engage directly with the Minister of Justice, who obviously has responsibility for the greater volume of staff, to seek a solution that he and I can agree on. The next natural step after that is to go to the Executive to seek agreement and then, hopefully, deal with the issue as a result. I am sure that the Member appreciates that, given the circumstances, Executive and cross-party approval is essential. In that respect, I hope that, if and when the Minister of Justice and I bring forward a solution to recognise the moral responsibility, it will get full support from all parties represented on the Executive, including the Member's party.

**Mr Wilson:** Is the Minister, like me, astounded by the brazen effrontery of the question from the Sinn Féin Member? He calls for additional money to be spent on equal pay settlements for those in the PSNI, and, at the same time, that party is squandering £5 million a month that could be used to make payment, but it prefers to give it back to the Government at Westminster. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for his very pertinent question. He is absolutely right. It is not the first time in the past week and I am sure that it will not be the last time today that Members opposite will press me to make

finance available for all sorts of projects in their constituencies or across Northern Ireland. However, the final leg of a resolution to the issue of equal pay for staff working in the justice family, if we can devise a solution, will be the need to find some money to pay for it.

I know where there is £15 million that could not only be used to fund this issue but could be given to colleagues in the Executive like the Health Minister, to relieve the pressures that the health service faces, or the Minister of Education, to relieve pressures in the education budget. Right across the system, all Ministers face pressures; they speak to me regularly and bring issues to the House. Members know that departmental budgets are under pressure, but £15 million is being squandered and handed back to Westminster this year. That will rise to £105 million next year, and a total of £1 billion over the next five years. That is money that we can ill afford to lose, yet it is being handed back and not being put to any good use.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for his answers. I do not want to quibble with the Minister. He said that it was not an equal pay issue in the legal sense, and one can accept that. However, it is certainly an equal pay issue for those who are negatively affected. Will the Minister clarify the position that he reached with the Minister of Justice, if he did, indeed, reach a position with him, on how to bring this to a happy conclusion?

**Mr Hamilton:** I would have thought that a learned gentleman like the Member opposite would have appreciated that it is not a legal issue. Strictly speaking, there is no liability in a legal sense for the Executive to deal with.

My discussions with the Justice Minister have not reached a conclusion and are ongoing. I am happy to continue to discuss it directly with him, although officials from both Departments continue to engage to find some way in which the moral argument could be recognised. I am happy to continue to engage with the Minister of Justice and for engagement to take place between officials from both Departments. In fact, I am happy to engage with anybody, and, later this afternoon, I will engage with NIPSA on the issue. They also have a responsibility, having contributed to the raising of expectations on the matter over the past number of months by organising something of a campaign that called on me and other Ministers to solve the problem, as they see it. They also have a responsibility and a duty to come forward with ideas on how it might be resolved, and I look forward to hearing that from them later this afternoon.

**Mr Copeland:** I thank the Minister for his answers. I know that it is a difficult problem. Will he confirm whether the money required to settle this non-legal moral issue, which essentially it is, has been identified? Have any sums towards that been included in the current budgetary arrangements? If so, will they be ring-fenced for the purpose for which they were intended?

**Mr Hamilton:** I welcome the Member's view that resolving the issue is neither a simple nor straightforward matter. I hope that an understanding across the House that it is not simple or straightforward will result in some patience and tolerance among Members, as well as the members of staff who are affected.

No ring-fenced money has been put aside to deal with the issue. Money was set aside for it in the past, should it have materialised that the Executive had a legal responsibility to settle it. That money is no longer in place. It is for the Executive to look at where money for resolving it might come from, if and when they decide to move forward with a solution. Our job in finding that money is not made any easier — in fact, it is made considerably more difficult — when we see the squandering of £5 million a month through not progressing with welfare reform.

## Public Procurement

2. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what progress has been made on improving the public procurement process. (AQO 5543/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for his question. In its role of supporting the procurement board, the Central Procurement Directorate has made significant progress in improving public procurement processes by making them less bureaucratic and more SME-friendly. A number of improvements have been put in place, such as the publication of guidance notes on how to overcome barriers that may prevent local businesses and companies accessing procurement opportunities; making tendering opportunities easily available via a single portal; and simplifying the procurement process for lower-value procurements that are not subject to the same level of European legislation. The directorate is working closely with construction and business representatives, and further areas being addressed include the standardisation of tender documentation and terms and conditions of contract; setting qualification requirements at levels that are proportionate to the contract; and introducing project bank accounts for

construction contracts. The measures, many of which address the recommendations arising from the Finance Committee's inquiry into public procurement, are making it easier for Northern Ireland suppliers to participate in tendering opportunities. I look now to Executive colleagues to ensure that their Departments and arm's-length bodies implement those improvements with help and guidance from CPD.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Minister for the responses so far. What work has gone on between the Central Procurement Directorate and business organisations with the aim of improving procurement processes?

**Mr Hamilton:** It is important that the Central Procurement Directorate and I, as the Minister responsible for public procurement policy in Northern Ireland, listen to concerns or positive suggestions from representatives of particularly the construction industry but right across business. My predecessor had an open door policy, and I have continued that in encouraging people who have issues around public procurement to come forward and raise them directly with me or with CPD. We will not be found wanting in coming forward with solutions where and when we can.

The CPD has been working closely alongside industry to address problems that it raised with us. For example, we have been working closely with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) focusing on reducing bidding costs, improving consistency across centres of procurement expertise (COPEs), reducing information demands in tenders and standardising documents. The outcomes of that work were publicised at a public procurement conference that I attended at the end of January.

With the construction industry specifically, we have been working on developments on construction procurement, the most recent of which are the standardisation of pre-qualification questionnaires and the development of project bank accounts. We have also been working with business on the dissemination of public procurement policy and the review of the delivery of procurements across business sectors.

I very much support joint working between business and government in improving procurement because it is so important to developing and growing the Northern Ireland economy.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. In light of some of the procedures in place, would the Minister consider a specific review? There are contracts worth less than £10,000, yet tenderers are expected to have an income of £2 million. Many small businesses feel that they are not in the range of earning £2 million but are ruled out of tenders of less than £10,000. Would he consider a review of such incidences?

**Mr Hamilton:** As the Member will know, procurement is a heavily regulated area, not least as a result of European directives handed down from national government that we have to implement at regional government level at Stormont. There seems to be positive progress in respect of the new set of EU procurement directives, which seem to be a little more responsive to and reflective of criticisms not just from Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom or Ireland but that the whole of Europe has been levelling against procurement across the European Union.

One issue that I think they specifically want to look at to assist small businesses is the turnover cap that prevents buyers from setting turnover requirements at more than twice the contract value. I can recall cases where requirements for the likes of insurance or indemnity insurance were unnecessarily high and above and beyond what many small firms could tender for. Without trying to twist or bend the rules in any way, we have always to be mindful in public procurement that our economy is dominated by microbusinesses and that, as we want to encourage them to avail themselves of public procurement opportunities, we do not set barriers of whatever nature so high that they will never surmount them. It is an area that we are mindful of and where we have taken action, and it is an area where, I hope, the new EU procurement directives will assist us in taking further action.

**Mr B McCrea:** Would the Minister care to comment on the impact that year-end flexibility or the lack of it has on the public procurement process and whether the public get value for money?

**Mr Hamilton:** I regularly hear the criticism from Ministers that not having end-year flexibility does not allow them, particularly on the capital side, to plan sufficiently far in advance. We are all aware of the old criticism that year-end expenditure is not necessarily of the same value as stuff that is planned further in advance.

The problem is that we work within the rules that the Treasury sets us, which do not allow us to have end-year flexibility. It is not called "end-year flexibility" any more, it is the budget exchange scheme. In respect of capital carry-over into the next year, we have a maximum of £10 million for the entirety of the Executive's capital budget. That is out of a budget of over £1 billion of capital spend, so the Member and the House will appreciate that the amount of money that we can carry forward is very small. That does not permit us to give any one Department or business area total flexibility in what it can carry forward.

I accept that in many circumstances — I have spoken to some colleagues about this — there are business areas where not having the ability to carry forward money into another year does not allow them to plan capital expenditure with the degree of certainty and strategic nature that they would want.

2.15 pm

## Prompt Payments

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures his Department is taking to ensure prompt payments to subcontractors. (AQO 5544/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** For all government contracts, CPD guidance includes a number of measures aimed at ensuring prompt payment to subcontractors. They include payments by main contractors being made within 30 days; monthly reporting by main contractors on payments to subcontractors where the subcontract value exceeds 1% of the total contract or £10,000; payment issues being a standing agenda item for project meetings; random checking by project managers to ensure that subcontractors have received payments due; and the exclusion of contractors from tender opportunities for a year if they do not comply with contract conditions relating to prompt payment. In addition, my Department has introduced project bank accounts in appropriate construction work contracts, which help to accelerate payment to subcontractors and protect payments in the event of the main contractor's insolvency. Payment is made simultaneously to the main contractor and its subcontractors, usually within five days of funds being deposited in the project bank account.

**Mr Maskey:** Will the Minister comment on the fact that many in the construction industry say that some of the difficulties that they find lie more in the period between the submission of

invoices and the actual payment? Will the Minister give me some insight into how that element of the process can be expedited to make sure that the targets are not flawed and are met?

**Mr Hamilton:** I accept that, even though we have put in a significant raft of measures to respond in the way that we want to from a public policy perspective, as responsible contractors or responsible buyers, we want to make sure that they abide by the sort of standards that we put upon ourselves. The Member will be familiar with the fact that we aim, as a Government, to pay all our invoices within 10 working days, not the 30 days that we have put on contractors, and obviously there needs to be a bit more time there because of the nature of the work.

I appreciate that sometimes there is a lapse between invoicing and payment. However, we have issued guidance to Departments, including my own, that, where we are developing contracts, particularly those with a significant volume of subcontracting, a condition must be that it is paid within 30 days.

Occasionally, there will be circumstances where the invoice submitted is not accurate. The main contractor might want to test that and make sure that everything that is being asked for is included and that our work has been done. However, by and large, everything should be easily paid within 30 days. As a Government, we endeavour to pay everything, and the project bank accounts will certainly help to ease out some of the problems, particularly with large construction projects.

**Mr I McCrea:** The Minister will be aware that the Health Minister raised the need for a project bank account to be included for the building of the training college at Desertcreat. Will he outline how important he thinks project bank accounts are to ensuring the quick payment of moneys to subcontractors?

**Mr Hamilton:** They are an incredibly valuable innovation. We are the first part of the United Kingdom to introduce project bank accounts, and I would not be surprised if other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom followed suit very quickly.

The Health Minister was right — I paid tribute to him at the time and would do so again — to ensure that a project bank account was included for the work at Desertcreat, which is in the Member's constituency, because of legitimate concerns that he had on the basis of

previous experience in his sector about payment trickling down to subcontractors.

From January of last year, project bank accounts have been introduced into the contract conditions for government construction contracts let by my Department, where such contracts have an estimated value of £1 million and contain a significant subcontracting element. CPD has now let two construction works contracts that include the use of a PBA: the new regional office for the Rivers Agency in Omagh, at a cost of £1.13 million, and the refurbishment of the jobs and benefits office in Foyle at a cost of £1.04 million. We have also prepared guidance for the application of project bank accounts in all construction contracts. Its adoption as Northern Ireland public procurement policy will be considered by the procurement board to ensure that it is applied by all Departments in future.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra.

What monitoring process does the Minister have in place to ensure the effectiveness of the measures that he outlined earlier? Are any statistics available?

**Mr Hamilton:** I have no current figures, but I will attempt to furnish the Member with some data as quickly as possible. In fact, I would be interested in seeing it myself. As he will know, regular project meetings go on, particularly about big construction contracts, to measure and keep an awareness of various aspects of a contract. We have now issued guidance intended for all Departments to ensure that, as well as talking about whether the contract is on course to be finished on time and any issues that have arisen over the course of a project, payment issues are included as a standard item on the agenda of project meetings. That allows officials, whether from my Department, other Departments or arm's-length bodies, to bear down on contractors and ensure that they adhere to the very strict and firm conditions that we are setting for prompt payment.

## Construction Sector: Outlook

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the outlook for the local construction sector. (AQO 5545/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** We are continuing a theme, I suppose.

There is no doubt that our economy is beginning to show signs of recovery. We have had some encouraging indications that we are beginning to emerge from what has been the deepest and most protracted recession in living memory. The latest 'Northern Ireland Construction Bulletin' shows that the total volume of construction output here increased by some 2.4% in quarter 3 of 2013-14 compared with quarter 2. The Northern Ireland construction industry has demonstrated great versatility and resilience, with many firms winning major projects in Great Britain and beyond. A number of larger local construction firms have indicated that over 50% of their turnover comes from projects located outside Northern Ireland. The ability of local firms to compete and win work outside Northern Ireland is evidence of the quality of the construction industry here, and that gives me confidence in the future outlook for the industry.

**Mr Craig:** Can the Minister outline what government has done not only to stabilise but to assist the recovery of the construction sector?

**Mr Hamilton:** What we have done most and perhaps best is continue to invest in infrastructure across Northern Ireland. We have assisted the construction industry by at least attempting to simplify and streamline the procurement process, as I outlined in response to other questions, and that has helped to reduce costs to the industry and, most importantly, public bodies. That has maximised the funding available for construction works and minimised delays in having schemes brought forward.

There is still considerable work to be done on speeding up our procurement process for major capital projects, and that is why I have asked the procurement board to carry out a targeted piece of work in that regard. However, in the biggest areas in which we are spending money on construction works, adjusted for inflation, we are now spending at the same level as we were prior to the 2007 credit crunch and downturn. Proportionately, public sector investment in construction, which, prior to 2007, was just below 40% of total investment, is now at 54% of total spend, which is testimony to the continued investment that we as a Government are putting in. However, it also shows the extent of the collapse in spending by the private sector. It is more of a private sector problem. I assure Members that all available capital moneys are being spent and that any surplus funding is being diverted into much-needed schemes through the monitoring round process.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister's figure of 54% of spending in the construction sector indicates how important public sector expenditure is. That brings me on to the ISNI portal, which is used to highlight what projects there are for contractors. Some contractors have indicated that the portal is not as good as it could be. They accept that it is a good principle, but, for example, some projects are not on it yet.

**Mr Speaker:** I encourage the Member to come to his question.

**Mr Flanagan:** Can the Minister ensure that his Department and others use the portal effectively to benefit local construction companies?

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member makes a good point about the portal, which is a delivery tracking system that the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) runs on behalf of the Executive. Obviously, SIB's work is a ministerial responsibility for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, but it has the potential to be the answer to the problem that the Member identifies, which is a lack of clarity about the pipeline of capital investment moving forward. I have listened to people in the construction industry who, although they are taking up opportunities for work outside Northern Ireland, say that they are starting to see some pick-up in work here in Northern Ireland, especially in the private sector. They still want to do public sector work, and we want them to do public sector work in Northern Ireland. However, as they are meeting other pressures and have to skill up and tool up for projects well in advance, they need good information and a delivery tracking system could and should be able to do that.

The problem, as the Member identified, is that not all Departments have availed themselves of the data tracking system. There are some Departments whose work is not on the delivery tracking system at all, and there are other Departments who put the information on it sporadically. So, you are very much getting an incomplete picture for people in the construction industry. I think that, if we, as an Executive, are serious about giving good and timely information to people in the construction sector, this is a device that we can use. If we wanted to, we could all do it within a week. There is no reason why Departments should not be looking at it. As I mentioned in response to the previous question, I have asked the procurement board to look at this issue and related issues as part of its review of the

procurement of major capital projects in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Gardiner:** Minister, there are still significant delays in many government capital projects hitting the ground. What can be done to improve the situation that we find ourselves in?

**Mr Hamilton:** Of course, one of the biggest capital projects not to proceed over the past couple of years is the A5 road project. The Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy, was responsible for that project and fell foul of the courts in the process leading towards it materialising on the ground. There are lessons for all of us to learn from that. One of the lessons that, I hope, we learn and something that, I hope, the subgroup of the procurement board will look at closely is how we create a pipeline of work so that, in a situation such as that with the A5, where a significant amount of money could not proceed — roughly £100 million last year and £115 million this year could not be spent on that project — a sufficient volume of projects have advanced to a stage at which they can avail themselves of that funding if and when it materialises.

Obviously, we hope that the sort of situation that arose with the A5 does not happen again and that all major capital projects that we want to deliver are delivered. However, as we know, whether through planning or falling foul of the courts, as Minister Kennedy did with the A5, that is not always the case. There need to be other opportunities to soak up that money. If we do not have an opportunity to soak up that money, the funding will be lost to Northern Ireland, and our people will lose out as a result.

## Equal Pay: Civil Servants

5. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the equal pay issue for retired civil servants. (AQO 5546/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for her question. I am very happy to say that, with my approval, officials from my Department are in the process of negotiating with NIPSA the settlement terms and processes for payment of former staff represented by the trade union who lodged writs in court following a change last year to the legal position on the time frame within which former staff can lodge equal pay claims. Affected former staff represented by NIPSA will be contacted soon. Once those processes have been agreed and payments for that group of staff are under way, officials will

contact other former staff who could bring a claim and seek to settle with them in the same way.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I am delighted to ask a supplementary question on that good news; I was not expecting it. Could the Minister advise the House of the time frame and of how many staff this affects?

**Mr Hamilton:** It is a very rare piece of good news around this place, but I am happy to bring it nonetheless. About 1,200 staff will be affected. Obviously, we are very keen to progress this as quickly as possible. As I said, we have already started discussing this with union officials to try to get it transacted as quickly as possible. However, as the Member will appreciate, given the volume of staff and the amount of money that will be paid out to affected individuals — around £2 million — it will take some time to process not just the terms of the outstanding pay but the ramifications for pensions.

**Mr Anderson:** If finance were made available to settle the equal pay issue, will the estates of staff who have died also receive the payment?

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for his question on an important issue. Again, the answer is good news. Yes, officials will contact the estates of staff who have died and make a payment to the estate of the deceased member of staff.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. That concludes questions for oral answer to the Minister of Finance. We will now move to topical questions.

## Welfare Reform

1. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that DSD has estimated that £450 million will come out of the local economy if welfare reform is implemented. (AQT 721/11-15)

2.30 pm

**Mr Hamilton:** I am not particularly versed in DSD's precise estimate of what will come out of the economy as a result of welfare reform. Many people in Northern Ireland will benefit from welfare reform as a result of the move to universal credit, and a significant number will be better off. As happens with any changes or reforms, there are always winners and losers. However, the Member will know that, as I made perfectly clear not just in responses to earlier

questions but very publicly in the media and in the House last week, we have to balance the impact of the money that is lost as a result of welfare reform with the significant amount that will be lost to the Northern Ireland economy and to our ability as an Assembly to spend money on public services that are needed by our citizens.

The Member and I go back a long time in looking at welfare reform, and he will remember the previous set of reforms, which were a bit of a teddy bears' picnic compared to the current ones. He will have to appreciate, as I am sure will others, that the impact of taking £1 billion out of our Budget over the next five years will affect some seriously vulnerable people in Northern Ireland society.

That does not take into account the impact of the cost of a replacement IT system. If we step away from parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, we will have to replace that system, the cost of which is estimated at £1.6 billion over the next 10 years. Then, there is the very real concern that, even in procuring a very expensive IT system of our own, it will take until beyond 2016 to put it in place. The ramifications of that are that many people, including 200,000 working families in Northern Ireland, will not receive the benefits to which they are entitled post-2016.

**Mr F McCann:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I do not recognise the figures he mentioned; they have materialised only in the past few weeks. Rather than being a reform agenda, this is a cuts agenda. The British Government have already said that they want a 20% reduction in the benefit bill.

