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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 24 February 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Financial Provisions Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: We come to the Further Consideration Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill. I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton, to move the Bill.

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

Mr Speaker: One amendment has been tabled. Members will have received a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments, which provides details of the amendment and the grouping list. The single debate will be on amendment No 1, which requires the Department to conduct a review of regulations under article 31C of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, and to lay a report before the Assembly by 31 October 2014.

New Clause

Mr Speaker: We now come to the single amendment for debate.

Mr McKay: I beg to move the following amendment: After clause 7 insert

"Review of regulations under Article 31C of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977

7A. The Department shall by the 31st October 2014 review and lay a report before the Assembly on the application of regulations under Article 31C of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977."— *[Mr McKay.]*

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The amendment that we move this afternoon is pretty straightforward. It is pretty much an open amendment, and, hopefully, we will get the agreement of the House to adopt it later today.

The amendment is in relation to a review of regulations relating to the small business rate relief scheme, and we are seeking a commitment from the Department to hold the review and to lay a report before the Assembly by 31 October of this year.

The small business rate relief scheme commenced in April 2010 and has been in operation for some four years. There have been some changes to it in that time — for example, the extension to properties with a net annual value (NAV) of up to £15,000. It has been welcomed by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in particular and by many shops in our town centres, and around 25,000 properties currently benefit from it. Its purpose was to support growth and sustainability, and that is especially important given the economic context that businesses have faced and continue to face today.

Town centres and the businesses in them that are now dealing with a changed market are close to the hearts of many public representatives. They are dealing with consumers whose needs have changed and what they want in terms of service. There are new types of competition, the Internet being an obvious one. So, retail has had to face a completely different, utterly changed landscape in town centres.

The Department said that, in 2014, it would look at town centre rejuvenation, and that should be one of the review's priorities. It is important that the right balance is struck with town centre rating as businesses will, of course, have new bills in just over 13 months' time, based on the revaluation of all commercial property. The Assembly debated town centres in October last year. The Alliance Party and Mrs Cochrane, a Member for East Belfast, tabled a motion on the pressures that retail businesses in town centres are under. There continues to be a debate about the future of town centres. That future depends on the policies that we adopt, especially in areas such as rating.

DFP officials indicated to the Finance Committee that, in 2014, the Department will be able to marry the assessment of the impact of revaluation to the continuation of the scheme. There is no doubt that the small business rate relief scheme has been a success for the many businesses that benefited from it. However, a small number of businesses have large premises and low turnover, and, to some of those, it seems unfair. A recent and obvious example of that is indoor go-karting facilities, to which my party colleague will refer later. Those businesses need facilities with a large square footage, but their turnover is small by comparison with many similar-sized properties, particularly large retail stores. Such facilities are dotted throughout many constituencies. I know of one in North Antrim, and there are facilities in East Antrim, Bangor, Derry and Newry. Many of the businesses face large rate bills because of the size of their property, but their turnover is much smaller compared with businesses that have a similar square footage.

The amendment proposes a review. We have deliberately kept the wording of the amendment open, simple and straight to the point in order to get the support of the House. We suggest that the review urgently looks at anomalies such as those I mentioned, as some of those businesses will struggle to sustain themselves, even over the next number of months, never mind into 2015.

As I said, the amendment is quite simple and straight to the point. The issue is urgent for the many businesses that do not qualify for the small business rate relief scheme at present. We are open-minded as to how the review should be taken forward, and many difficult decisions will have to be made. Obviously, we cannot keep all businesses happy all the time, but I feel that now is the time for a review. There is commitment for a review to be carried out in 2014. We believe that it should be carried out and a report laid before the Assembly by 31 October this year. A Cheann Comhairle, I look forward to the debate.

Mr Girvan: I will speak against the amendment. I am not against trying to help small businesses, and I am not trying to create a problem for them. Far be it from us to try to stop our town centres from regenerating.

I appreciate that reductions have been made since 2010, when property with a rateable value of £5,000 could avail itself of a 20% reduction. That was increased to a £10,000 rateable valuation, and lately it has gone up to £15,000. As a consequence, up to 25,000 small

businesses have been able to avail themselves of that 20% reduction.

There is flexibility in the Bill to allow the Minister to change the percentage to an amount that could be allocated to specific businesses, and there is a commitment in the Programme for Government to look at this issue. The Minister has already given a commitment to conduct a review of the policy and its operation. As such, I do not see the need for legislative control.

Our town centres seem to have been taken over to a large degree by charity shops, which have availed themselves of many key retail sites and do not pay any rates on any of those properties. We need to look at how we can encourage retail back into town centres and stop them being taken over by charity shops and the like. We need to look at those issues as a way forward and as part of the review that the Minister has already said will happen.

I also have concerns about big businesses that have large land takes but do not necessarily have the turnover. That should and will be considered, but I wonder exactly where Sinn Féin was coming from on this and whether it had identified a specific sector on which it wanted to focus. I am happy enough for that to be answered in the winding-up speech.