**Mr Speaker:** I encourage the Member to finish.

**Mr F McCann:** It is more likely to hit those who are most marginalised in society, such as low earners. Would it not be better if we stood together, as a House, and went to the British Government to say enough is enough?

**Mr Speaker:** I must insist that the Member now brings his remarks to a close.

**Mr F McCann:** Let us get a system that benefits —

**Mr Speaker:** Minister —

**Mr F McCann:** — the people rather than having cuts.

**Mr Hamilton:** I think that there was maybe a question in there somewhere; there was a why or a where or something.

I remind the Member that, whatever the estimates — he mentioned £450 million, and I have seen a figure of £750 million being put forward by others — that is not money that is being taken out of the economy. It is the amount less that we will have to spend on welfare in Northern Ireland. The overall global picture of welfare spending in Northern Ireland will continue to increase post-welfare reform. If we take the Member's figure, it is £450 million less than we might have expected as opposed to a net loss of £450 million.

Thinking back to figures that I saw 12 to 18 months ago, social security expenditure in Northern Ireland was anticipated to rise towards the end of the decade by roughly 20% as a result of the reductions that will come through from welfare reform; that will be roughly 17%. However, whether it is 20% or 17%, there will still be a net increase in welfare expenditure in Northern Ireland. There will not be a reduction.

As I said, in a situation where it might not be nice to see that amount of money not going into the Northern Ireland economy, we will sure as hell feel the impact of £1 billion being taken out of our ability to spend over the next five years. The Member said that he does not recognise the figures that I have put out, but he will start to recognise them when we see cuts to every single Department — every single Department. I will have no option but to bring forward a paper to Executive colleagues outlining how I think we should best reduce our expenditure across all Departments by £105 million next year. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Hamilton:** I will really not look forward in a few years' time to taking over £300 million out of expenditure by Departments here in Northern Ireland. The impact of that will hit the very vulnerable people whom, I believe, the Member is trying to protect. Those same vulnerable people will be affected exceptionally negatively by cuts in housing, health, education and other sectors.

## **Agrifood Loan Scheme**

2. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the agrifood loan scheme should reopen for applications, given its significance to our local industry and his

revelation that it should reopen early in the financial year. (AQT 722/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** Work is ongoing. I would not necessarily describe what I said as a revelation. It was pretty clearly outlined to Executive colleagues in the January monitoring paper and was not hidden away anywhere. I raised it specifically in the House when I brought forward the January monitoring paper.

I remain absolutely and totally committed to the scheme. It is a good scheme that allows us to avail ourselves of opportunities in UK supermarkets, which are increasingly sourcing food products, particularly meat products, from UK farms and producers. There are huge opportunities for the local sector to expand. I am sure that the Member will appreciate that bringing together government, banks, producers and processors was complicated from the outset. We anticipated that, even if applications were made in this financial year, the bulk of the spending would take place in the next financial year. That is why we have an existing commitment from January to an additional £10 million of expenditure in the agrifood loan scheme. Work continues on that, and I hope that it will be in place in the next number of weeks, ready for the next financial year and for people to avail themselves of an excellent opportunity to expand their businesses.

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. It may not have been a revelation for the Minister, but it certainly was for a large number of people in the industry. Will the Minister confirm whether the £10 million is still in place for the scheme?

**Mr Hamilton:** I am sure that many in the farming industry do not listen to January monitoring statements, and certainly a lot of Members of the House do not listen to those statements, even though they are incredibly important. There is £10 million committed to next year, and we will judge the success of the scheme on how it impacts on the poultry sector. If it is as successful as I think that it will be, we will look at additional expenditure in future years. There is money through financial transactions capital that is unallocated for future years and could be given to the poultry sector. We are also exploring opportunities in the pig meat sector, and we have not drawn a line just under those two sectors. We will look at other opportunities in other sectors of our booming agrifood industry.

## National Asset Management Agency

3. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with NAMA in the past week, given the importance of its portfolio to the local economy and markets. (AQT 723/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** I have not had any discussions this week with NAMA. I am sure that the Member will refer to reports in the media, although I will try, as best as I can, not to pre-empt his supplementary question. I have had no conversations with NAMA this week, although I intend to have a conversation early next week.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. It is important to appreciate the commercial sensitivities on this issue. Will the Minister reassure us that the Executive and the Dublin Government are making it quite clear that there is a need for responsible management of the NAMA portfolio to avoid any adverse effect on the local economy?

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member, and most Members, will have seen news reports towards the tail-end of last week on speculation about a potential buyer for the Northern Ireland portfolio. As I understand it, it is not only for assets in Northern Ireland but for assets that are owned by Northern Ireland people. Those assets will predominantly be in Northern Ireland, but they could also be in Great Britain, the Republic or elsewhere. It has the potential to be very good for Northern Ireland as we get towards the business end of what NAMA has to do. NAMA has taken a responsible approach over the past number of years, but it is getting to the stage in its process at which it will have to start to realise some benefit and money from the assets that it holds in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. I am sure that the investor, who has been mooted in the press as having the backing of a \$2 trillion fund, will take a longer-term view of NAMA's assets in Northern Ireland. It has the potential to be very good in unlocking the huge potential in many of the assets that are locked up in NAMA.

However, it would be utterly inappropriate for me to discuss the merits or otherwise of particular bids with NAMA. We have an interest in what happens to those assets. From the outset, at the institution of NAMA, we encouraged it not to go down the route of a fire sale, and, to be fair, it has not. It has acted incredibly responsibly, and, in some respects, has been very good for the property market in

Northern Ireland by carefully letting some assets out in the construction sector, in housing and in commercial properties. When I next speak to NAMA, I will continue to impress upon it that, whatever happens with the portfolio, whether it remains in NAMA's hands or goes to somebody else, it must ensure that the assets are handled with great sensitivity and that the property market in Northern Ireland, which is showing good signs and improving gradually, is not wounded or damaged in any way by a sale to somebody who wants to earn a fast buck.

## Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme

4. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his estimate of the savings that his Department will require in the principal civil service pension scheme in 2014. (AQT 724/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** I do not want to guess so I will furnish the Member with the precise figures in correspondence, if he is content with that.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you. I expect a similar answer to my supplementary. What changes are likely to be applied to employee contributions to deliver the planned savings?

**Mr Hamilton:** As a result of the reforms that recently passed through the House but have not yet received Royal Assent, we will take whatever steps are necessary, as will all Ministers who are responsible for one of the five principal schemes covered by the Bill, to realise the savings that the Executive collectively have to make. There is a range of ways in which that can be done, and increased contributions are already hitting members of staff, but I would rather come back to the Member with more precise details than say something foolish and wrong in the House.

## Dormant Accounts

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the £3.2 million in dormant accounts of faith-based organisations. (AQT 725/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member will be aware that the issue has been around for some time, and some cynics might say that it, in itself, has become dormant over the past number of years. We have been attempting to develop the most appropriate scheme to utilise the money in dormant accounts, which, as I understand it, has increased significantly. As more money

passed the threshold — in a bank account showing no transactions for 15 years — it has come into the overall dormant account pool.

I agree with my predecessor's decision to move away from a grant-based programme to one that provides loans to people in various sectors who work with children and young people and others who are in need. I have regular meetings with officials on the detail of taking that forward, and I hope soon to be in a position to have a finalised scheme that can start to hit the ground running in the not-too-distant future and do some very good work right across Northern Ireland.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he foresee who will administer the loans?

**Mr Hamilton:** That will be an issue in how we design any scheme. Who will do that is up for discussion. My personal favourite approach is that, instead of government administering it and having to create a bureaucracy of our own, we look to the market to people who are operating in Northern Ireland. I do not wish to name any particular organisations, but several that operate in Northern Ireland offer loans to people in the social enterprise sector. It is important that we piggyback on their experience and knowledge of the sector so that we can get all the money and, indeed, probably more into very needy projects across Northern Ireland.

## Health: January Monitoring Bids

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he had with the Health Minister about the pressures in the health service, particularly the accident and emergency crisis, given that, in the recent in-year monitoring process, although the Health Minister bid for some £43 million for inescapable pressures, some £30 million was allocated. (AQT 726/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** I have regular discussions with the Health Minister and Executive colleagues, not least when I put forward my January monitoring paper and the Executive gave £30 million to my colleague the Health Minister to relieve pressures that his Department was under. I am not satisfied that just £30 million was needed; I think that the pressures probably deserved more. However, given the situation that we found ourselves in and that we were trying to balance competing pressures that the Executive face, I do not recall the Minister for

Regional Development, for example, putting his hand up and offering the Minister of Health any additional funding. We have to balance a whole range of pressures. I am glad that we were able to give the Minister of Health £30 million to spend on relieving pressures right across the health service, as we did in previous monitoring rounds. I will continue to support the Health Minister when he comes forward with bids to meet the inescapable pressures that he faces as a result of years of mismanagement in the health service that he, of course, inherited just two years ago.

2.45 pm

## Enterprise, Trade and Investment

### Job Creation

1. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the success of Invest NI initiatives in promoting and creating jobs for people who are long-term unemployed. (AQO 5556/11-15)

**Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** My Department and Invest Northern Ireland have a key role to play in addressing unemployment by ensuring that we deliver on our Programme for Government commitment to promote 25,000 new jobs. A significant element of Invest NI's job promotion activity is directed at helping to rebuild the local economy in the wake of the economic downturn. In doing so, the jobs fund has offered an important source of employment creation, particularly in providing opportunities for those who would be considered as long-term unemployed.

Since its launch in 2011, the jobs fund has created over 4,300 new jobs. Some 300 of those jobs have been created for younger people not in education, employment or training who have received support to start up their own business. A further 650 residents of neighbourhood renewal areas have also received support to set up their own business, and 160 jobs have been created in social enterprises across Northern Ireland.

**Mr Copeland:** I thank the Minister for her answer. However, recent labour figures show that over-45s in Northern Ireland are more likely to be economically inactive than their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. What specific steps does she have in mind to address that trend?

**Mrs Foster:** It has long been recognised that we in Northern Ireland have an issue about those who are economically inactive. It is one of the reasons why the Minister for Employment and Learning and I are engaged in a consultation on that very issue. In that consultation, we will, of course, engage with stakeholders, but we hope that people will take the opportunity to look at the consultation, because it gives the chance for people to come forward with innovative, new ideas for pilot projects. I know that some Members are engaged in looking at what that could mean for their own particular area, and I encourage him to do likewise.

**Mr Douglas:** Will the Minister inform the House what impact the jobs fund has had in my East Belfast constituency?

**Mrs Foster:** The jobs fund has been a tremendous success. Of course, it was one of the actions that we took to try to deal with the downturn that came upon us. In East Belfast, it has promoted a total of 1,259 jobs. I think that is a tremendous impact for the constituency. That includes 30 jobs fund business investment projects at various stages of development, which should lead to the creation of 1,179 new jobs as well. Of course, that includes a very large project known as Stream, which had 993 jobs. We should note that the jobs fund is also having an impact on neighbourhood renewal areas and on those not in education, employment or training. It is not just creating new jobs but is helping people in those disadvantaged areas.

**Mr A Maginness:** Clearly, there is a need for a specific approach to the long-term unemployed. The Minister has put a lot of emphasis on the jobs fund. Will she estimate how many of the jobs that have been created have in fact gone to long-term unemployed people?

**Mrs Foster:** I do not have those statistics, because it is not a measure that we have. I know that the House would like me to have statistics broken down into many different categories, but I do not have that particular category. I think the jobs fund is my strongest tool to help in particular areas, but it should be seen alongside everything else that has been happening, including the work that goes on in Stephen Farry's Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, particularly through his employer subsidy, which is the Steps to Work strand. That subsidy provides an incentive to employers to recruit unemployed or economically inactive clients whom they would not otherwise look to. That is part of the

suite: we have to look across government as to how we can help people who are struggling with unemployment, particularly those who have been struggling for a long time. The economically inactive strategy, which is, as I said, out for consultation, provides the opportunity to do something innovative in that area. We look forward to the consultation responses, which should be with us over the next month.

**Mr B McCrea:** Earlier, the Minister mentioned discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning. Is she concerned about the large number of people who are getting ring binders full of certificates but are no nearer to getting a job because they lack the skills demanded by industry?

**Mrs Foster:** I am not here to answer questions on behalf of the Employment and Learning Minister; he is well capable of doing that for himself. However, one area where I am involved with him in relation to what the Member calls "ring binders full of certificates" is the Software Testers Academy. I know that those people get real and meaningful jobs. That is why the academy was set up: to deal with the deficit of skills for the IT industry. A targeted approach is certainly needed. There is no point in giving young people skills if there are no jobs at the end of that skills development. Certainly, that is where my focus has been. I think it is where the focus of the Employment and Learning Minister has been as well. That is why he is putting a lot of emphasis at the moment on apprenticeships. I encourage him in that; I think that that is the way we should be moving forward.

## HGV Road User Levy

2. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact of the heavy goods vehicle road user levy on cross-border trade, particularly that of small and medium-sized enterprises. (AQO 5557/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** In 2013, I met the Freight Transport Association about those very issues. The UK Government estimate that nine out of 10 UK-registered HGV operators should experience no overall change due to reductions in vehicle excise duty. The Republic of Ireland remains our second largest market for sales, after Great Britain, and it is a particularly important market for SMEs. I am aware that rising transport costs are a concern for many local firms. I have, therefore, tasked my Department and the Northern Ireland Centre for

Economic Policy with conducting research on the cost of doing business. That research will examine a range of cost areas, including transport costs, and seek to benchmark costs for Northern Ireland firms against the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that, given the impact such a levy would have on cross-border economic development, it is of a cross-cutting nature? Therefore, will she encourage the Environment Minister to bring a paper to the Executive on the matter?

**Mrs Foster:** It is not a matter for the Environment Minister; it is a matter for Westminster. They have decided that they are going ahead with the levy. In some ways, I understand why they have decided to do that. Many of our road hauliers have to pay tolls and charges when they travel across Europe. Even when they travel in the Republic of Ireland, they are subject to road charges and tolls. Therefore, it was felt that we needed to give a level playing field to our hauliers. The Freight Transport Association actually welcomes the road user levy. There were concerns about the Irish Government, in discussion with the UK Government, exempting the levy for the whole of the Northern Ireland road network, but that has not been the case. The Westminster Department considers Northern Ireland part of the scheme as well.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for her answers, and I welcome her back from her business trip to Singapore. I am sure that we will hear some good news later on.

Does the Minister believe that it is right for the Republic of Ireland to push for Northern Ireland roads to be exempt from the levy while Northern Ireland hauliers are paying toll charges when using roads in the Republic of Ireland?

**Mrs Foster:** As I said, it is a Westminster matter. It has been decided to exempt seven kilometres of road in Northern Ireland that goes in and out along the border so that there are no enforcement difficulties.

That is in and around the A37 and A3, which, as I said, weave in and out of the Republic of Ireland. It would be unfair for our hauliers to have to pay the tolls that they have to pay. I know that the cost of doing business across Europe has risen. I am waiting for that report from the Northern Ireland Centre for Economic

Policy. I look forward to the evidence base that it will bring me. It is unfair that they should be expected to pay tolls when people who come from the rest of Europe, including the Republic of Ireland, do not pay a charge in Northern Ireland. It is the right compromise. I hope that we will continue to keep an eye on that to make sure that our hauliers are not disadvantaged.

**Mr Dallat:** I have listened very carefully to the Minister. I am sure that she will agree with me that what we and hauliers want more than anything is a unified and coordinated approach to this. She will be aware that the Minister for Transport, Leo Varadkar, is meeting his counterparts in the UK at the end of February. What is she doing to ensure that we do not end up with a situation where there is ping-pong between North and South and that, in fact, there is a coordinated and unified approach to a very serious problem?

**Mrs Foster:** Perhaps that is more a matter for the Minister for Regional Development, who shadows Leo Varadkar on this issue in the North/South Ministerial Council. I will certainly pass on the Member's comments on the matter. As I understand it, the whole issue of being able to enforce related to that stretch of road that goes in and out of the Republic of Ireland. That is why they have determined that it is exempt from the regulations and that it is only in the rest of Northern Ireland that they will be applicable. The Department for Transport has taken the view that exclusion of those particular roads will not affect the overall cohesiveness of the scheme in Northern Ireland. I very much hope that that is the case. I hear what the Member is saying, but he should reflect on the fact that the Freight Transport Association welcomes the scheme in Northern Ireland. It made that point to me back in March of last year.

**Mr Allister:** With regard to the pressures that are being placed on hauliers, is the Minister aware of the difficulties that are being created for Northern Ireland hauliers by excessive delay in the Southern authorities' refunding of VAT that they are entitled to on fuel purchases? Is there anything that she can do to try to expedite those matters?

**Mrs Foster:** I am aware of that issue because it has been raised with me at a constituency level as opposed to a ministerial level. However, again, it is probably more an issue for the Department for Regional Development. I am, of course, content to pass on the Member's concerns to the Minister so that he can raise it with the appropriate authorities in the Republic.

## Oil Prices

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the levels of transparency in home-heating oil prices. (AQO 5558/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** The price of heating oil is largely determined by international markets. Daily movements in the commodity price for kerosene are fully transparent. The Consumer Council produces a range of current and archived retail oil prices across Northern Ireland on its oil watch web page. Additionally, the Northern Ireland Oil Federation, in partnership with the Consumer Council, launched a customer charter that provides service and price guarantees to consumers confirming the price of oil in advance of delivery.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Minister for her answer. As she may be aware, my colleagues in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment raised those concerns in December. Can she indicate what response she has had from the Oil Federation in that regard? Go raibh maith agat.

**Mrs Foster:** I am not entirely sure what concerns have been raised. Certainly, I have not received any issues to take forward. The reality is that the price is transparent. We have looked at that in the past. Indeed, the Office of Fair Trading looked at the issue in 2011. All that we can do is continue to look at the price of oil and work with the Consumer Council, which, as I have indicated, keeps a very close eye on the issue. Indeed, I welcome the fact that it is now working more proactively and positively with the oil industry here in Northern Ireland.

**Ms P Bradley:** Can the Minister comment further on the need for regulation of the home heating oil market?

## 3.00 pm

**Mrs Foster:** As I indicated, the 2011 Office of Fair Trading study considered the Northern Ireland oil distribution sector to be transparent and, more importantly, competitive on price, with cheaper retail prices than Great Britain and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland. That point is sometimes missed when the story comes to the fore.

It remains very unclear whether regulation would achieve significant benefit. However, I know this much: it would place a large regulatory burden and cost on what is assessed

as being a competitive oil supply and distribution sector. Let us not forget that the cost will be passed on to the consumer. Therefore, regulation is not a cost-free option. It brings costs, and those costs have to be passed on to the consumer. We should remember that when we talk about regulation.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. Will the Minister advise the House how often she meets, or her departmental officials meet, the likes of oil retailers to discuss prices and the impact of those prices on the economy, fuel poverty and related consumer matters?

**Mrs Foster:** As the Member is only too well aware, the issue of fuel poverty is taken forward by my colleague the Minister for Social Development, and I am sure that he keeps in contact with the retailers. Steps have been taken to help those in fuel poverty. I particularly commend the efforts in and around bulk buying. I am aware of very many excellent examples of credit unions, local councils and communities working together in oil-buying schemes or oil stamp-saving schemes to ease the burden of purchasing oil. We know that the cost of energy, regardless of whether it is oil, gas or electricity, is a burden on those in fuel poverty. Therefore, I welcome the fact that such schemes are in place to help individuals.

## **Broadband: Rural Areas**

4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the measures being undertaken to improve broadband coverage in rural areas. (AQO 5559/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** In recent years, my Department has invested significantly to facilitate the extension of broadband networks, making use of numerous technologies including fixed-line, radio and satellite. On 7 February 2014, I announced further investment of some £23.5 million from government and BT to improve broadband choice and speed to over 45,000 premises across Northern Ireland. That work is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2015. I will continue to work to extend broadband services, where it is feasible and cost-effective to do so.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for her reply. What criteria will BT use to determine where investment, if any, is placed?

**Mrs Foster:** We are working again with BT, which has proven itself to be a good partner in the past. The improvements that will take place are based on engineering criteria and what represents the best value for money. Of course, most of the money is public money, so we will want to make sure that our intervention represents good value for money.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. That is welcome news. When does the Minister foresee the money first being rolled out? Will she give an assurance that she will look at and address the fact that there are those who will not be able to use line-based technology? However, this is a good-news story.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his acknowledgement that it is a good-news story. I know that we have been waiting on investment for some time now. Indeed, he is one of the Members who keeps asking me when it will be available. We are pleased that the tender has now been agreed with BT. It will look at the many postcodes that have been submitted to the Department to see what engineering solutions are available in those areas and whether they represent good value for money.

We are looking forward to the roll-out of the mobile infrastructure project for mobile phones. You might ask why I am mentioning that in the context of broadband, but the reason is that we know that many people use their mobile devices to access broadband. We are looking at the issue in the round and trying to make sure that people who cannot access fixed-line broadband can do so through another technology.

**Mr McCallister:** Will the Minister outline how much of the £230 million from the UK Government her Department will receive and where it will be spent?

**Mrs Foster:** The £23.5 million that we are rolling out in Northern Ireland is a mixture of money from my Department, the European Union, the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), BT and DARD. So, there are five parts to the scheme. I think that we received in the region of £6 million, although I stand to be corrected on that. I am going from memory, Mr McCallister, so forgive me if that figure is wrong. However, I think that it is £6 million from DCMS for this particular pot of money. We will receive more money for the mobile infrastructure project, as I indicated. However, for this particular scheme, I think that it is £6 million.

## Economic Rebalancing

5. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps her Department has taken towards rebalancing the economy. (AQO 5560/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** Actions that are set out in the Northern Ireland economic strategy seek to rebalance the local economy by stimulating higher rates of innovation, increasing skills levels and encouraging export growth. Considerable progress has been made across all Departments in implementing those actions. My Department has promoted 19,329 jobs and secured investment of £1.04 billion in the Northern Ireland economy. In addition, Invest NI has supported investment of £238 million by businesses in R&D since April 2011. We have also taken action that is aimed at rebuilding the local labour market by continuing to offer support for businesses through a range of measures, including the jobs fund and the growth loan fund. We are continuing to advance the case for the devolution of corporation tax, which has the potential to help to rebalance and rebuild the Northern Ireland economy faster than would otherwise be possible.

**Mr Gardiner:** I thank the Minister for her response thus far. How many services that the Civil Service formerly delivered are now delivered by the private sector, and how many jobs have been relocated from the public to the private sector as a result?

**Mrs Foster:** I do not have those figures in front of me today, but I am happy to make contact with the Department of Finance and Personnel to try to assess them.

**Mr Campbell:** Will the Minister give us an update on the measures that are outlined in the Northern Ireland economic pact and on how progress is going there?

**Mrs Foster:** As the Member knows, in June 2013 just before the G8, the economic pact was a document that was set about from Westminster and ourselves. Obviously, corporation tax is a very important part of that, and we await the Scottish referendum being dealt with before we have a particular answer on that issue. However, that does not mean that we have not progressed in other areas. We have agreed to pilot an enterprise zone that will build on Coleraine's role as a digital hub, which I am sure that the Member is delighted about. My colleague the Finance Minister sent details of the possible proposals to Her

Majesty's Treasury on 6 December as a basis for discussion, and we are awaiting feedback on that issue.

Where access to finance is concerned, we have, of course, met as a joint ministerial task force to examine whether tailored support is required for our banks and how support for Northern Ireland businesses can be maximised to improve access to finance. We are meeting again in joint ministerial task force remit on 26 March. We have also set up the access to finance implementation panel, which has commenced its meetings with the four local banks. I am very pleased with the calibre of people whom we were able to attract to that panel. The business regulation review has been launched. The expert advisory panel, which includes Lord Curry, who is the Chair of the Westminster Better Regulation Executive, has also started its piece of work. So, the projects are progressing, and we will keep in touch with our colleagues in Westminster to continue to pursue corporation tax.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers. Does she accept that the term "rebalancing the economy" must include addressing the historical neglect west of the Bann, and will she explain how her Department strives to rectify that situation?

**Mrs Foster:** Obviously, we are dealing with that issue, in particular the way in which west of the Bann had to deal with IRA violence in the past and the fact that a lot of infrastructure was damaged in that way. I am delighted that the licence competition for gas to the west has been announced. We look forward to natural gas being available to citizens and businesses in the west of the Province for the first time. That will have a big impact in the west of the Province, particularly for businesses that have had to endure not having the choice of energy provision. I very much welcome that they will now have the choice of natural gas and I look forward to that being rolled out in the west of the Province.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Minister, you will be aware of the important role that small businesses play in the Northern Ireland economy. I will speak to you later about this, but will you visit part of my constituency and speak to local businesses about some of the difficulties they face in matching education to the skills that their industry needs? In particular, Minister, how often do you and Minister Farry have that analysis?

**Mrs Foster:** And, indeed, the Minister of Education as well. At the next meeting of the Executive subgroup on the economy, we intend to discuss that very issue, around careers advice and making sure that it fits in with the economy of today and tomorrow. As I indicated to Mr McCrea, there is little point in having a surfeit of skills that do not match the workforce that we need. We very much need to join up the Departments of Education, Employment and Learning and Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to careers and skills advice. I am more than happy to have a conversation with the Member around that issue.

## Wind Energy

6. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment her Department has made on the impact of wind energy on energy prices. (AQO 5561/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** Wind generation rarely sets the price of wholesale electricity, although it does influence prices on a continuing basis. At peak demand times, wind can often offset more expensive peaking plant. Also, if there is a lot of wind on the system, remaining demand will be met by conventional generators, with the more efficient and cheaper being dispatched first.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for her answer. It has come to the attention of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee that when wind energy can meet demand, generation costs are significantly reduced. Does the Minister agree that to bring down price, we need to increase our investment in wind energy and reduce our over-reliance on expensive fossil fuels such as gas?

**Mrs Foster:** As I have always said to the Member: it is not just about wind energy; it is about renewable energy from all the different types of technologies. At present, we are probably over-reliant on wind as a source of renewable energy. I hope that other sources will emerge in the future, whether it is tidal or marine, and we look forward to that coming on to the grid as well as wind. I am carrying out a cost-benefit analysis. I think that the time is right to do that in relation to the energy market. We are about halfway in the strategic energy framework, therefore it is right to review the cost of energy as whole, and we will be doing that. In fact, I have appointed consultants to do that, and that report will be with me by the end of the year. We will then have that look at the strategic energy framework.

**Mr Wilson:** The UK government indicated that, between 2004 and 2012, the increase in electricity bills has gone up from 2% to 8% as a result of renewable energy. Today, industry in Northern Ireland says that we are one of the least competitive places for energy in the whole of Europe. Does the Minister agree that, if we followed the policies of the Green Party, we would be back to the dark ages of blackouts, no competitive industry and increased fuel poverty, and that really we ought to be going for greater electricity —

**Mr Speaker:** I encourage the Member to come to his question.

**Mr Wilson:** — from fossil fuels, which are much less expensive?

## 3.15 pm

**Mrs Foster:** I agree with the Member that we need to be aware of our security of supply, and, as Members will know, in 2016, there will be only 200 megawatts above the balance. We should be concerned about that, and we will take action on the issue over the coming months because we cannot allow ourselves to get into a position where we are at risk of blackouts. That would be the worst-case scenario for citizens and particularly for industry and businesses. How could we possibly say to people that they should invest in Northern Ireland if we do not have a secure energy platform on which they could come forward? I hear what the Member is saying about energy costs. He will know that we are looking, with the Utility Regulator, into the whole issue. I will also say this: every day that we are without the North/South interconnector costs £7 million to consumers in Northern Ireland alone, and it costs a significant amount — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mrs Foster:** — of money to Republic of Ireland consumers as well. So every day that we are without the North/South interconnector is a constraint on the energy of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes oral questions to the Minister. We now move to topical questions. Anna Lo is not in her place.

## One Plan: Regeneration

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she or her officials have had any discussions with the Ilex regeneration company in his

constituency regarding the economic regeneration elements of the One Plan. (AQT 732/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** No, I have not had any discussions, but that does not mean that the Department has not had discussions. I am, of course, aware of the One Plan, and we very much support the overarching vision that the One Plan brings not only to the city but to the north-west. I will be happy to meet the Member to consider such a request.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Minister for her response and for her cooperation in teasing the issue out. Is the Minister aware of the U4D launch last week? That campaign points out very clearly that the most important economic regeneration plan ever to come into the city would be the expansion of Magee. In its words, the development of Magee would lead to combating one of the highest levels of unemployment in the region.

**Mrs Foster:** I am aware of the campaign and its very capable spokespersons, who very often remind the Executive about the issue. However, as the Member will no doubt be aware, that is not a matter for me but for the Minister for Employment and Learning, and I presume that he will have been listening last week to the case that was put forward.

### **Trade Mission: Singapore**

3. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her recent trip to Singapore with Ministers from Dublin and London. (AQT 733/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for that question because I have not been able to sandwich that response in anywhere else on today's agenda. The trade mission was the first of its type in so far as it was the first joint mission between the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and Invest Northern Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and UK Trade and Investment worked very well to put forward three Ministers to go to Singapore to talk about the aerospace sector. We have a very strong aerospace sector in Northern Ireland. We have, of course, the very big influence of Bombardier in east Belfast, but we also have about 50 companies involved in the aerospace supply chain. I was very pleased to be present at the Singapore Airshow. It is probably the third-most important global aerospace show, and it was important that we were there to put forward our case.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. Will she indicate how Invest NI, when organising trade missions, works with local councils, such as my council in Strabane, to promote subregions as a possible destination for foreign investors?

**Mrs Foster:** That issue has come up on many occasions, and I have always said to the councils involved that they need to bring forward their proposition to us so that we are aware of the offering in the council area. We have 26 councils at present, and that will soon be down to 11.

In particular, I ask the Member to look at our newly developed app for each of the council areas. Councils can put their individual strengths and skills advantages on the app so that it can be given to all potential investors. I know that she will join me in welcoming the recent announcement of jobs in O'Neills. Over 60 jobs were created with the help of the jobs fund in a very worthwhile and good investment for Strabane.

### **Loan Sharks**

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that her Department has a proud record of relationships with the credit union movement, whether she shares his concern that, day and daily, we read about people being ripped off by loan sharks and online companies that charge outrageous rates of interest and whether she would consider re-engaging with the credit union movement to establish why, although millions of pounds are in savings, in the same townlands and parishes, these loan sharks are running riot through people's pockets. (AQT 734/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** I am more than happy to say that I have always recognised the role that the credit union plays in Northern Ireland. I say "in Northern Ireland" because the mainland does not have the same presence of credit unions. As he says, credit unions are recognised and have a good reputation, and, therefore, people trust them and want to invest in them. I am happy to speak to the Member outside of the House about what he has in mind for their promotion. I certainly share his concerns about loan sharks and companies that, on the face of it, look very warm and cuddly, but, when you look a bit further, are not cuddly at all.

**Mr Dallat:** I thank the Minister for her answer, which, as I expected, is very positive, and I encourage her to continue in that vein. The Minister referred to "the mainland", but we will

not fall out about that. Is she aware that, "on the mainland", the Government appointed field officers to go out into the highways and byways to educate people about the advantages of credit unions and encourage their use? Would she consider a scheme similar to that here?

**Mrs Foster:** I thought that that was where the Member was going with this. The Member knows that Northern Ireland has a much more developed credit union system than the rest of the United Kingdom. That is why they have felt the need to appoint field officers and finance what is happening there. We do not see the need for that because we have at least two very strong federations. They make their voice heard, rightly so, and have done so throughout the whole credit union reform process, which, as the Member knows, is ongoing. Therefore, I do not think that there is a need for field officers as such, but I am happy to talk to him about other options that may fall somewhat short of that.

### **Agrifood Loan Scheme**

5. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why the £10 million agrifood loan scheme, which she announced with the Finance Minister, was handed back. (AQT 735/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** It has not been handed back; it just could not be spent within that period because of legal issues that had to be sorted out between the banks, industry and government. This is the first time that we have tried anything like this, and, sometimes, when you try something for the first time, it takes a little while for the lawyers to get their head around it. I understand that the lawyers acting for the banks are now content and that the issue is now with the principal poultry supplier. Therefore, I am very hopeful that the matter will come to a head in the very near future.

**Mr McMullan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she give me an update on the Going for Growth strategy? When does she expect it to be brought before the Executive for consideration?

**Mrs Foster:** As I am sure the Member is well aware, this is a joint paper between the Agriculture Minister and me, given which I was rather surprised to hear the Agriculture Minister's comments on it when I was out of the country last week. It is quite a comprehensive paper. It is now before the Executive, and I am certainly not "holding it up", which was, I think,

the allegation made last week when I was not around to deal with the issue.

We very much hope that Executive colleagues will sign up to Going for Growth, but, of course, that is in the context of money being available to deal with it. As we know, we are going to lose millions of pounds if we do not get agreement on welfare reform. Therefore, it is very difficult to see where the money will come from. Indeed, I would welcome the Agriculture Minister's clarification on where the schemes are, what she is putting forward for them and some clarity on where the money is going to come from. We look forward to that clarification in the coming days.

**Mr Speaker:** Colum Eastwood is not in his place for question 6.

### **Credit Unions**

7. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, without being too repetitive given Mr Dallat's question, whether she will work closely with local credit unions to expand on the range of services that they are able to deliver, given the increasing number of bank closures in rural areas, including Dromore, Fintona and Beragh in my constituency. (AQT 737/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** Part of the credit union reform is looking at the range of powers that credit unions will have. I hear what the Member said about bank closures. It is concerning for those of us who live rurally and have to deal with these issues. As well as that, we can access banking services through the Post Office. The Post Office is very keen that we do that. I have had some discussions with it about the fact that it can take deposits from most of the major banks and deal with other issues in that regard as well. We will look at credit unions, post offices and anything else that can help in the circumstances for rural dwellers.

**Mr McElduff:** Does the Minister have any thinking on the type of additional services that might be delivered through credit unions in the future? Does her Department have a regular liaison arrangement with credit union leaders to discuss issues of common concern?

**Mrs Foster:** Of course, it was not that long ago that we not only registered but regulated credit unions. We had a very close relationship with the credit unions. We no longer regulate the credit unions; as you will recall, that is now carried out by Westminster. We just register the credit unions, but we still have a very good

working relationship because of the historical working relationship with the credit unions, including the Ulster federation and the Irish federation.

As for extra powers, I think that we looked at them being able to deal with some benefits that come forward from government. I am quite happy to clarify that to the Member in writing. There are certainly particular powers that we are looking at bringing to the credit unions.

## Renewable Energy

8. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she still believes that the Programme for Government 40% target for renewable energy is realistic and achievable. (AQT 738/11-15)

**Mrs Foster:** I do. Last year, we hit, I think, 17% for renewable energies. The biggest challenge for us in renewable energy is the grid. We have had a stronger uptake in small renewable projects, which has put more of a strain on the grid than the larger renewable energy projects. We have a challenge with our grid. We are looking at that proactively at present. The regulator has allowed NIE to invest in the grid, although maybe not as much as NIE would have liked. We are also looking at some European funding, which would have to be match-funded by the industry here, to see whether that is available to us to help to strengthen the grid, particularly in the west of the Province.

**Mr Swann:** Was the Minister surprised when the former Minister of the Environment and Finance Minister called the same target impossible and economically destructive?

**Mrs Foster:** No, I was not surprised at all. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order, Members. That concludes Question Time.

**Ms Lo:** Mr Speaker, I very much apologise to you and the House for my absence today. I have been very busy today dealing with a number of issues. It just went out of my mind. I am very sorry.

**Mr Speaker:** I very much acknowledge the Member coming to the House and apologising.

3.30 pm

## Private Members' Business

### Shared Education

*Debate resumed on amendments to motion:*

*That this Assembly notes with approval the concept of shared education; believes sharing between all types of school could lead to better educational and community relations outcomes; further notes with disappointment the failure of the current Minister of Education to effectively facilitate sharing across the sectors; believes that the current area-planning process has not been conducive to sharing between schools and that the ministerial advisory group report on advancing shared education was a missed opportunity; expresses disappointment at the continuing failure to introduce a shared education premium; and calls on the Minister of Education to take practical steps to promote and facilitate sharing, so that a single education system can become a realistic policy goal. — [Mr Kinahan.]*

*Which amendments were:*

(1) *Leave out all after "outcomes;" and insert*

*"welcomes the initiative by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in progressing this work through the signature projects; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively assist in this work through the development of shared campuses so that a single education system can become a realistic policy goal." — [Mr Storey.]*

(2) *Leave out all after "outcomes;" and insert*

*"believes that the current area-planning process must be conducive to sharing between schools and that the ministerial advisory group report on advancing shared education provides an opportunity to advance these aims; calls on the Minister of Education to introduce a shared education premium and to take practical steps to promote and facilitate sharing across the sectors and the entire education system." — [Mr Hazzard.]*

**Mr Lunn:** At the outset, I want to say that those of us who think that the best way to bring our children together and encourage better community relations is to educate them together in the same school, classes and uniform will take little comfort from whatever decision the House comes to on the motion or the two amendments. I note that both

amendments leave the first section of the motion unchanged.

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

I imagine that, in countries where integration is normal and there is no religious segregation to start with, there are situations in which sharing classrooms, teachers and facilities is practised for reasons of economy and the delivery of a full curriculum. I have no difficulty with that approach. However, I listened very carefully to what Mr Kinahan had to say when he proposed the motion. At times, he used the words "single", "shared" and "integrated" almost in the same sentence, without really explaining exactly what he meant. I do not mean any offence to Mr Kinahan; I know that it is a complicated subject, but those three words are not really interchangeable.

**Mr Kinahan:** They are.

**Mr Lunn:** Well, OK, but to extend the principle that you will get better community relations and promote the ideal of a single education system out of a shared system is perhaps stretching it a bit. While, in theory, shared education in the format envisaged puts children together, it would accentuate difference at the same time because pupils would be transported across town in different uniforms, eventually coming back to their own sector, their own school, their own environment and their own space.

The motion is, frankly, bizarre; it goes all over the place. The reference to area planning without the obvious requirement for a single Education and Skills Authority (ESA) to manage it is out of place. Again, it is all about shared education, not integrated education, and the management of division rather than overcoming it. It refers to a "single education system", yet the parties that advocate that do not approve of a single education body. We already have a single system for the curriculum and ultimate government management, yet, in other ways, we do not. I would happily take an intervention from any unionist who would like to try again to define precisely what the term "single education system" actually means. If nobody is getting up, I will continue. Maybe when she is making the winding-up speech, Mrs Dobson will be able to enlighten us as to what it means. On this side of the House, we do not really know.