People involved in karting were mentioned. I have more than a side interest in motor sport and understand that businesses of that kind cannot always make a lot of money. Other flexibilities can be taken into account in the review, such as the flexibility of the Minister, which was included in the Bill at Consideration Stage, to allow an amount to be allocated to such businesses.

The Bill, as it is, meets those requirements, and I speak against the amendment. We have the bones of a review already in place, and I ask the Minister to expedite that.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú. I support the amendment, which requires a review of the Order and a report to be laid before the Assembly by 31 October 2014. I do not consider the amendment controversial in any way, largely because we already had an undertaking from the previous Finance Minister that there would be a review. That has been echoed by the present Minister. We are all in agreement that there needs to be a review, and, for that reason, I cannot see why anyone would object to the amendment.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Yes.

Mr Wilson: The Member and the proposer of the amendment have accepted that a review has already been agreed by me and the current Minister. Why, then, is an amendment necessary? Is it because the Member does not believe that such a review will take place? Does he doubt the sincerity of the Minister, or was it simply a case of tabling an amendment of some sort?

12.15 pm

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for the intervention. He should know by now that I take every word that comes out of his mouth as truth and would not dare, under any circumstances, to contradict him. However, it is always reassuring to have what is said underlined, and underlined in legislation. To have such an amendment included would add to the accountability that we have in the House. I think that we all realise that a number of anomalies have arisen from the Order. One is that there are businesses that have large premises but relatively small turnovers. Those are not captured by the scheme.

The Committee Chairman referred to the leisure business of karting. Mr Brady and I have such a facility in our constituency, in Greenbank in Newry. At a time of recession, there is less money in circulation for the leisure activities provided by such businesses. They feel the pinch and could benefit from the type of rate relief that the scheme affords. Under those circumstances, it is appropriate to support the amendment. My party certainly does, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Cree: I am also surprised that the amendment was tabled at Further Consideration Stage. Members have referred to the fact that we have a guarantee from the Minister, which, I am sure, is 100% guaranteed.

The other thing that leaves me with some confusion is why the amendment gives a tight time frame. Perhaps its proposer will deal with that when he comes to make his winding-up speech. Why is there a short time frame, when perhaps all the information may not be available by then?

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: Yes, certainly.

Mr Wilson: The Member makes a very important point, especially because it has been suggested that one of the reasons for the review is that some businesses have a low turnover to large space ratio. There is an issue with how you accurately measure that turnover and how you distinguish between one type of business that is rated on the rateable value and one that is rated on the turnover. All those things cannot be easily worked out. Does the Member accept that to set down a timetable, which the Minister may or may not be capable of meeting, and put it in the Bill is simply ludicrous?

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for his intervention and his wisdom. Obviously, we are of the same mind, but we need to know that. I am sure that —

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. To go back to what the former Minister said, businesses have been waiting for years to get a review, so I presume that a lot of the work will have been done by now.

On the matter of the tight time frame, as it was referred to, I spoke to staff in the Department, who said that having until 31 October is quite a reasonable time frame for it to carry out the work. It is now February, and I am quite confident that the Department is capable of carrying out a review between now and October and getting a report before the Assembly before many more businesses go to the wall.

Mr Cree: I thank the Chair for that, but I remain unconvinced that we would have all the information collected in the time frame. It is important to do it right, and I am sure that the Member agrees. At this point, I will keep my powder dry, listen to the debate and decide at the end.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: The different perspectives that people are developing on this issue are interesting. Perhaps there is a danger that we could talk ourselves into unnecessary conflict. That was illustrated perfectly by Paul Girvan's contribution. That is because, in many ways, his argument was not against the amendment, and nor should it have been. Whoever the incumbent Minister is — we are talking about Simon Hamilton, in whose judgement and pragmatism I, at least, have a lot of faith — this reinforces that there will be anomalies. Those were described, and we have possibly not fully described them.

I think that there is a need for our Minister of Finance to have the ability to respond to those

circumstances, because not only are there anomalies in the business structure of individual projects but variants can occur with economic downturns and upturns in the economy. So, different decisions might need to be made in different circumstances. However, if this Minister or any future Minister were dealing with an issue such as that which has been presented for consideration here today, it seems only right that they should have the tools in the toolbox to respond and to come back to the Assembly at a particular point to set out the reasons for their decision. So, if the Minister decides against it or decides to take action, in either circumstance, it would be included in his report back. It seems to me that that is a common-sense approach, and I hope that Leslie's party will reflect on that. We are not asking the Minister to do anything ultra vires, and we are certainly not looking to spend the entire Assembly Budget; we are talking about trying to help businesses that are under genuine pressure. If the business structure, for instance, is a large space with a small turnover and is particularly vulnerable, why would we not try to respond to help that business and that service to continue?