The DUP amendment is not acceptable to us. Some members of the Education Committee — Mr Storey, Mr Kinahan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Rogers, I think, and me — were in Scotland a few months ago to look at a shared campus. Based

on the one that we looked at, if anybody came back from that experience thinking that that was a great idea and the way forward, I would be seriously worried about them. That school is almost T-shaped. It has a common entrance door, a common dining area and, apparently, common buses to bring the kids to and from school. However, there was no other aspect of the operation of that school to which you could apply the words "common" or "shared". We were told that there were no shared classes and that the two schools operated completely separately in the same building. We were also told anecdotally, but I believe it, that, when the schools were brought together, some of the staff demanded that the staff room, which was meant to be shared, was partitioned. So —

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

**Mr Lunn:** Yes, certainly.

**Mr Kinahan:** I note that the Member has focused on one school that tried that approach. I do not think that we should look at that as either a failed or a successful school.

To try to get the point across, this is about setting up a management body with a complete structure that will look at everything to do with education and will slowly funnel everybody towards a single shared education system. It will be different in absolutely every area, depending on the types of schools that are asked to work together. It is about trying to get the best out of the system, putting a time frame on it and working together. The integrated system is an excellent example of that, but it is the major one that you are working towards.

**Mr Lunn:** Yes. I thank Mr Kinahan for that intervention. I do not know quite what to say about it, but I thank him anyway.

I try not to be negative about the sharing concept, particularly when I see academics of the stature of Professor Tony Gallagher and others advocating it. The first line of the motion — to approve the concept — is not something that we could oppose. Frankly, however, it goes downhill after that. If it is to be viewed as a step on the road to an integrated system where all pupils can attend the nearest school of their choice without sectoral barriers, it is to be welcomed, but how realistic is that at the moment in this country? It is just not going to happen.

Instead of building shared campuses, we should be promoting proper integration without the need to abolish any sector. In England, it is

quite normal for Protestant children to attend Catholic schools; it happens here as well. Look around. Look at Columbanus College, look at the Dominican College in Portstewart. On the other side of the fence, look at Belfast Royal Academy (BRA), my old school. Look at Methody. All well mixed and well integrated, no problem whatsoever.

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

**Mr Lunn:** Yes, thank you. We will oppose amendment No 1 and support amendment No 2. We will listen carefully to what the Ulster Unionists have to say about the motion.

**Mr Moutray:** I will speak to the amendment tabled by myself and my party colleagues. I commend the First Minister and our party leader for leading the way in the campaign to build a single education system since 2010, when he outlined clearly our party's vision with regard to shared education. We would all be politically naive if we thought that it could happen overnight, but our party remains committed to the change.

It is important to note that the First Minister ensured that the objective was in the Programme for Government in the form of Lisanelly, the creation of the advisory group and ensuring that all children had participated in shared educational programmes by 2015, even though some other parties in the Chamber were not in favour of the concept. Furthermore, our party will not be found wanting in going forward with the creation of a single education system. We will continue to that end to fulfil our Programme for Government commitment and our party objective. In the light of the positive comments by my party leader on the subject, I am disappointed by the tone of the Ulster Unionist motion.

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

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

The motion is negative in its content and offers little of a practical nature to move this challenging and complex situation forward. We all know that the advisory group was a missed opportunity. Indeed, it was the First Minister and my party's education spokesman who said so on the day that the report was issued. However, despite our criticism of its failings, we have continued to promote the concept in a positive way through the example of the signature project initiative.

No one knows the inadequacies of the area planning process more than I do. In the Craigavon area, however, my party and I listened to the views of local people — something that others failed to do. I am pleased to say that we have forced the Southern Education and Library Board and the Minister to think again on the shape of the future provision for the area. We are confident that the final shape of any area plan will reflect the wishes of parents whose children attend schools in the controlled sector and that, within the framework of the Dickson plan, we will continue to shape provision that meets the needs of all our children for many years to come.

The only positive comment in the Ulster Unionist motion relates to the introduction of a shared education premium. As a party, we have no problem supporting that concept. Indeed, Members from this party have been actively promoting sharing in schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board and other places over a number of years. Most Protestants still choose to be educated in the controlled school system, while Roman Catholics choose to attend government-funded maintained schools run by the Catholic Church. Both systems have widespread support in their community. However, if we are to encourage the promotion of a single education system, we must begin to tackle the issues at hand and start to build on the shared education agenda. That is exactly what the signature projects and shared campuses will do. We all know that that will take time. It will, indeed, need the support

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

**Mr Moutray:** No.

It will need the support of all partners in education. It must be built on the firm foundation of equality and inclusion, and it must be grounded in strong and robust locally based programmes, where the young can meet and share together. Finally, it must have the positive support of all parties in the House.

OFMDFM has challenged the House with its signature and shared campus projects, a United Youth programme with 10,000 one-year placements, 100 shared summer schools and 10 shared education campuses. Those are all very challenging tasks, but they make a clear statement that our First Minister is dedicated to delivery. The signature projects that the Department has commissioned undoubtedly work towards a genuine shared future.

I am a believer in not forcing children together but creating a norm — creating somewhere safe. Where is safer than a school or an organised summer school or youth programme?

We encourage the Education Minister to actively support the programme. He must show leadership and demonstrate his desire to create a path that promotes shared education. He must encourage managing authorities to be active participants in developing shared campuses where there is equality in ownership, governance and participation. I support the DUP amendment.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support amendment No 2 and welcome the opportunity to debate the important subject of shared education and examine the policy context of a single education system.

As has been stated, on 10 January 2014 the Minister, John O'Dowd, launched a programme for the delivery of 10 shared education campuses locally. It is clear that that programme will complement the work that is clearly already under way on shared education and area planning. Schools locally already work together in shared education programmes and in the delivery of the entitlement framework. That is a fact. As was mentioned, the Lisanelly project is visionary. It will be the largest investment in education facilities ever made, with construction costs estimated to be in excess of £120 million as it brings six schools together on one campus in the town for the first time.

Much reference has been made to the ministerial advisory group on shared education. Importantly, it found that sharing was not only about sharing across religious barriers but about sharing across socio-economic barriers. It remains a fact that children in lower income brackets are at much higher risk of educational underachievement. In my constituency of Foyle, where 35% of children in three wards live in child poverty, there is a direct correlation between child poverty, deprivation and educational attainment. That cannot be ignored in this debate.

The Minister has rightly outlined his response to each of the recommendations in the ministerial advisory group's report. He has committed to bringing forward a statutory definition of shared education in the Education Bill and provisions to ensure that the Education and Skills Authority will have a duty to encourage and facilitate it. The Minister has said that any proposal for a

new school must be sustainable and capable of delivering high-quality education for the pupils it serves. We want to see collaboration, not competition; we want to see sharing, not duplication.

The primary integrating/enriching integration (PIEE) project, delivered across 26 schools, engaged 1,900 pupils. We have research through the schools omnibus survey on shared education, which received 539 responses from schools. Interestingly, 285 respondents identified disadvantages from schools, pupils and teaching being involved in shared education, and 284 said that there was no disadvantage. It is very clear that parents and children want high-quality schools in their community. They are up for sharing, not separation.

There are 20 recommendations in the report, some that can be taken forward immediately and others that require further consideration and debate. There is nothing to stop us, if the political will exists to extend and enhance our equality duties to ensure better outcomes and policies.

### 3.45 pm

Research in 2011 showed that, although, on the whole, attitudes to shared education in the North were positive and the potential benefits were acknowledged, in practice there was a range of difficulties that could have an impact on the willingness and capacity of schools to collaborate. Shared education is a programme of work. It is a process in its own right. Therefore, throwing out a line on a single education system without preparatory work, without detail and without connection to statutory duties is asking for trouble.

**Mr Newton:** I support the DUP amendment. Whether we call this area of our children's future and the education of our children "shared education" as a transitional step or a "single education system", a number of underlying and underpinning principles have to be adhered to. Those, generally speaking, can be summed up in the words "inclusion", "integration", "respect", "responsibilities", "rights", "sharing" and "tolerance". If those underpinning principles are not adhered to, we will not provide the education system for the future that pupils in Northern Ireland deserve.

I support the amendment standing in the names of my colleagues and reject the amendment standing in the names of Mr Hazzard, Mr Sheehan and Ms McLaughlin. I do so because

the Minister recognises that the area planning that he undertook was a failure and that there were inadequacies in it. The motion recognises that, but the actions to address it took too long and dealt with the issue only partially. I welcome the fact that the Minister did address some of the issues, but they were addressed only partially.

The biggest problem — certainly in the east of the Province — is around the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the failure to take action to democratise it. For a number of years — around four, I think — the board has been run by three appointed persons. I am sure that they are honourable people, but that means that parents and political representatives have no say in the running of the board. How can parents share an education system and contribute to it when they and their representatives are excluded from the board? The South Eastern Education and Library Board is not conducive to a sharing philosophy and does not underpin any of the features that I outlined.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Member for giving way. Can he give us an example of how pupils and parents in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area have suffered compared with those in the other boards, which are properly run in a democratic way? What is the difference?

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

**Mr Newton:** There is a situation at the moment involving the South Eastern Board and the Belfast Education and Library Board that the Minister is well aware of. It concerns Newtownbreda and Knockbreda high schools. Parents have no way of influencing the South Eastern Board in the decision-making process there. Until recently, the Belfast Board had a deficit of councillors. Four representatives from Belfast City Council are entitled to sit on that board, and it was only lately that the Minister took action to remedy the situation. That process is not good for sharing.

When moving the motion, Mr Kinahan treated us to a history lesson as an introduction. In many ways, that is fair enough. However, the motion fails to recognise that shared education can be achieved only when there is a wider context of improvements across all departmental aspects of our society in Northern Ireland. Responsibility for that lies around the Executive table.

There is a road to be travelled to shared or single education. We need to rise to the challenges. The professionals who are at the chalk face of education are making demands. A number of Members referred to the desire for shared education and a coming together in education. Pupils are demanding it, and parents are demanding it. We will have failed if we do not travel this road. Future generations will condemn us if we do not travel this road and go towards that goal.

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

**Mr Newton:** I will not get any extra time for giving way.

I pay tribute to the First Minister, as has been done, for his vision and his remarks about travelling down the road to a single education system. The OFMDFM strategy is designed to improve community relations. It will all be underpinned by the words that I used in my opening remarks. In doing that, we are on a continuing pathway towards a more united and shared society. I commend the DUP amendment to the House.

**Mr B McCrea:** I listened with some amazement to this speech. This is the group of parties that could not reach agreement at the Haass talks. These are the people who will lecture us about how we should all get together, build a common future and be friends and do all of that sort of stuff. Yet, they cannot agree with each other.

Mr Kinahan's motion has rightly been ripped to shreds in the debate. If we have a single, integrated education system, will every Member send their children to it? That is the key point. Is parental choice appropriate? I defend people's right to choose to send their children wherever but do not try to lecture me that all our children should go somewhere but somebody else's children should go somewhere else.

I listened to Mr Storey, who, removing his glasses, spoke with some seriousness about the matter and about how wonderful Mr Robinson was. I chanced upon this document, which states:

*"Free Presbyterian church slams shared education".*

If I am right, Mr Storey is an elder of that organisation and sends his children to different places. He is entitled to do that, but do not try to tell me through your amendment, "By the way, we should have a single, universal education system".

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I will give way.

**Mr Storey:** Not only am I proud that my children went to an independent Christian school but I will tell you the difference: I paid for everything that they got in the school. I never asked the state for one shilling. I never asked the state for one farthing. I went for faith-based education for my children. It ill becomes you and whoever gave you that piece of paper to bring my personal preferences and choices into this debate, especially when I paid for those choices.

**Mr B McCrea:** I support Mr Storey's right to choose whatever he thinks is right for his children. Although this is not necessarily to do with that individual, I will say this to the Assembly generally: if you are going to call for a single education system, perhaps people should practise what they speak. It is hypocrisy if you say the opposite.

Members talked about how wonderful Peter Robinson was for saying, "Oh, I would like us all to get together. We would all like to be friends. Let us try to build a future". It is rank hypocrisy. Look at all the other policy documents that we talk about, all the other issues that we have and all the things that went on at the Haass talks. Your actions do not measure up to your words. What is all this talk about? If you really want a shared future and shared education, get together around the Executive table and thrash something out.

When it comes to the Sinn Féin amendment, I am interested in whether we can get some mainstream funding for schools that share education. If there is a shared premium, I am all for that, and I hope that the Minister will give us some detail about it. However, it needs to be more than just box ticking; it needs to be something real. It should not be something that you do just to get extra money.

Our issue with this whole debate is that we may, in the future, want to see — I hope that we all do — some form of unification in this part of the world, which I call Northern Ireland. We should understand that, although there are differences, those differences should be respected and accorded dignity and we can work together to say that it is not "Them and us" but "We". However, are we going to do that in one go? Are we going to do that now?

We have to work in a particular direction of travel. I happened to watch the 'Sunday

Politics' show, and I saw Mark Carruthers having a go at the Minister of Education. I would love to get all the education spokesmen here on the 'Sunday Politics' show to see what a forensic investigation of their stances would actually mean. None of them stands up to scrutiny.

One of the allegations put forward in this debate was made by Mr Hazzard, who asked about the follow-through and the detailed plans. I will tell you what I want to see. We talk about citizenship at school, but what the heck is citizenship? What does it actually mean? I want to find out what people are being told about how to vote, about the issues and about our local history. I do not want to be in the situation in which I found myself, where I was not taught Irish history and I did not deal with Bloody Sunday or the Maze or any of those issues. If we are genuinely going to build a shared future, those are the issues we have to confront. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member should resume his seat. As I said before, the Speaker needs to hear exactly what is being said. I have to remind Members that the rudimentary rules of the classroom apply here: there should be no shouting from a sedentary position. The Member will continue.

**Mr B McCrea:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

There are issues in our curriculum that we need to examine.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** With 20 seconds to go it is a bit late, otherwise, as the Member knows, I would have taken his intervention on board.

We need to work out how we deal with the curriculum. We need to engage in our history, and we need to make sure that we challenge, understand and, if necessary, confront it and move forward. Our education system should do that, but we should do it whether we have integrated education, if that is right, or shared education, if that will not do.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** We must find a way to move forward. Let us invest in our future and stop talking tosh.

**Mr Allister:** Shared education, from everything that I see and hear about it, is one of those fluffy buzzwords that is supposed to give you a

warm glow and can really mean whatever you want it to mean. It is clear in the House that it means different things to different interests.

To some, it seems to mean the start down a road that will, ultimately, lead to a single education system for which the state pays and in which anyone who wants their own system, be it a church-based system or anything else, will pay for it. That seems to be the vision of some. Those who are wedded to faith schools, as they are called, can equally clamber on board the shared education bus and say that they are enthusiasts for shared education. Yet, their stance is "We will cling to Catholic schools for Catholic children". That is the essence of the stance of some. Yes, they can pay lip service to all the nice-sounding shibboleths and jargon surrounding shared education but never will it mean giving up Catholic schools for Catholic children. There is no chance, they tell us, of it leading to the vision of some others, which is that it is all about getting to a single education system. So, what does it really mean? Even the integration lobby is not happy, as we heard from its most fanatical supporters today. In some way, they feel that it sells the cause short and, in some way, gazumps what they believe in.

So what does it actually mean? For me and many people out there, that is one of the biggest difficulties with dissecting and understanding what various proponents of what they call "shared education" mean. Does it mean, for example, that, in the North Antrim constituency, in shared education, we will get to shared sport? Are Mr Storey and Mr Frew recommending that the kids at Ballymena Academy should perhaps learn to play Gaelic with St Louis or whatever? Is that part of the process that is being proposed, and vice versa? We need to be honest and straightforward with our constituents about what we are talking about with shared education.

#### 4.00 pm

We then discover that, at the heart of it, something is talked about that would be a premium paid in respect of shared education. What is this shared education premium? Is it seriously being suggested that some schools that cannot avail themselves of shared education because of where they are should be prejudiced by getting less money per pupil than those that embrace shared education?

Let me give you the example of the school that I perhaps know best, Moorfields Primary School, where I chair the board of governors. It is five

miles outside Ballymena, and, happily, it has the facilities that it needs. It has 200 pupils, seven teachers and a full class for each year. That school has no particular need, in an educational or infrastructural sense, for shared facilities. It has no need to share a gymnasium or classes. So what are we really saying about such a school, which does not need the practical advantage of sharing facilities?

I can understand that, if two schools are sitting cheek by jowl and both need a new science lab, they decide to build one that they might share. However, are we seriously saying to schools that are in a situation that is different to that that they are to be prejudiced against in that their pupils are to get less money per head to educate them because they do not qualify for the shared education premium? I think that we have enough of a hierarchy of funding in this country.

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

**Mr Allister:** We have enhanced funding for the Irish-medium sector and for the integrated sector, and now someone is suggesting that we prejudice everyone else by having an enhanced funding premium for shared education.

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

**Mr Agnew:** At the outset, I declare an interest as a director of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), but I am speaking on behalf of the Green Party in Northern Ireland.

To some extent, my comments follow on from what was said previously in the debate. What is shared education? What do we mean by it? I have asked a number of questions of the Education Minister on how it will be defined and what the minimum requirements of sharing are. There is no clear definition, and, from the debate today, the House is certainly not clear. As Mr Allister pointed out, it seems to be a blank canvas, and everybody can make it be what they want it to be.

I do know that shared education is not integrated education, and I think that an attempt has been made to try to paint it as that. Sharing classrooms can mean many things. It can mean pupils sitting in the same uniform, being taught the same curriculum by the same teacher, but it can also mean two sets of pupils going in through different doors of the same building, wearing two different uniforms, sitting in the same classrooms but at different times

and being taught by different teachers to a different curriculum. That is where my concern lies about shared education, and that is where, for me, neither the motion nor any of the amendments adequately addresses the issue. For that reason, none of them can command my support or that of the Green Party.

We need some honesty in this debate, and we have to look at why we are here today discussing shared education. Is it because of a genuine desire to move towards a single education system, or is it, as I believe, an effort to sustain a segregated education system that is crumbling, with falling classroom numbers in many cases and insufficient funds for capital build programmes? For me, it is the latter. It is about sustaining our segregated system. It is not, as some propose, about moving towards a single system. It props up the very thing that those people claim that they are trying to get rid of: the various state-funded sectors in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Member for giving way. I wonder whether he managed, in the course of the debate, to figure out what exactly is meant by a single education system, because he referred to it twice. Maybe he has been more attentive than I have.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Member for his question. As he pointed out in his speech, the words "single", "shared" and "integrated" were almost used interchangeably. I support a single education system. For me, a single system does not mean having different sectors; that is not a single system. It also means not having academic selection. With a single system, you cannot have grammar schools and non-grammar schools. Those are separate systems and separate bodies.

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

**Mr Agnew:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr Kinahan:** I want to make it absolutely clear that when I spoke at the beginning of the debate, I mentioned that the integrated sector was very much part of, and the goal of, a single shared education system. A lot of people seem to be trying to find holes in it rather than sitting down and trying to find a way forward, which was the whole point of the debate.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It exactly addresses my concern, which is that, somehow, shared education becomes our focus and we forget about what is, for me, the much higher aspiration: a truly

integrated system in which children from different community backgrounds wear the same uniform; they attend the same school and genuinely share a classroom; and they share their childhood experience rather than campuses, which is one of the terms that I heard used today. I went to Grosvenor Grammar School, and we shared a campus with Orangefield, but, believe me, it was not a shared experience. In fact, it was a very oppositional experience, and, sometimes, when we saw some of the tougher Orangefield boys, we avoided them.

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

**Mr Agnew:** I will continue because I do not have much time left. I have heard terms such as collocation. All these terms are about maintaining our current segregated system in a new way rather than challenging that system and moving it forward towards integration. To some extent, we are letting some segregated schools fail so that we can use falling classroom numbers as an opportunity to create integrated schools that will be financially sustainable as well as societally good.

I keep hearing about parental choice and that parents are choosing shared education. I do not see the evidence for that. In the Northern Ireland life and times survey, 88% of people said that they supported integrated education. People will say that they are not voting with their feet. However, in Northern Ireland, saying that you do not choose integrated education is like saying that you do not choose sunshine. We do not have the choice. Only 62 of over 700 schools are integrated, so the real choice is not there yet. Unless we give the support needed to develop the integrated sector, parents will never be able to make that choice.

If we are really to move forward with my vision of a single education system— the common education of our children for the common good — we need to move towards a truly integrated system and move on from this mythical concept of shared education.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A LeasCheann Comhairle, ós mé an tAire atá freagrach, fáiltím roimh an deis labhairt, agus muid ag tarraingt ar dheireadh na díospóireachta inniu ar oideachas roinnte. I welcome the opportunity to speak as the responsible Minister as we draw towards the end of today's debate on shared education.

The motion quite rightly calls on the Assembly to note with approval the concept of shared education and the benefits of sharing between all types of school, but, interestingly, ends with a call to get rid of all these types of schools in favour of a one-size-fits-all model.

The first of the two amendments is helpful in recognising and welcoming the role of the Executive's Delivering Social Change programme, which was debated earlier today in the Chamber, in helping to advance shared education but also has a single educational model as its ultimate goal, without going into any detail of what that single educational model would look like or what rights and entitlements would be enshrined within it.

With regard to the second amendment, I fully agree that the area planning process must be conducive to sharing between schools and that the ministerial advisory group's report does indeed provide an opportunity to advance those aims. I previously indicated to the Assembly that I accept that mainstream financial support is required for additional costs involved with shared education. I am already taking steps to promote and facilitate sharing across our education system.

I will shortly respond to the points made during the debate, but it is important that I start my remarks by making clear my commitment to advancing shared education and to doing so in a manner that puts pupils first. By shared education, I mean, of course, the provision of opportunities for children and young people from our two main community backgrounds to come together and learn together. I recognise that many schools already have the confidence to embrace sharing across the community divide — a number of Members referred to that — but others do not, nor do the communities that they serve. My goal is to support them in taking the steps that they need to take if we are, together, to build a united community.

I also want shared education to be organised and delivered in such a way that it also promotes equality of opportunity and social inclusion more widely. The primary focus must be on breaking down barriers across the two major traditions here, but it cannot stop there. I do not think we should be satisfied with cosy sharing. We know that some of the greatest divisions in education are more to do with social circumstances, not religion or community background. So, I want the work we do to also provide opportunities for children from different racial backgrounds; children with and without disabilities; children who are carers or school-age mothers; and children from different socio-

economic backgrounds to come together and learn together at school and in less formal education.

Shared education is, of course, not just a priority for me as Minister; it is a priority for the whole Executive. Our Programme for Government prioritises it, our investment in signature projects like the Lisanelly shared education campus demonstrates it, and the work programme being led under the Together: Building a United Community programme supports it.

Events of recent weeks remind us why it is so important that we take every step to give young people from different backgrounds the opportunity to come together, to learn together and, most importantly, to learn from one another. As Education Minister, a key priority for me is to build aspirations among our young people and to have high expectations for them, but as we have seen in recent weeks, they too have aspirations for us. They set high expectations for us as Ministers and politicians.

Results from a recent life and times survey of 16-year-olds tell us that 89% of our young people think that working together with pupils from other schools is a good idea, and 83% think sharing facilities and resources is also a good idea. So, our young people are up for shared education, but they need our help in providing opportunities. Almost one third of young people told us in the 2011 survey that they rarely or never socialise with young people from the other community. Our challenge, therefore, is to help to provide those opportunities. It makes good educational, social and financial sense to do so.

I will now turn to a number of points raised in the debate, starting with the SEELB and its political representation. The SEELB, like other boards, should not be in existence. We are now seven or eight years into a debate around the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, which will bring all the managing authorities under the one tent. Those who are serious about moving towards a single education system would take a significant step forward if we moved towards ESA.

Regarding the political representation on ESA, when I hear Members talking about political representation on boards, I am sometimes concerned that they see that not as a leadership role but almost as a role of, "There go my people; I must follow them". That is not the role of a board or an elected representative. Education and library boards, as currently constituted, have a legal duty to give leadership

around education duties. I have to say that, in recent days, a number of them have not.

Regarding Mr McCrea's intervention, which, perhaps necessarily, raised the temperature and colour of the debate a little, the curriculum allows for the scenarios that he set out.

Our curriculum allows, regardless of the sector of the school, the history of any era, from any section of our society, from any part of the world to be taught. I would encourage schools to debate all the circumstances around Irish history and British history — or however you wish to refer to it. There is nothing in history that we should be afraid to debate; in fact, we have to learn from history to move on.

#### 4.15 pm

I see shared education —

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Minister allow an intervention?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes.

**Mr B McCrea:** I agree with the Minister that it is possible to do such things. However, I am not sure that everybody does it. I would like to see some direction given to say that we should be dealing with those issues.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I have no power to give direction on such matters. Our curriculum is set out in legislation in such a way that we set the parameters of the curriculum, then schools teach it in whichever way they and their board of governors feel comfortable with. However, I would certainly encourage it.

I see shared education not simply as children in different school uniforms sitting in the same classroom learning the three Rs. I want to see children from different schools, in different uniforms if need be, sitting in a classroom learning about one another and from one another in a respectful way. I want to see subjects such as our recent history and our future together broached. I want to see young people, whether from a nationalist/republican background or a unionist/loyalist background, learning about the history of those communities and what is important to them. I want to see young people from a Protestant/unionist/loyalist background talking about, for instance, the loyal orders or the importance of parading and bands and what that means for their cultural identity. I want to see them talking to young people who have never experienced that before, and vice versa. I want to see the breaking down of the

misconceptions around sporting organisations, such as the GAA, and all those sorts of things. Young people being able to come into a room and talk about those things has to be part of the shared education system.

Mr Allister pointed out, quite correctly, that shared education means many different things to many different people in this room and beyond. He asked whether young people from Ballymena Academy should be playing GAA. I ask this: why not? Why would young people from St Louis in Ballymena not be playing rugby or cricket? It is sport, and it is very entertaining. Why not? I do not know the answer to that question.

Will there be a Catholic sector and different sectors as we move forward? The reason why we have a divided education system in this society goes back to the foundation of the state and to men like Mr Allister. We have a divided education system and a divided society because of people with a mindset like yours.

**Mr Allister:** Is the primary reason why we have a divided education sector not because the initial Government of Northern Ireland, in their generosity, decided to fund a separate Catholic system of education because that was the demand of the Catholic Church? If, instead, the state had funded one system of education and left anyone who wanted a different system to fund it themselves, we would have a single education system. Does not, in fact, the division in our education sector come from the generosity of funding not one but two systems?

**Mr O'Dowd:** If you look at the history of funding from the formation of the state right through until perhaps even the 1980s, you will see that "generous" may not be the word to use. I said "men" like yourself, and those men were involved in many different bodies, not only political but others.

You said that there are many different interpretations of a shared education system. There are many different interpretations of "a single education system", which is in the final line of the motion. A single education system has to protect the rights of all citizens; it has to embrace all citizens; it has to be aware of, acknowledge, support and promote the cultural differences that exist on this island; and it has to allow young people to develop their own cultural identity. That is where the final line of the motion fails. Although we should be moving towards a single education system, those who promote it have to go much further than one line in a statement. They have to talk about how they envisage protecting the rights of

individual citizens in a single education system, how they would protect communities and minorities and how they would ensure that everyone is given an equal place in society.

In conclusion, the proposers of the motion —

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for giving way. The Programme for Government targets have been mentioned throughout the debate. Two of its key targets are to ensure that all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015 and to substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015. Given the proximity to that date, can the Minister update us on progress towards achieving those targets, and indeed whether measures to achieve those objectives have been put in place?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes. I actually meant to deal with your question earlier. With regard to the four Programme for Government targets on shared education, progress has been made and continues to be made on commitment number 70, which is to significantly progress work on Lisanelly. Work to establish a ministerial advisory group and the report on that have been completed. It is worth noting that that report has been with the Executive since June 2013. I am still waiting to debate that at the Executive table. Work to ensure that all children have an opportunity to participate in shared education is on track. We are working towards the announcement of a new shared education programme in spring 2014. Finally, again, progress on work to substantially increase the number of schools that share facilities is on track. A call for shared campus proposals was issued in early January. Proposals are invited by the end of March. An announcement is planned for June 2014, including on other programmes of work.

I, along with other Ministers, have to report regularly to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on my Programme for Government targets. They are all in place apart from ESA. With regard to those matters, it is the only one that is not in place.

In conclusion, the proposers of the motion and, indeed, the two tabled amendments are correct when they say that sharing between all types of schools could lead to better educational outcomes and community relations for society. I believe that we should recognise the richness of diversity that characterises our system and, with that, encourage sharing to flourish. My focus and, I believe, that of the Executive in their Programme for Government is to encourage sharing in a system that promotes

equality and diversity and encourages confidence in our individual identities and respect for those of others.

Deirim seo leis na Comhaltaí: tá mé ábalta ag an dúshlán; tá súil agam go bhfuil siad féin fosta. Agus sin ar intinn, beidh mé ag tacú leis an dara leasú. I can assure Members that I am up for the challenge of shared education. I hope that they are, too. With that in mind, I will support the second amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Sheehan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I support the Sinn Féin amendment.

I was fortunate enough to have received a third-level education. I am eternally grateful to Her Majesty's Prison Service for that privilege. One of the first things that my tutor told me to do, when answering any question, was to define the terms. Nowhere here today have I heard the term "single education system" being defined. In fact, I agree wholeheartedly with Trevor Lunn that the terms "single", "shared" and "integrated" have been used interchangeably. Anyone with any sense knows that they are not interchangeable: they are completely different concepts.

When he was ending his speech, the Chair of the Committee, Mervyn Storey, said that the education system should benefit all pupils, not just a few. I cannot disagree with one word of that. For that reason, when we debate education issues here, we should not use education as a political football. It is much too important for that. The education of young people is one of the most important things in society. It is an area where we should, as much as possible, try to get agreement. If we cannot get agreement, we should at least take the sting or the toxicity out of debates.

I will not try to define a single education system. However, my guess at what is meant by that is that one size fits all. Where into that does the Irish-medium sector fit? I know that Jim Allister in the corner singled out the Catholic sector. The Catholic maintained sector is outperforming every other sector at the minute on educational outcomes. Why on earth would it agree to go into a single education system? Why would the Irish-medium sector do so? Why would people who want to play Gaelic sports go into a system in which they might not be catered for? All those issues have to be teased out.

The fact is that we have differences in our society and those differences need to be

respected. The way in which they can be respected is within a shared system, in which we can share facilities and resources and more efficiently target public funds.

Some Members argue that the integrated system covers that. Steven Agnew made a valiant effort to defend a single education system, but the fact is that the integrated sector still supports socio-economic divisions in our education system. The sector has been interrogated on the issue in the Assembly on a number of occasions, but it is still not prepared to come out and support an end to those divisions.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Member for giving way. Given that integrated schools are not selective, on what does he base his view that the integrated sector continues socio-economic segregation?

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

**Mr Sheehan:** A number of integrated schools still operate a selection process, whereby students have to do a transfer test to get into those schools. It is straightforward. It is not rocket science.

The fact is that there are many sensitivities around bringing different education sectors together. There are religious differences. There are communal differences —

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you very much for giving way. I very much take the Member's point about looking for a framework and pulling everyone together, but does he not accept that the area planning initiative, as it is worked out at the moment, has caused schools to join together in their sectors rather than move towards what we are all looking for, which is sharing?

**Mr Sheehan:** I am not so sure that I agree on that point. There are circumstances in which it would be difficult for schools in different sectors to cooperate. As such, you have a situation in which some schools in a particular geographical area end up sharing facilities or resources with a school from the same sector. That is not the ideal situation. I think that the ideal situation is for different sectors to be sharing —

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

**Mr Sheehan:** In any event, I call on the House to support the Sinn Féin amendment.

**Mr Craig:** I support amendment No 1. This has been a fascinating debate to listen to, and I wrote down some of the comments made. What I find remarkable is that, in a House that is debating shared education, some Members sitting here have this wonderful slogan for themselves: new face, new thinking in politics. What I heard today was old politics being dribbled out to the Chamber by that individual. I am not at all surprised, because the same individual took a sheet of paper from somebody who is the old face of unionism and certainly represents the old way of thinking when it comes to everything in the House.

Shared education is not a new concept.

**4.30 pm**

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If Mr Craig's last comment, which he did not even have the courage to spell out, was meant in some way to be a reference to me giving a piece of paper to Mr McCrea, I want to nail that lie. I gave no piece of paper to Mr McCrea. Perhaps the Member would be big enough to withdraw the allegation.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I do not believe that that is a point of order. However, if the Member's motive was to get it on record, he succeeded in doing that.

**Mr Craig:** Guilty by association; that is your problem. What I will say is —

**Mr Allister:** He's not even man enough.

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Craig:** More points of order.

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Surely we should be able to talk without using the words "guilty by association" and suchlike. We are trying to have a debate here. For the record, Mr Allister did not pass me any piece of paper.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am sure that the Member shares with me the ideals of many other Members, which are that we all have ambitions but do not quite achieve them.

**Mr Craig:** The idea of shared education is not a new concept. It has been going on in education for almost a decade. Shared education has been run out in shared area plans for sixth-form

provision in schools for quite a time. It works out in practice, and it means that all sectors have to share courses across different sectors. It is not a new concept; it has been quietly working in the background for a number of years. It works in my constituency, and it works in every constituency for every Member. So the idea that shared education is a new concept is a foolish one; it is something that goes on in practice. That is because resources in our education system are finite, and, therefore, there is a need to share them.

It is the sharing of resources that has driven the whole shared education agenda forward. It is being driven forward by government now because a realisation is settling in on all of us that five separate education systems in this country are not affordable. Ultimately, I have no idea where those five systems are going, but the one thing that I do realise is that, as a nation and a country, we cannot afford to have five separate systems all funded by the taxpayer. That is where the problem lies. I have no difficulty whatsoever with an individual making the choice of a separate education system for their child, as occurs the world over. However, they pay for it themselves; they do not expect the state to fund it. Nevertheless, we have the taxpayer funding five separate systems in Northern Ireland.

I listened with interest to what Danny Kinahan said about the motion when he said that we have to go forward with "courage, determination and resolution." Our education system is moving forward with courage, determination and resolution, but it is all done quietly in the background. Our educational achievers out there — the principals and the boards of governors — just get on with the job of carrying out that function, and very little is said on a daily basis about the work that is going on there.

Will this ultimately lead to a single education system? I do not have a crystal ball, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not know where it leads. However, I know that the imperative is there; this party has led the way for a shared education system. It makes economic sense, and it also makes sense when you think about the historical divisions that there have been in this country, because others share their opinions when they are in that system. That cannot be a bad thing for society as we move forward. So, I commend our amendment to the House.

**Mrs Dobson:** I agree with my colleague and proposer of the motion, Danny Kinahan: this issue is one of, if not the, most important that the Assembly will ever debate. Looking

towards the future, shared education of all young children should be our shared goal. Government should recognise and celebrate that inside every child in Northern Ireland is a spark of ability and talent. The question is this: how do we best find that spark, irrespective of whether it is academic or vocational, and allow it to flourish into later life? We must never say that one is better than the other. Everyone is different, and we should not ask, "How smart are you?" but rather, "How are you smart?".

A single shared education system can answer that question. However, in following on from other Members who spoke today, I think that it is crystal clear that the current actions of the Department, and indeed the boards, regarding area planning have left us far from reaching that goal. Indeed, they all too often head us in the opposite direction. How can we truly realise shared education for our children if boards are prepared to force unpalatable solutions down the throats of local communities that are resolutely united against them?

Although this debate is not about the Dickson plan, the Minister and I share a constituency but, it is widely known, we do not share the same view on area planning. He may well lambaste the SELB for last week finally bowing to pressure and removing option A. However, he must surely —

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

**Mrs Dobson:** No, I want to make my points.

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

**Mrs Dobson:** Well, if you are quick.

**Mr Storey:** Maybe the Member will clarify for the House what her party's point of view was and whether her party in Upper Bann was united, particularly Mr Arnold Hatch, in relation to the proposals that were on the table at the SELB.

**Mrs Dobson:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I am on the record from 2011, and my commitment is clear on the Dickson plan. So, I am speaking here today. The Minister must surely realise that when area planning so enrages and angers communities, something has to give. How can he truly claim to be putting pupils first and shaping their futures if they and the wider communities continually state their opposition to area-planning proposals? I join Mr Kinahan in calling for the current area-planning process to be stopped. Minister, pitting school against school

— grammar against high school and primary against primary — is no way to build a shared future. Indeed, as the Minister's colleagues' amendment suggests, area planning should be "conducive to sharing between schools".

Perhaps the Minister's idea of sharing is to force the amalgamation of schools, irrespective of their views. That runs contrary to Sir George Bain's report of December 2006. Minister, in the House, last October, you said:

*"As Minister, I see far too many development proposals that are written as if the school up the road does not exist. That has to change."*— [Official Report, Vol 88, No 8, p1, col 2].

Why, then, was one sector allowed to unilaterally reconfigure and rationalise its schools ahead of the viability audits and area plans of 2011 and 2012. All sectors — maintained, controlled, voluntary, integrated, library boards, everyone — should be actively working together and be on an even playing field. Minister, let us not have a shared out future when it comes to education. One example is the removal of the certificate in religious education that is required to teach in the Catholic maintained sector. Forced amalgamations and soured relations, created by the Department, are no way to begin to build that shared future.

Despite these actions, collaboration between schools is happening and is to be welcomed. I pay particular tribute to the influence that area learning communities have had on sharing between schools. I have attended a number of ALC meetings and was pleased to see the level of cooperation that exists between schools from different sectors and the fantastic collaborative work between FE colleges. However, and the Minister is well aware of this, if funding is removed, such collaboration and best practice comes to an end.

I will make some remarks on a number of contributions to the debate, primarily from the party spokespeople.

Mervyn Storey paid tribute to teachers and parents who have for years worked hard to ensure that their schools are open and shared spaces. That was organic rather than forced, and I also praise those teachers, parents and communities. He praised his party leader for changing the mind of bishops, which was a little bizarre, and went on to say that a shared future can be all things to all people. It must be a shared future in which all sectors have an even playing field and, as Sean Rogers said, with no

prioritisation by the Minister. Mr Storey also praised the special schools as leading lights when it comes to sharing, and I totally agree with that. Their example and continued leadership can be an example to all.

Chris Hazzard, although critical of our motion, said that he wants sharing to flourish in the months and years ahead. He described how local communities and schools, not government, are leading the way when it comes to sharing. That is a sad indictment of the success of Ministers and their policies. Many Members, including Mr Hazzard, praised the work of the Fermanagh Trust as an example for others to follow. He also said that the scars of the conflict must be addressed sensitively without opening old wounds, and we agree with that.

Sean Rogers said that communities must be brought with us if we are truly to achieve a shared education system, and I totally agree, especially in light of area-planning disasters, including in my constituency. Mr Rogers also made an extremely valid point about sharing being a viable alternative to closure for rural schools, and he also called for an even playing field for all sectors. We can wholeheartedly agree with that. There should be no prioritisation.

Trevor Lunn made the case for the integrated sector, and I agree that all sectors have to play their part. Again, there should be no prioritisation. Mr Lunn also asked that I enlighten him. Now there is a challenge.

I was disappointed by some Members who were unable to lift their eyes to the endgame of a totally shared education model for the future children of Northern Ireland. I welcome the Minister's willingness to advance shared education, but I would welcome clarity, Minister, on your view on bringing communities with us.

As I bring my contribution to a close, I am mindful of it once being said to me, "If you started with a blank canvas, we would never in a million years draw up an education system like Northern Ireland has today". We do not have the luxury of a blank canvas. Rather, our education system is a product of the patchwork history of Northern Ireland. For some communities, sharing can begin immediately, which is to be welcomed but, for others, it may be medium to long term. However, if the motion is to achieve anything, it should focus our eyes on the endgame of a Northern Ireland in which our children are educated not because of their family background but in the best interests of their future.

Minister, let us not make shared education something that was never meant to be. Let us encourage equal sharing between all the sectors and not continue with the soured relations and forced amalgamations within one. I commend the motion to the House.

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

*Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.*

*The Assembly divided:*

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

*Ayes 35; Noes 20.*

#### **AYES**

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

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson*

#### **NOES**

*Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Kinahan.*

*The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Attwood, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr Rogers*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I have been advised by the party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 27(1A)(b), there is agreement

that we can dispense with the three-minute rule and move straight to the Division.

Order. Some people do not appear to be in a hurry home tonight. *[Interruption.]*

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 34; Noes 15.*

#### **AYES**

*Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson*

#### **NOES**

*Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Kinahan.*

*The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes with approval the concept of shared education; believes sharing*

*between all types of school could lead to better educational and community relations outcomes; welcomes the initiative by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in progressing this work through the signature projects; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively assist in this work through the development of shared campuses so that a single education system can become a realistic policy goal.*

## **Remote Sensing Inspections**

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

**Mr Frew:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses dissatisfaction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for its failure to effectively inform the 1,139 farm businesses that received a remote sensing inspection in 2013; notes that the farmers only received notification days before they were expecting their single farm payment and recognises that this will place many farm businesses under incredible pressure in the coming months; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain how this happened and give assurances that she has put in place measures that will prevent it happening again.*

To do the subject of this DUP motion justice, you have to go back to the start and to the crux of remote sensing. I suggest that remote sensing is, indeed, a good idea. It should speed up the inspection process and should mean that more farm businesses will be paid their single farm payments more quickly. So, in a general sense, remote sensing is a good thing. However, the issue here is that it seems that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was not fit for purpose to advance remote sensing inspections to the level that it took on. By that I mean that 1,139 farms were inspected by remote sensing this year and 250 farms were inspected in that way last year. That was a massive increase in remote sensing at a time when DARD did not have the technology or the system in place to cater for it.

In the last week of November, I started to receive phone calls about the issue from farmers who were concerned about their single farm payments. When they rang their local DARD office to enquire about their payments, they were told that they had, indeed, been part of an inspection process. The majority of those farmers had no idea that they were involved in an inspection. It is not as though people and feet were on their grounds; these inspections are done by aerial photographs and can be done remotely, as the name suggests. So, those farmers had no concept or no idea that there was going to be a delay in their single farm payments, some ranging from thousands

to tens of thousands of pounds. Those farmers were expecting that money a week later. Now, you can imagine how any business could cope with that information at that time, a week before they were expecting thousands of pounds to come into their bank account.

When they then phoned Orchard House, which is the main DARD HQ for processing single farm payments, they were told the same thing. They were told that they were involved in a remote sensing inspection and that their local offices would be writing to them soon to confirm that. When the local offices were contacted again, farmers were told that Orchard House would be issuing the letters. So, one part of DARD did not know what the other part of DARD was doing. The question that I will pose to the Minister is this: who was actually responsible? Why did it go on for so long? Those aerial photographs were taken in April, May, June and July, and it took DARD until December to inform people.

#### 5.15 pm

The Department and the Minister have spoken on this matter. I asked the Minister an urgent question for written answer on 6 December 2013. I wrote to the Minister at the same time and received a response on 23 December. I also met DARD officials on 31 January 2014 along with Diane Dodds MEP and farmers from north Antrim and Clogher valley. On most of those occasions, if not all, I was given the excuse that a farming community cannot be told that they have been inspected because, at that point, they could not change their claims. Well, I am sorry: that is weak.

If you were to receive an ordinary inspection, you would see the inspectors on the ground. You would see that you were involved in an inspection process. You would know that you were not going to be paid in December and that it would be many weeks or months later. DARD should have been able to tell these farmers somehow that they were involved in an inspection process; that they should not expect their single farm payment cheque in December; and that they should try to plan ahead in their business plans and purchasing so that they would not hit this hard wall come December.

This has had a massive impact on the farming community. The areas picked — or plucked out of the air — for remote sensing were two concentrated areas: one in North Antrim and one in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. They were chosen basically because aerial photography would be easier there. I can understand the logic of that. What I cannot

understand is why they chose so many — 1,139 — and why they concentrated on two areas when they knew fine rightly that they did not have the IT systems in place to process and deal with those applications.

They knew months before December that all these farmers would be left out of the payment scheme in December. That brought much hardship not only for the farmers in the concentrated areas in North Antrim and Fermanagh and South Tyrone but for the merchants, suppliers and local grocery stores, which were relying on the farmers getting that money and paying out. It got to the point where merchants and suppliers were having to bankroll those large areas and many farmers while they waited for their single farm payments.

It is not good enough that DARD was able to simply leave those 1,139 applications to one side. They knew that they could not cope with them. They knew that they could not process them. They could then ignore them and go and achieve a target of 90%. The Minister will quote that she has achieved the target set by the EU; that is fine and dandy. However, in other years when we have had so many people inspected in this process, they have been scattered around the Province. This year, two concentrated areas have not got their money. It has had a devastating effect in my constituency and in the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

I pose these questions to the Department and the Minister. If the Department could not cope, why did it increase the number of cases of remote sensing by so many? Why could it not cope? Why could it not have had a system in place earlier to cope with the increase in remote sensing? Why could the Department not have communicated with the farmers involved much earlier? The excuse that they would not be able to change their claim is very weak. When farmers apply for their single farm payment, they have applied and that is it done. To say that we have saved them because they will be able to change their application is incorrect. That is not the case. As soon as you have DARD officials on your farm and are inspected by feet on the ground, you lose that opportunity anyway.

Minister, that is a very weak excuse for not notifying these farmers. They should have been notified somehow. Somehow your people should have been able to go to the farmers and say, "By the way, you have been inspected by remote sensing. Do not expect your money in December." We are talking about businesses

with massive amounts of debt, cash flow and turnover. They have been disabled over the past number of weeks because their cash flow has been hurt dramatically.

Does the Minister realise the impact that that has not only on those farm businesses but on those concentrated areas of North Antrim and Fermanagh and South Tyrone? Why, then, when she knew that all those problems were going to come about, did she pick North Antrim and Fermanagh and South Tyrone? Would she like to tell the House what areas she is going to pick for next year? They may face the same problems as my constituents in North Antrim and constituents in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Why, Minister, have we bitten off more than we can chew? Why is the Department not fit for purpose for remote sensing when other countries in Europe, including the Republic of Ireland, can do that and do it well?

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

**Mr Frew:** Why, Minister, have you failed the farming community and my constituents of North Antrim once more?

**Mr Milne:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. We must not underestimate the importance of the single farm payment to farmers and the rural community. However, it is also important that the payment is accurate as well as timely and that it falls within the regulations set down by Europe.

When the targets and requirements for all three aspects have been met, we will have a perfect system. It makes no sense to focus on speedy payments if they are to be followed by an overpayment notice or penalties from Europe. Farmers and DARD have upped their game when it comes to how claims are submitted through to when they are paid out. We have seen steady improvements over the past two years, but there is still some way to go.

I can appreciate that the Department is undergoing a lot of changes to its systems and processes. I can accept that, when difficulties have been identified, they have been addressed in the short term and, just as importantly, rectified for the long term. However, I have no doubt that that brings little comfort to the individual farm families who have been affected, and their concerns and anxieties need to be addressed.

Remote sensing has undoubtedly speeded up the payments process. With all that we have heard throughout the debate, it would be easy to forget that more farmers were paid last December than ever before and that the targets that were set for February are expected to be met. However, improvements can still be made, particularly in the communication and planning of the inspection process, which would help those who are selected for the process to plan for the months ahead, and those improvements need to be put in place.

Although there are advantages to centralising inspections to specific areas, that has to be weighed against the potential knock-on effect on local suppliers and the local economy as a whole. Early notification will also be an issue, because the rules surrounding it are governed by Europe and are there to protect the integrity of the inspections.

As the necessary IT systems are now up and running, delays in beginning the remote sensing inspections, which have led to the debate and the difficulties that we are discussing, should not have the same effect next year; I ask the Minister for her assurance on that. A number of applications will always be delayed because of matters that are outside DARD's control such as probate or missing information, but when the Department can make improvements, it has a responsibility to do so.

**Mr Byrne:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I thank Mr Frew and his colleagues for tabling the motion.

On 13 January 2014, a Member of the House queried the numbers of people who were subject to remote sensing inspections. The Minister answered that any people who were inspected would be paid by the end of February. If that is the case, perhaps she will enlighten us as to how many of the 1,139 farmers have been paid since the first week of December. The delay that those farmers have endured in receiving farm payments over the past period of time has been intolerable for some.

Remote sensing inspections were introduced as a means of checking the eligibility of land for single farm payment (SFP) claims and of making the process more efficient.

DARD, as we know, completes about 2,000 random single farm payment inspections, as per its obligations under EU legislation. In the past, these were carried out by on-the-ground visits. Increasingly, inspections take place using remote sensing. This involves looking at

a satellite image or aerial photograph and comparing that with the area declared on the single farm payment application form.

When remote sensing inspections were introduced, DARD committed itself to completing checks and informing claimants as soon as they were processed. This was designed to assist the speed and accuracy of the single farm payment assessment. The purpose of removing the number of on-the-ground inspections should be to help to reduce the administrative burden that is placed on farm businesses, not, as the case has been, to add to farmers' stresses. Unfortunately, many farmers were not notified that a remote sensing inspection of their land would be taking place. This has led to unnecessary distress and anxiety, as Mr Frew outlined. Given the number of difficult years that farmers have faced with inclement weather and the fodder shortage, it is imperative that the processing of SFP claims is as easy as possible.

The Minister must recognise that the failure to notify farmers in writing or otherwise about inspections of their land must never happen again. In some instances, farmers received notification but only a few days before they were expecting their single farm payment. DARD has defended its decision, saying that farmers were not informed of inspections because, if they were informed and then made changes, it could leave them subject to penalties. All these farmers are suffering from the delay in payment, even if no discrepancies are revealed. Up to 38,000 farm businesses in Northern Ireland receive the SFP. It is an essential payment, which helps farmers to pay suppliers for a variety of items such as meal and fuel bills and, in many cases, to pay the banks. Many farmers have been told to wait for their single farm payment while inspections are ongoing. Farmers should have at least been forewarned that payment would be delayed because, at least, they would then have been in a position to inform their bank and, indeed, their suppliers.

Remote sensing has the potential to speed up the inspection and payment process if it is implemented effectively. The majority of farmers affected appear to be in the same geographical locations, the Lower Bann and the Clogher valley, comprising mainly the constituency of North Antrim, parts of Mid Ulster, parts of Fermanagh and South Tyrone and parts of West Tyrone in the Fintona area. Some of the farming communities that have experienced this difficulty are suffering cash flow problems. We recognise that this is a new process and that there are bound to be some

teething problems, however we wish to ensure that the issues are addressed fully by the Minister so that they do not recur. DARD must put forward a plan for such inspections and make farmers aware that their land will be subject to remote sensing inspection. I think that it is only a courtesy that the farmer should know that an inspection is taking place.

Questions need to be addressed by DARD on why the equipment and scheduling have resulted in another unfortunate development that led to farmers being hit once again. Inspections took place last May, but it was December before said farmers were informed, and that was when they were expecting their single farm payment cheque. The Minister needs to explain fully why another administrative fiasco by DARD has again been exposed and why only farmers in the Lower Bann and Clogher valley areas who have suffered through the delayed SFP.

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

**Mr Byrne:** The questions are these: were drones or satellite images used; what was the equipment fault; and what administrative bottlenecks are resulting in these problems?

**Mrs Dobson:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, although I was disappointed that the Ulster Unionist amendment was not selected, as I believe that it would have added to it. Nevertheless, even without it, we can have as many take-note debates as we like; we can challenge the Minister as much as we like at Question Time; and we can issue as many press releases as we like expressing concern at her handling of remote sensing. However, if she and her Department remain as stubborn as they currently are, there is little chance that anything will be done.

Year on year, the Department and the Minister walk themselves into holes, which, very often, are dug entirely by them. We should have known that the Department would not have been able properly to administer remote sensing. It is continually unable to carry out even the most basic tasks without demonstrating its usual level of ineptitude. I do not doubt that the Minister, in her response, will give an explanation for how remote sensing has been carried out, but I ask her to go and try to explain that to the many farm businesses that have found themselves the guinea pigs to the Department's efforts to play catch-up to avoid further EU disallowance. That includes the 150

farmers who joined Robin Swann and me at an open meeting organised by Robin in Glarryford Young Farmers' hall at the end of last month.

I and my party recognise that remote sensing should have helped the Department to make faster payments.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that one of the major problems was that when we, as elected representatives, or the farmers got a response from the Department, it was inadequate and insufficient because it did not tell them why there was a delay and why they were not going to get their single farm payment until February?

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

**5.30 pm**

**Mrs Dobson:** I thank my colleague for that intervention. He is quite right: that further added to the exasperation and frustration felt by the farmers.

The situation was so ridiculous over recent years that it could do nothing but improve. My issue is not with remote sensing. In the right hands, it should be a quick and efficient system, but with the Department's handling of it, it has been little more than 'Carry on Mapping'. By treating farmers with its usual level of suspicion, the Department has only further soured relations with many. It is increasingly adopting a policing as opposed to a supporting role. That message was delivered to DARD officials loud and clear by the farmers at Glarryford. Minister, it is a two-way street. If you and your Department want to hold the respect of farmers in the wider industry, you need to earn it.

There are many actions that the Department could take to improve relations. Take the issue of tackling red tape, which is a matter of failure for the Minister, yet not once has the Department held its hand up and apologised. Another issue is the continued blight of TB, where forced action continues at a snail's pace, leaving farms at the mercy of a disease that thrives under a regime of departmental foot-dragging.

The Department continues to fail, and fail scornfully. I understand that a level of inspection is required under remote sensing, but refusing to inform the affected farmers until the very last moment that their payments would be delayed was simply out of order. Those are businesses too, remember, with costs and a

constant eye on outgoings and incomes like any other. The single farm payment is, of course, public money, so it needs a high degree of transparency at every step of the way, but the Department has used that requirement to put up additional barriers.

I tabled an amendment to the motion raising, once again, the issue of advance payments. Our farms remain at a distinct disadvantage, not least compared with those in the Republic. It is an issue that has been widely talked about in the past by the Assembly, even as recently as last June through another amendment that I proposed, but the fact that —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind the Member that the debate is on the motion in front of us today.

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

**Mrs Dobson:** No, I want to make my points. I gave way to Tom, and I have an extra minute. The fact that the Department remains as flippant on an almost unanimous request just goes to show the level of contempt in which it holds the thoughts of not only this Assembly but the wider industry.

In conclusion, I do not expect that the debate will be anything other than 90 minutes of venting or justifying. I expect the Minister to make excuses, such as the need to avoid disallowance, problems of lining up the payment system and the mapping system, but it will do little to reassure farmers who find themselves at the mercy of DARD inspectors. So, I call on the Minister to reassure us that the same problems will not occur next year, but even if she does so, can we have the confidence to believe it?

**Mr Irwin:** At the outset, I declare an interest as a farmer and someone who is in receipt of a single farm payment. Here we are again, discussing an issue of importance and concern within the farming community regarding the administering of single farm payments in the Province.

Farmers are increasingly concerned, as, year after year, the Minister makes promises that the system will be improved with investment in various aspects of the single farm payment processing wing, yet, year on year, the complications continue. Unfortunately, with the complications come unacceptable delays for the farmer. That is certainly the case with remote sensing and the debacle that has left hundreds of farmers still waiting for their single farm payment some nine months later. Those

farmers were expecting a relatively trouble-free payment process. Therefore, to find, a few days before they were to receive their eagerly anticipated payment, that their farm was now subject to remote sensing was absolutely infuriating.

Earlier this month, the Minister tried to give her version of events at Question Time, and I was less than impressed by her attempt to justify yet more delay and complication for farmers. Indeed, my colleague Sammy Wilson MLA was right to press her on the description of Members who were raising the issue as losing the run of themselves. It is clear that the Minister does not have irate farmers contacting her directly to vent their anger and frustration at the Department over the mishandling of the remote sensing debacle. Indeed, her attempt to divert attention through the use of percentages is no comfort to the hundreds of farmers across Northern Ireland who remain without their payment.

In case it has slipped the mind of the Minister, farmers rely heavily on their single farm payments, especially with the latest beef price crash and the various other pressures being brought to bear on the industry. We have increasing concerns about the persistent wet weather and the possible ramifications that that will have in the spring for getting animals back out to grass and trying to ease those pressures. Energy costs continue to burden the farmer, as do ongoing price battles with the large supermarkets. All those issues combine to put a massive strain on cash flow for the farmer. The Minister has the power to do something about the issues that she is responsible for. She cannot control the weather. However, she can control her resources and her team, and it is high time that the farmer was treated with some respect.

Northern Ireland farmers cannot sustain year-on-year single farm payment problems, yet, year on year, that is what farmers get from the Department.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way. Earlier he mentioned the Minister stating that we should not lose the run of ourselves. It was, at that time, a flippant comment by the Minister. I know that the hustle and bustle of this place can bring out the best of us in debates. I have no problems with that. I am thick-skinned enough to take it, and it is healthy to have it, but there is a seriousness to it. Those areas of North Antrim, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and the surrounding areas — Mid Ulster included, of course; we cannot be remiss — were left to one side while the Department

targeted a target, knowing fine rightly that they would not even be processed by December.

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

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I certainly agree with him. I respectfully ask that the situation change. When will we see a fit-for-purpose payment system that does not starve farmers of vital payments?

The issue of early payments and part payments was raised earlier by the Member for Upper Bann, and I know that that is an issue for farmers. However, I believe that, in the Republic of Ireland and other farming areas that have advance single farm payments, if there is an inspection they do not make advance payments to those farmers. That is a problem. Maybe the Minister could update us on that, but I think that that is a problem with advance payments.

**Mr McMullan:** Go raibh maith agat. Today's motion explains in detail how the Minister is using modern technology to speed up single farm payments. Let us put some of that in context, for it has been very emotive so far. I cannot understand why some things have been left out.

Remote sensing was first used in 2012, and 250 claims were selected for inspection, which allowed 83% of the 2012 claims to be paid, amounting to £184 million. In 2013, Commission regulations required a minimum of 5% inspections or on-the-spot checks to be carried out, which meant that, of 2,129 claims, 999 were farm inspections, which left 1,130 that were selected for inspection in 2013. That was from a total of 37,500 claims for single farm payment. It resulted in 90% of 2013 single farm payments being finalised in December 2013, totalling £232 million. It means that the payment target of 95% by February 2014 may be met, with the remaining cases to be paid by the end of April at the latest. Those targets — this is something that we have not had today — are two months ahead of the 2012 payment timeline and four months better than 2011 figures.

It is vital —

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

**Mr McMullan:** Hold on; I am trying to get my point across.

It is vital that we all work with the Minister in helping promote the technology. We can all agree that we have to get the money out to the farmers, and quickly. We are all working towards that.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way. He is very gracious.

The motion is clear. It is not about the failure to hit a target. DARD has hit a target. It has improved on the year before, and there are many reasons for that. One reason is this: those 1,139 applications were simply left on a pile to one side because they could not be progressed as the Department did not have the technology. Some of those are still to get a rapid field inspection. As far as I know, none of them had a rapid field inspection before December. That is the issue. You simply set those aside to meet a target, and that has hurt those areas where remote sensing was used.

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

**Mr McMullan:** I thank the Member for his intervention. We are not going to fall out over whether what you are saying is true or untrue. We are all trying to get to the point where we get over all the inspections. However, we must allow more time for the technologies to work in. We cannot expect to get them all right in the first year.

**Mr Frew:** Why?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr McMullan:** Remote sensing technology involves the careful examination of satellite images or aerial photographs and comparing them to an area declared in a single farm payment application form. Rapid field visits may be required if an image of an eligible area within a field cannot be made; which could be because of tree coverage or fog or mist on the day. Once remote sensing was completed, the information was further checked by staff using DARD's control management systems. Do not forget that one thing Members from both sides of the House attacked the Minister on before was the cost of making those farm visits to look at the inspections. Here we are now, getting 95% of them out, and we are still complaining.

The purpose of the control has not in any way changed up to now. The timing of the remote sensing checks has meant that it has not been possible to notify farm businesses that they have been selected for remote sensing checks.

That is in line with the accompanying guidance, something that none of you has even touched on today. Under guidance set out on the 2013 single farm payment application form, applicants did not receive notification of a remote sensing check unless a field visit was required. That is EU regulation, not the Minister's regulation, and that is something that should be brought out. We are sending out the wrong message to farmers.

The Member to my left talked about the meeting he organised in Ballymena with 150 people at it. I organised one in Ballymena and had nearly 500 people at it, and there was not one word of this. They knew that there were going to be delays, but it was understood that the new technology was bedding in. Those things were understood. We understand —

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

**Mr McMullan:** No, you have had one bite of the cherry.

You cannot afford to be complaining all the time. We know that the Department will have to improve in ways. None of us here is denying that. However, at least give this a chance to bed in. You would nearly be forgiven for thinking that there is an election on, the way you are going here. Get the facts out there: it is EU regulation, nothing else.

**Mrs Overend:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McMullan:** You are too late.

**Mrs Overend:** The Minister talked about new technology. Surely DARD has email and text messaging facilities. It should use that new technology to get the message through to farmers.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time is up.

5.45 pm

**Mr McMullan:** As I said, EU regulations —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member's time is up. *[Interruption.]* Order. Time is up.

**Lord Morrow:** It is regrettable that the debate has to take place. In fact, the matter should never have had to come to the House. Had the Minister done her duty and shown that she was

concerned about the issue, she would have come to the House with a statement. Instead, she chose not to do that. What has annoyed many farmers and Members is the detached stance that she has taken. She and some of her colleagues have come to the House and tried to make light of the fact that there is just £25 million still outstanding for distribution. In my books and by my calculation, that is no small amount of money. Knowing the way in which it operates, I suspect that it is a small amount of money to Sinn Féin. The Minister has taken a hands-off approach: "It is not really my problem"; "I am not too concerned". That is how she comes across. I say this today: the situation is bordering on crisis. If the House and her Department do not take the issues seriously, the Minister has to consider her position.

In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, particularly in the south Tyrone part of it, farmers are standing waiting and pleading, "Why can we not get our payments?" The only answer that the Minister can give is that the Department has got the payment out to over 90% of farmers. It is 92% or 93%, I think. That is fine for those farmers who have received it. However, if you are one of the 7% or 8% of farmers who has not received it, you are in diffis. That is something that the Department and the Minister just do not get. They just do not get the message.

In chastising a Member who asked about it, the Minister said, "I think that you are losing the run of yourself". That has become the catchphrase since Martin McGuinness first used it when he challenged Margaret Ritchie, the then Minister for Social Development. He used the phrase, "You're losing the run of yourself, Margaret". Sinn Féin Ministers have now adopted that as their catchphrase. When anybody challenges what Sinn Féin does, or, in this instance, is not doing, it says, "Don't lose the run of yourself". In other words, it is not an important issue.

Let me make this very clear to the House: the issue is very important. The Minister needs to take on board that some farmers, who, at the end of the day, are running businesses, are struggling to keep going. The weather has not been good to them. The rising prices have not been favourable to them. They were budgeting to have received their single farm payment. The Minister was not able to deliver. I hope that, when she responds in the House, she will be able to give a specific date when everybody will receive their payment. Dates have been bandied about. There has been talk about the end of February. I see that April is sometimes mentioned. Indeed, some farmers have now

become so despondent that they are beginning to think that it could be June, July or August.

**Mr McMullan:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he not agree that the number of farmers who are now getting paid has gone up, that the percentage has gone up and that we are reaching out to more farmers? We are working with a figure for the number of farmers who have not been paid. We accept that. However, does the Member not agree that the Minister, since the new technology was introduced, has improved the payment scheme from 2011-12 right up until now?

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

**Lord Morrow:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have already said that over 90% of farmers have got payment. That is fine if you are one of the over 90%. What if you are one of the 7% who has not been paid?

The figure that is in front of me is that — this was in the Minister's press release from 20 December — £232.5 million worth of payments had been made to farmers. If that figure is right, and if it represents nine tenths of the total budget, it seems to me that £25.83 million has still to be distributed. The Member who asked that question —

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

**Lord Morrow:** I will in a moment. Does the Member who asked that question see the importance of that £25-plus million getting out to the farmers who are standing waiting for it?

I will give way to Mr Frew.

**Mr Frew:** I thank Lord Morrow for giving way.

**Mr McMullan:** Can the Member justify —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Again, some people are losing the run of themselves. Lord Morrow, given that we just heard from Sinn Féin personnel across the way that this was new technology, maybe the Department lost the run of itself when it decided —

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

**Mr Frew:** — to pick 1,139 for remote sensing inspections?

**Lord Morrow:** Yes, I think that it did.

I know that my time is up, and the Deputy Speaker is going to remind me of that. If we can do anything here today, maybe we can get the message to the Minister —

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

**Lord Morrow:** — about the seriousness of the situation, which she has failed to grasp to date.

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

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. To start off, I acknowledge that the DUP has admitted that the Minister cannot control the weather; it has tried to blame her for everything else.

I want to make a couple of points here today. Despite what Lord Morrow said a while ago, we are not making light of the situation. We know exactly what it is like for farmers. We are from farming communities, and we know exactly how it affects people in local areas. We are not detached from local communities. I have been here for many of the agriculture debates, and I have not seen Mr Morrow speaking up in too many of them. Maybe that is because you spend most of your time over in the Lords; I do not know. You called us "detached", but I suspect that you are more detached from farmers in the Clogher valley than we are.

I will move on. Paul Frew made the point that farmers cannot change their applications. That is factually incorrect. Field data can be changed in single application forms but not after a farmer has been told about an inspection.

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

**Mr McAleer:** Yes, but —

**Mr Frew:** I take that for granted; I am not disputing that. What I am disputing is that, once you get an inspection on the ground, you lose the ability to change your claim. So, why are on-the-ground inspections different from remote sensing inspections? Why is there a difference?

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

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat.

I want to get back to the fact of the matter. Again, I reiterate that we support farmers and acknowledge the difficulties. We met the UFU earlier today, and it told us about those difficulties and the importance of single farm payments to the farming community.

During the year, we have had many motions about farming and single farm payments and the importance of getting them moved on. Two of the key vehicles for moving them on were online applications and a move towards remote sensing inspection. There is widespread support across —

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for giving way. First of all, I declare an interest as someone who is in receipt of a single farm payment and lives in the Clogher valley area. A large number of my constituents have been subject to the inspection. They are asking questions, and rightly so. Will the Member explain the rationale for remote sensing inspection, as opposed to the traditional method of on-farm inspection?

**Mr McAleer:** That sort of links into the point that I was making. The idea behind moving to remote sensing inspections was to make the system more efficient; it is one of the key control mechanisms.

We got some information from the South of Ireland, where remote inspections are used. The cost of such inspections is drastically different and is much cheaper than the classic method. Indeed, in the information that we got from the South of Ireland, we found that the cost is in and around €1,800 for a classic inspection, whereas it is around €60 to €70 for a remote sensing inspection. That is much better value for money.

In the case of remote sensing inspections, we welcome that the Department has met very challenging targets this year. We have already seen over 90% being paid out. Going back to notification, although we empathise with farmers and see the importance and relevance of them being notified in due course, it is very important to point out that — this is in the staff application guidance notes — when you submit your application, you agree to permit the Department to carry out a land eligibility check, with or without prior notice. The check may go ahead if contact cannot be made. When farmers submit their forms, they have the guidance notes. Despite that, the Department went beyond the guidance notes and issued letters to farmers in mid-December notifying them of an inspection. The point that I am making is this: they were notified.

Mr Morrow made the point about getting the payments out. Would you rather breach the EU regulations around this and face infraction and penalties from Europe where everybody loses out? Is that what you would prefer?

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Member for giving way. Given that £25 million is still waiting to be distributed, does he not see the importance of getting that money out? Those are the issues that his Minister should be dwelling on. Instead of clapping her on the back for inefficiency, he should be saying, "Look, step up to the plate here".

**Mr McAleer:** It is important to put this in context. The single farm payment is worth £0.25 billion a year. Rather than risk breaching EU rules and risk that £0.25 billion, is it not better to get it right and do it within the rules?

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

**Mr McAleer:** Yes.

**Mr Frew:** I take the Member's point entirely, and I understand the EU rules. However, why were the rapid field inspections not done before December, because that would have given an early indication to those farmers that they were involved in an inspection process?

**Mr McAleer:** I accept your point. However, I go back to my point that they were notified in mid-December of the inspection. So they did know. I accept that, where it is possible and if it is possible to notify them earlier and more effectively, that would be fair enough. Quite a number of the farmers that we met through our constituency offices made that point to us and that, had they know earlier, they could have planned ahead much more easily.

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

**Mr McAleer:** In conclusion, we empathise with the farmers. We are confident that the Minister will listen to today's debate and that measures will be put in place to deal with the issue ahead of the applications going into next year.

**Mr Rogers:** I apologise for my bit of technology going off earlier.

With regard to the Member's point, the improvement in statistics is fine, and it is fine for the farmers who got their money. However, in my constituency, 89 farmers did not get their money by the end of January. If you were to try

to tell them that the statistics were better, you would need to have your escape planned from their farmyard.

The introduction of new remote sensing technology to monitor the use of land resulted in unforeseen delays in payments despite hopes that the technology would actually streamline operations. Assurances that all single farm payments would be finalised by the end of February are of little use to the farmers who are faced with managing immediate cash flow problems. At a recent meeting of Magherafelt District Council, a motion was passed expressing the concern of the farming community.

The Minister must get to grips with implementing remote sensing inspections. The opportunity that this technology presents should guarantee that inspections are administered in an efficient and effective manner. Remote sensing inspections provide a satellite image or aerial photograph and compare that with the farmer's single application form. This was meant to improve the method of processing single farm payments. In many cases, it has made the process more cumbersome. Mr Frew has a relevant point in that, if they had been done much earlier, it would have been better.

Prompt payment of the single farm payment is crucial to support —

**Mr McMullan:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that if there were more online applications, the problem would be lessened and that that would also speed up the process?

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

**Mr Rogers:** The Member may have a point. However, with regard to getting online applications right, our farmers need better IT training and so on and they need a lot of help in that area.

Undoubtedly, farmers have faced increased pressures over the past number of years, which has led to the cash flow problems that Lord Morrow talked about. The Minister must give the House a firm assurance that the delay will be prevented in future. Inadequate notice was given to the 1,139 farm businesses that were to receive the remote sensing inspection.

**Mr McAleer:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mr Rogers:** I will.

**Mr McAleer:** The Member referred to the Magherafelt motion. In that motion, the SDLP called for a three-month notification period. Does he accept that if that were the case, it would result in an infraction of EU legislation and disallowance?

**6.00 pm**

**Mr Rogers:** There has to be an accommodation for farmers, and we need better notification than a few days on this type of issue.

Although there may be many challenges to implementing a new method of assessment, the Department must recognise the stresses and strains that the farming community has faced over the past number of years. Central to alleviating that distress is the single farm payment, which must be paid in a timely fashion.

We know the value of the single farm payment to our economy, and the Minister must assure us that nothing will interfere with people's payments. Some 38,000 farms avail themselves of this crucial payment for vital farm supplies. Farmers should have been forewarned about any delay in their payments so that they could make some attempt to balance their finances.

If the technology for remote sensing inspections is utilised effectively, it should result in a more streamlined system of assessment. Although we accept that there may be some initial difficulties involved in switching from on-the-ground assessments, it is unacceptable that farmers should in any way be penalised by a delay in receiving what is owed to them. The Department must have an efficient and reliable inspection process in place and keep farmers fully informed about when exactly their land will be subject to remote sensing inspections and how this affects their payment. I acknowledge that this delay did not affect payments in south Down, but I hope that lessons will be learned so that DARD can get the technology right, and farmers get their single farm payment on time.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The business in the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business is completed.

**Mr Swann:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You are so kind.

We have heard a lot of repetition about the problems, and I commend the Sinn Féin Members who have spoken to date for defending their Minister. They have quoted the statistics: 93.6% of payments made by 3 February, and the hope is to hit the 95% target. Those targets are not the problem; the problem is the fact that all the farmers are compressed into two small geographical areas in Northern Ireland. The first is in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and the other includes my North Antrim constituency, with bits of Mid Ulster and East Londonderry.

I wonder whether Sinn Féin Members would be standing here tonight saying what a great achievement the 95% payment is if those areas were in West Tyrone and the glens, and it was their members, their constituencies, their friends and the farmers in their areas who were suffering so intensely.

We have heard the figure 1,139 trotted out by a number of Members. We need to bring into perspective that those are 1,139 families. I have heard them referred to as 1,139 businesses or farms. They are not; they are 1,139 families who are sitting, at this minute, with major cash flow problems in their bank accounts. They are drawing down their personal savings —

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

**Mr Swann:** I will, if you are brief.

**Mr Frew:** I take your point, and the Member is making it well. It is not only the families, because those families may employ farm helpers. So it will have a knock-on effect on other families.

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

**Mr Swann:** Thank you very much. I take the Member's point. However, I will be honest with him. The farmers whom I know are still paying their helpers, which is where the frustration comes in. They are still meeting the suppliers' needs. They are still meeting their bank payments. It is their families who are suffering, which is why we need to speed up the processes. When remote sensing and aerial photography were brought, the Minister said — I will quote her from 18 June 2012 — that it was to "help reduce the administrative burden". They did that and reduced the administrative burden by one letter, the letter that would have informed each of those families that their farms were to be inspected.

As far as I am aware, up to 19 inspections by DARD or its associated bodies can take place on farms, and each one of those can give up to two days' notice. So they can give notice of the inspections. I have heard Mr McAleer ask, on a number of occasions, whether we would rather break EU regulations. The guide on how to complete a 2013 single application and field data sheet states:

*"By submitting a Single Application, you agree to permit the Department to carry out an OTS land eligibility check (with or without prior notice at any reasonable time)."*

So even the Department, in its guidance notes, says that it has the ability to give notice of an area for remote inspection. It is within the Minister's gift to do this, and I ask her again to do it. Remote sensing will not go away. The frustrations have been mentioned repeatedly by a number of Members, and the debate has to try to improve the situation for next year. We have to get the payment out to the waiting families and ensure that the process is improved for next year.

Last year's pilot of 250 claims was referred to. It was June, Mr McMullan, before most of those farmers were paid. I think that the pilot was in and around the Ballyclare area. We now find that, because it is such a small geographical area, men meet at the same marts and agricultural suppliers so that information is being passed on. Families have been promised payment, but when Department officials ring, they say, "The payment will be coming at the end of February". They also meet farmers who say to them, "I was part of that project last year, and I did not get paid until June". So the stress on our farm families is increasing.

One thing that I find frustrating is the handling of single farm payments and how we process them. The Minister outlined this information in a recent answer to me. The cost to the Department of managing the single farm payment increased from £2 million to £2.63 million from 2010-11 to 2012-13, not including the cost of inspections. That is a 30% increase in three years. That is the cost of managing the fiasco to date. Out of this debate needs to come a better use of resource and learning from what we have seen last year and this year. I hope that the Department is able to do it.

My concern now is that I am already receiving communication from members of staff in DARD to the effect that, in the Department, people are being moved about to try to meet the February date. Other schemes, payment divisions and branches are having personnel removed to try

to meet that date and ease the situation. Although that is commendable, I hope that the —

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

**Mr Swann:** — Department puts the resources into place to make sure that this does not happen again next year. If the same geographical area is selected again, and there is a chance that it will —

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

**Mr Swann:** — the same families will be hit for a second year, and they will not survive it.

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

**Mr McCallister:** The figures that Mr Swann gave on the cost of DARD administering the single farm payment suggest that that end of the public sector is one of the few areas not affected by austerity.

I declare an interest as a recipient of single farm payment, although it is probably a fairly modest one in comparison with Mr Irwin's.

There are many factors in this, and, when you condense it into small geographic areas, that intensifies the difficulties faced, not only by the businesses but, I dare say, even further up the supply chain. You are affecting cash flow in a limited area. As pointed out, south Down was not one of the areas affected, but that intensifies the problems that others are facing.

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

**Mr McCallister:** Certainly.

**Mr Swann:** The Member said that south Down was not affected this time, but I hope that he takes my point that the Department has now divided Northern Ireland into 157 tiles or geographical areas. So south Down may be a target next year — the word "target" was used by another Member — and that would intensify the problems with the supply of single farm payment in that area.

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

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful, Deputy Speaker. My point was more that we had escaped this time, but dear knows whether we will be as fortunate in the future. That is the worry. We

have been trying to sort out so many inspection issues for so long. The entire single farm payment process has been difficult.

We have had one party in charge of it now for seven years, and I have to say that the very fact that we are debating it again does not suggest that huge progress has been made in that area. You are intensifying the problems. You need to look at the various processes that are in place with our inspection model and compare them with those in other parts of Europe. Why does it seem so difficult to get some of these things right?

Every year, we talk about cutting red tape and making the application process for single farm payments easier. Quite frankly, as someone who has been in the system and looked at it from that point of view, I have not seen a lot of those changes or advances making it easier or less bureaucratic. Over the past 20 years, when we had the integrated administration and control system (IACS), which then evolved into single farm payments, we have not seen progress in making it simpler or more user-friendly. We have increased the levels of inspection and the burden that that represents, the penalties and the time lag for getting something. Even the businesses that get a clean bill of health on inspection still suffer significant delays to the payment. That is something that must be addressed.

Given her political background, the Minister obviously looks a lot to our near neighbours in the Republic. I am sure that she is aware of how they do this business. Mrs Dobson mentioned that, in the Republic, there are advance payments and staged payments that can help with cash flow problems. We do not do that and have not even looked at whether it would be desirable. I think it would be desirable, particularly for the 10% of farms that are affected. It would have a huge impact on cash flow and help prevent some people going into dire financial hardship.

We must also look at some of the issues around it. The way they handle this process in the Republic of Ireland seems to be a lot better than what happens here. So, Minister, I think we will have to —

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

**Mr McCallister:** Briefly.

**Mr Milne:** Does the Member not agree that this is just the second year of this type of inspection? We are into a new system. You

referred to Sinn Féin's seven-year Ministry. Does the Member not accept that there are always teething problems when it comes to new systems?

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful to the Member for that. I look forward to Sinn Féin Members being so understanding when it comes to things like welfare reform and glitches with that computer system. I take the point that we have changed the system, but could we not get some of these things in order? I accept that it is only the second year, but this is causing severe financial hardship in limited, tight geographical areas. My point is that, when you apply this and look at comparisons from across the border, they suggest that Sinn Féin's goal of an Ireland of equals does not exactly apply to farmers.

**Mr Allister:** If there is one sector in our economy that is absolutely vital, it has to be the farming agriculture sector. It produces much of the food that all of us eat, and yet it is the sector that is probably the most regulated of all. Indeed, it is over-regulated and is constantly burdened with endless inspection and regulation. This episode is, in itself, an illustration of that.

As I understand the situation, from last May, the Department had the satellite images. It then embarked on aerial photography during the summer and then what did it do? What has it been doing since? We arrive at December with notification, when farmers are expecting their payment, but the Christmas message that they get from the Department — the supposed champion of farming — is very different. It is this: you are not getting your payment.

**6.15 pm**

Why did the Department hold off? It held off quite deliberately and consciously to stem a tide of protest and complaint, including MLAs and others campaigning on behalf of the farmers for the matter to be expedited. The Department said, in effect, "Don't tell anyone; we'll just bounce them. Come December, we're not going to make the payment". It was not because the Department was trying to prevent some cover-up by farmers of what the actuality was on their farms. It is not that sort of situation. It is aerial-type inspection. Quite a cynical hand has been at play in the Department in that regard.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. As we sit here tonight, how many field inspections that are now being resorted to are

still outstanding? She has told us that she expects the payments to be made mostly in February. Here we are past the halfway point in February; can she tell us how many field inspections are still outstanding? That will help us to judge whether the indication that the payments will be made will be met.

Can she give the House an assurance that the areas selected this year for random aerial inspection will not be selected in the coming year? Will they be exempt by virtue of the fact that they have been inspected this year, or could we face the scenario in which the same farmers will be subject to the double whammy of another such inspection next year? There are so many different areas, so there is nothing to be lost by giving an undertaking that those areas will be exempt from future inspections.

This whole episode amounts to another indictment of a failing Department. Under EU rules, it is allowed to make advance payments as early as October. However, it has not put in place anything to allow that to happen, so we are still restrained to December. Then, come December, a large number of families received that Christmas box from the Minister. The Minister presents herself as a friend of the farming community, but she presides over a Department that seems to excel in placing obstacles in the way of success for the farming community and starving it of funds. The single farm payment is not a luxury or an extra that farmers happen to get; it is the lifeblood for many of them. It was how many of them were going to pay their bills in December.

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

**Mr Allister:** Not only was it going to pay for Christmas, it was going to pay their suppliers as well. What does the Minister do? With a sweep of her hand she says, "You won't be getting it. We didn't bother telling you. Why would you need to know? You're only the supplier".

**Mr McMullan:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask you to rule on a comment by the Member for North Antrim. He implied that there was some kind of cynical move in the Department on the payments method. I ask for Hansard to reveal what was said and for you to rule on it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I think that it was all part of the cut and thrust of debate rather than a specific attack on an individual.

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate on remote sensing, as it is still a relatively new method of inspection for the Department. However — I will address the reasons why I say this — it has already proved itself a key instrument for the early completion of inspections and a mechanism to speed up payments to farmers. That is something that the House debates quite regularly.

Right at the outset, I want to register two key points. First, that the use of control with remote sensing this year has been a success and, secondly, that we are in the process of learning a great deal from its deployment in 2013. Part of that learning relates to the subject of the motion, and, despite the critical tone that some have chosen to take, I do not think that we should lose sight of the fact that remote sensing has improved things and that the context of where we are now has greatly improved compared with two years ago.

There are those who are talking about crisis. I do not accept that there is a crisis. I would have thought that a seasoned politician, such as the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, would have been able to recognise a crisis closer to home, maybe on his own Benches, quicker than he has recognised the crisis in this Department, because there is no crisis.

**Lord Morrow:** Like what?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There is no crisis.

I want to set the context, and I think that it is very important that we do that. There have been massive improvements. Even take 2011: it took until August to complete inspection cases. In 2012, we brought that back to June and, in 2013, we brought that back to April. Those are positive improvements, and we should not forget that things are changing and improving all the time.

Let me, therefore, set the motion in context by listing the benefits so that Members are clear about what has been achieved. First, as I said, we have paid many more farmers more quickly this year than ever before. I can confirm that not only did we have a record payment outcome in December but we have achieved a challenging payment target for overall payments in February. We have paid inspection cases faster this year than ever before, and I can confirm that the target to pay the majority of inspection cases in February has

also been met. Hundreds of farmers who have been subject to an inspection and who, in other years, would not have had a payment at this point will have a payment in February. That includes hundreds of traditional inspections and hundreds of remote sensing inspections. I will return to the figures in more detail shortly.

Good communication with farmers is most important, including on the issue of inspections, but I must ensure that Members understand that I am constrained somewhat in that communication by the requirement to have an effective control system in place. So I will turn first to the regulatory context for scheme controls, before turning to the equally important issue of communicating well with farmers.

My Department is obliged to carry out inspections because, under EU regulations, a single farm payment cannot be made to a farm business until verification of eligibility conditions has been finalised. In 2013, my Department received over 37,500 claims for single farm payment. Commission regulations require a minimum of 5% inspections or on-the-spot checks to be carried out, which meant that 2,129 claims were selected for inspection in 2013. The data from those inspections is used by the European Commission to make assessments about the overall control framework. In other words, if significant errors are found in the random inspections in particular, the Commission will come to the conclusion that the same level of error is occurring throughout the entire population of farmers.

As Members will be aware, in 2012 my Department used remote sensing technology in the North for the first time, and 250 claims were selected for inspection. In 2013, as we recognised the benefits of that approach, we significantly increased the number of cases examined in this way and began the process of bedding the process into our systems. This meant that we undertook 1,139 checks using control with remote sensing techniques in 2013, with the remaining 990 cases subject to classic on-farm inspections.

Remote sensing is a tried and tested methodology in the majority of EU member states — I think Members have picked up on that point — and is promoted by the European Commission's joint research council to provide accurate and reliable land eligibility determinations. It involves the careful examination of a satellite image or aerial photograph. That information is compared with the area declared on the single application form. The satellite imagery and aerial

photographs were taken in May 2013 and provided an accurate record of the conditions on the ground. In a number of cases, an on-farm rapid field visit may be required if an accurate determination of the eligible area cannot be made.

There are strict regulatory limitations on what the Department can tell farmers about inspection controls in advance and, indeed, the Department is empowered to carry out an on-the-spot land eligibility check, with or without prior notice, at any time. However, provided that the purpose of the control is not jeopardised, an on-the-spot check may be announced in advance, and I would want that to be so. The announcement is strictly limited to the minimum period necessary and, according to EU regulations, shall not exceed 14 days. To avoid the check being compromised, DARD usually advises of an on-farm visit 48 hours in advance. This applies whether the on-farm visit is part of a remote inspection or a traditional inspection.

In 2013, farmers who received either a classical field inspection or a remote sensing rapid field visit, where we had to access the farmer's land, were contacted by an inspector to make arrangements for the visit. Those farmers were, therefore, aware that their claim had been selected for inspection and, as a result, their payment was likely to be made later in the payment window that runs from December to June. The control images for remote sensing were recorded in May 2013, but it would not have been possible to inform farmers of that part of the process in advance without compromising the control. That will remain the case in future years. If the Department were to inform farmers of that aspect of the control at that stage in the year, the Commission would undoubtedly consider the rapid field visits to have been compromised.

Considerable work was needed to build and refine our protocols and IT systems in 2013 to introduce a new mapping system and make sure that other parts of the system connected effectively to the new control. The work is now substantially done, many rapid field visits are completed and payments are flowing to those farmers who were affected.

Although the guidance that accompanied the 2013 single application form advised that farmers would not receive notification of a remote sensing check, my Department considered industry feedback from 2012. In response, we considered that it would be helpful to notify all farmers if their business was

selected for a remote sensing check, and letters to that end were issued to them in December.

There has recently been significant criticism of the timing of the letters and assertions that, for example, they should have been issued before the satellite photographs were taken. I share the concerns that were expressed but cannot contemplate such an early communication about an inspection, as that would not be acceptable to the Commission.

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** Let me finish this point. Having reviewed carefully the arrangements that were in place, my view is that, although farmers could not have been told at that point that they were subject to an inspection, we could, with hindsight, have aligned a letter to affected farmers with the timing of the determined areas notifications to other farmers. We are talking about an improvement of possibly 10 days, which would have been the difference.

Although some do not agree, there were advantages for farmers in a late notification. It meant that in a year in which new LPIS data had to be introduced to the claim forms and there was therefore considerable scope for error, farmers had the maximum time to make amendments to their claims without penalty if they encountered an error later on. However, it is clear that the impact on cash flow has been the overriding concern in recent weeks, and I want the Assembly to know that the Department has listened to the concerns expressed and understands them.

There is a related issue to do with the impact of using two zones for remote sensing. The selection process was carried out in accordance with the technical guidelines issued by the Commission. Although the Commission provides the satellite imagery for remote sensing checks, each member state is responsible for identifying the areas for inspection, known as control zones. Using random selection, those were identified: one in the east, mainly in County Antrim; and one in the west, in County Tyrone and the Clogher valley area.

Although it may seem unfair that there is a concentration of remote sensing checks in two geographical areas, and I recognise the impact that that has on rural communities, I reassure Members that the claims inspected by remote sensing were selected strictly according to EU guidelines. Nevertheless, there has been learning on the issue of zones. I am conscious of the significant localised impact that the use of

two zones had on the areas affected and am determined to address the issue in 2014. I envisage even faster payment of inspection cases in 2014, so hopefully the cash flow challenge and related communication issue will not arise in the way in which it did this year.

I will now deal with the specifics of the progress that we have made through the use of remote sensing and other work to accelerate payments. I indicated that the use of control with remote sensing has contributed significantly to helping DARD to make faster payments in 2013, a scheme year in which there was major change to systems as a result of the introduction of a new mapping control. In response to the high standard required by the Commission, we used our experience from 2012 to build new, robust systems with increased automation to improve scheme controls. Given the Commission's requirement that payments could not be released until all controls were finalised, the Department would most certainly not have been able to pay so many farmers so quickly had only traditional inspections in the field been used this year. I cannot imagine that a single Member would argue for a return to a slower inspection process.

A key achievement was that 90% of 2013 single farm payments were finalised in December 2013, totalling £232.5 million. That was a massive increase on the previous year, when approximately 83% of 2012 claims were paid, amounting to £184.1 million. As of today, 96.16% of claims have been finalised, including 400 claims from the remote sensing inspection process, totalling £255.92 million.

So, we have absolutely already exceeded our payment target of 95% for February 2014, with 96.16% of cases being paid.

### 6.30 pm

Payment of inspection cases began substantially in January, a few weeks later than non-inspected cases. The aim was to ensure that remote sensing cases were initiated in January or February at the latest. That has been achieved. Every effort is being made to finalise the remaining claims as early as is practicable, but, as I said, we have already achieved the target to have a majority of inspections paid by the end of February. I remain confident that any remaining cases will be paid by the end of April 2014 at the latest. That is two months ahead of the 2012 payment timeline and four months ahead of the 2011 timeline. From the most recent data, made available to me this morning, I can see that

1,340 inspection cases have been paid, 400 of which used remote sensing.

My priority has been to speed up the processing of the tail of inspection cases that occur every year. That has been substantially achieved. That is very significant in the context of the massive change programme that I have had to introduce in response to disallowance and in the context of the major work that is under way to prepare for CAP reform. It has involved a great deal of hard work on the part of staff across a range of disciplines, including IT, inspection services and general administration, and I am grateful to them for making it possible.

Looking ahead, I can say that we are already putting systems in place for the controls on 2014 claims. Depending on a satisfactory overall delivery of the 2013 programme — as I said, the learning is continuing — I intend to further increase the number of checks that are carried out by remote sensing for 2014 claims.

We have started working on the random selection of zones so that claims for verifiability checks can be selected at the earliest possible opportunity following the closing date for the single application form. That will mean that remote sensing, on-the-spot controls will begin earlier, and, as a result, farm businesses will receive earlier notification of the outcome of the check or of the rapid field visit, if one is required.

With the improvement in IT systems and the planned earlier start in inspections, I do not foresee the same concerns about communications arising in 2014. Farmers who have been subject to an inspection will be made aware of that in advance of their single farm payment. However, that will be done within the regulatory constraints that surround the advance notification of on-the-spot controls.

Although I welcome Members' comments, I think that you have to keep putting this in context. I clearly set it out, so I do not need to rehearse it. However, of 37,500 claims, 96.16% have been paid. Members cannot have it both ways: on the one hand, you are asking for things to be speeded up to get payments out, which I have delivered, but, on the other hand, you are quick to come to the Chamber to criticise. We have to put it in context.

I have always said this, but I absolutely accept the difficulty and stress that there will be if you are in the small percentage of people who are waiting for their claims to be processed. I assure farmers that I am doing everything that I

can. I think that there is a proven track record in that: we have improved things year-on-year, and we will continue to do so. Go raibh mile maith agaibh.

**Mr Buchanan:** The single farm payment has been debated on numerous occasions in the House. That the issue is before the House again is an indictment of the Minister.

The single farm payment, as we all know, is a vital part of the income that is associated with many farm businesses. Indeed, last year, 87% of the total farm income came from single farm payments. That is why it is so important that the farming community is kept fully informed of any changes that have the potential to impact on any delays in that payment process.

However, 1,139 farm businesses were subject to remote sensing in 2013 without due notification, which has placed many of them in financial difficulty. In normal circumstances, a farm business is selected for inspection, and the farmer will be aware of that. Rather than receiving his payment in December, he will know that it is likely to be delayed for anything up to six months, giving him the opportunity to make financial preparations with his bank and suppliers for the delay.

The Department's failure to notify all the farm businesses that were subject to remote sensing inspections on their land has placed those businesses in crippling financial circumstances. That happened simply because a number of farm businesses were not notified in due time that they would be part of a remote sensing exercise. Although we are not here today to hammer remote sensing, if it can do anything to speed up the single farm payment inspection process, then the Department must step up to the mark in processing these inspections.

The Minister, in response to a letter to her last year requesting details of when images for the remote sensing were taken, confirmed, as mentioned today, that they were taken between May and August 2013, yet they were not being processed until six months later, in February. When I contacted Orchard House again today regarding constituents who were in contact with my office, I was advised that they received the applications only in the past week. Six months or more have passed since the images were taken and the Department seems to have had real difficulty in assessing the applications. Such delays are totally unacceptable and cause much frustration and anger among the farming community who have been subject to them.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for giving way, and I want to correct a point he made: he said that nothing was happening. I failed to address it in the debate, but I think that the Chairperson of the Committee raised the fact that the aerial photographs were taken and sat on a desk where nobody touched them or did anything with those cases. That is absolutely not the fact. Rapid field visits started immediately after the photographs were completed and that went on, and has done, right through the whole process. Let us be very clear: there were no applications sitting on a desk with nothing happening. Claims were processed continually.

**Mr Buchanan:** Despite that, we are standing here today with £25 million outstanding that has not been paid to the farming community. People are in dire straits; people need that money, and people are waiting for the postman coming every day to see whether the cheque is in the post. They are still waiting. Despite all that the Minister might say has been done and all the targets that have been met, we still have this crisis in the farming industry.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way. The Minister can say that if she likes, but the fact is that one of the reasons why the remote sensing inspections were not able to be completed was because the technology was not in place to process them. DARD had no choice but to let applications pile up and sit there. If the rapid field inspections were completed before December, then why, from 13 February, were only 440 single farm payments given out to the ones who had been the subject of remote sensing inspections?

**Mr Buchanan:** My colleague makes a good point. Again, that is something that the Minister failed to answer in her response.

To turn to issues raised by Members in the debate, the proposer of the motion spoke of remote sensing and how it should speed up farm inspections. He said that, despite that, the Department is not fit for purpose when dealing with these inspections, and rightly so. If the computer system is not in place as it should be, then we have a huge problem where the Department is not up to speed in dealing with the applications. Farmers were only being notified in late December that they had been the subject of an inspection. Again, I ask why it has taken so long to assess the images that were taken between May and August? Of course, it is causing massive financial impact on the farming community and I would like the Minister to take that into account. She may well quote figures and percentages, but let us

remember that there is still £25 million outstanding and that is having a massive impact on the farming community.

Ian Milne said that we were moving towards having a perfect system and that more farmers have been paid than ever before. Again, he failed to mention that there is still £25 million outstanding and that there are still farmers struggling to survive until they get their single farm payments.

Joe Byrne spoke of the delays faced by those in farming businesses and said that it was intolerable. When remote sensing was introduced, DARD committed itself to notifying farmers and swiftly assessing applications.

Yet, as we stand here today, we see no evidence that the Department has moved swiftly to bring those assessments to a close.

The Minister must recognise her failure of the farming community in leaving these farmers to suffer financial consequences. That is the message that must go out from the House today. The Minister must recognise the financial consequences that this is having for the farming community. It appears that she is detached from the farming community. In her speech, she said that she does not accept that there is a crisis in the farming community. Listen to all the Members around the Chamber who are in touch with the farming community. Farmers are coming to them and pleading to get the process moved on so that they might get their single farm payment, yet the Minister seems to think that there is no crisis at all in the farming community. That speaks volumes about how detached the Minister is.

William Irwin highlighted the fact that farmers are continually frustrated, year on year, as complications with the system increase. Farmers are relying heavily on the single farm payment because of other difficulties associated with the industry, yet they are continually let down. Let down by whom? They are being let down by a Department and a Minister who are not able to move the single farm payment forward in time for farmers.

Oliver McMullan quoted figures and percentages of all the single farm payment claims that are being dealt with and paid. What he failed to point out is that a number of farm businesses are being hung out to dry and placed in crippling circumstances because they cannot get their single farm payment. He said that we cannot get it all right in one year. We ask this question: why not? In an age of so

much computer technology, why can we not get it right in one year?

Lord Morrow spoke about how regrettable it is that the debate had to take place. He spoke of the Minister's failure to come to the House with a statement to make Members aware of the crisis. He highlighted that £25 million is still outstanding. We have to get the message across to the Minister that £25 million is still outstanding. Those farmers are still waiting for it. The situation is bordering on a crisis. Lord Morrow spoke of farmers in his constituency who are —

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

**Mr Buchanan:** — pleading for payments as they struggle to keep going. I would like to say more, but I trust that the Minister will get the message today that there are farmers out there who are struggling and —

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

**Mr Buchanan:** — waiting for their payment. I trust that she will take action to ensure that those farmers get their payment.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly expresses dissatisfaction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for its failure to effectively inform the 1,139 farm businesses that received a remote sensing inspection in 2013; notes that the farmers only received notification days before they were expecting their single farm payment and recognises that this will place many farm businesses under incredible pressure in the coming months; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain how this happened and give assurances that she has put in place measures that will prevent it happening again.*

**Mr Ó hOisín:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. During the debate, Mr Morrow referred to a figure of £25 million; it is actually more likely to be around £10 million or £11 million. He followed that by saying that he thinks that that is considerable but that Sinn Féin obviously does not think that it is considerable, and we all know:

*"the way in which it operates".*

Given that Sinn Féin, unlike others, publishes its annual accounts, will you make a ruling on that, a LeasCheann Comhairle?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has made his point. We will move on.

*Adjourned at 6.44 pm.*







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