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. There are two issues here. What he has been discussing, or what he has been alluding to, is the outcome of the review. However, this amendment is about the timing of the review. If his colleague accepts that assurances have been given that this can be done by October, and the Minister has given an assurance that all additional resources that we put are to having the review completed, why is there a necessity for the amendment, other than that, despite the sweet words about the Minister, he does not actually believe the assurance that has been given?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I will repeat those words, and I am quite happy to. I think that we are dealing with a Minister who listens and responds, and I have worked with him long enough to know that that is the case. I do not really need to labour that particular point, because the track record is there, but I am indicating that there are circumstances in which the Minister might wish to respond before October. There may be circumstances in which he is not bound by a review that will be comprehensive and that will look at the profile of our economy and the businesses that already exist. That is because some of those businesses may not be there in October. I think that our amendment allows the Minister to go with the assurance and the authority to act in our name in the interim, if those circumstances require it. I am not even making the case that

that is a dire and essential requirement here, but it is a possibility, and who could deny it?

The particular circumstances that have been described by the presenter of the proposal in Newry and that were referred to again and explained by Dominic were brought to my attention as well in a more localised context. They had not occurred to me, but if our Minister had the ability to do something about it, am I going to say, "We will wait until October"? That is because the business may not be there to avail itself of it, so I ask —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: If you want in before I sit down, I will give way.

Mr Wilson: I asked the Member to give way again, because I am finding it hard to follow the logic of what he is saying. All that the amendment is saying is not that the Minister will take action but that he will lay a report before the Assembly by 31 October 2014. So, if the logic behind this is to allow the Minister to act more quickly to resolve businesses' problems, the amendment will not do that.

All the Minister can do is bring a report, which will then have to be acted on and, presumably, put into legislation by the Assembly later on.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I will respond directly to that in my closing comment.

The Minister could act now, but, if we have a scheduled period for review and reporting to the Assembly, each decision can be examined in its context, along with the rationale for it, and it can be criticised or supported. We are arguing that we have already developed a fairly comprehensive, and, in some case, very creative and inventive, support for local business. This is another one. There is no dark cloud suggesting that this could do untold damage and would set precedents all over the place. That is not the case. We have specific circumstances and we can respond with support or by saying, "I have looked at it and have decided not to intervene"; and then we can move on. That will then be discussed at the appropriate time.

People should relax and think about this in the context of whether there is something, in addition to what we are doing already, that would support, particularly the survival of, existing enterprises in our economy. We should give that careful consideration.

Mr Hamilton: So far, the debate has been livelier than I expected and livelier than it perhaps should have been. I oppose the amendment, and I do so, potentially harming the reputation I have developed for being open and listening. It is gone now. Maybe that is no bad thing. I want to explain as carefully as I can and pick up some of the points raised by Members.

At the outset, and fundamental in responding from a position of opposition to the amendment, I want to make it absolutely clear that an evaluation of the small business rate relief scheme will be undertaken by my Department later this year. That intention has been made clear for some time. It has been made clear by my predecessor and by me in the House and elsewhere. The very clear stated position of two successive Ministers of Finance and Personnel representing the Department has been that an evaluation will be carried out because one needs to be carried out at that stage in the life of the small business rate relief scheme.

I accept the comments made by various Members that it has been an incredibly successful scheme. It has been extended on two occasions, to the point where over half of all businesses in Northern Ireland are getting at least 20% off their rates bill. We all agree that it has been successful, but it has a predetermined shelf life. Even though it was expanded to take in other ratepayers, it was always due to run out at the end of the next financial rating year. That was because it was introduced as a recessionary measure and the hope was, and the reality now is, that the recession would be over by that time. However, we wanted to evaluate and examine the effectiveness of the policy, as anybody would understandably and rightly do with a policy that had a short-term existence, to see whether there was a need for it to continue or to be tweaked.

Members should also be aware that, as Mr Girvan pointed out, the commitment has already been established as a milestone target in the Executive's Programme for Government. I therefore have no difficulty in making the commitment that Members seek, which is to review the small business rate relief scheme. However, I oppose the legislative changes laid out in the proposed amendment to the Financial Provisions Bill. I see them as unnecessary additions to the statute book, and I think we should not, as a point of principle, legislate unnecessarily. I would see the difference if I, as Finance Minister, were opposed to the review. Then, maybe a timetabled review locked down in legislation would be absolutely

necessary; but given that I have reiterated today that I want, and need, a review to take place, there is clearly no opposition from me as Finance Minister.

Mr Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Wilson: Does he accept that the real constraint on him is that, since the budgetary commitment to the scheme runs out at the end of the next financial year, if he is going to extend it, modify it or put it forward in some form or other for the next Budget period, he has to have some evidential base on which to make that submission to the Executive? Therefore, whether it is in the Bill or not, there is an actual requirement on him if he wishes to continue that in any form at all.

12.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: Absolutely. Without wishing to prejudice the outcome of a review that has not happened yet — the Member will appreciate this from conversations that he and I have had in the past — I am incredibly sympathetic to the principle of supporting businesses when they are suffering. Over the next number of years, as we move into economic recovery, one of the difficult balances for us as a House and an Executive will be that there are still businesses that will struggle and need support and assistance from government in order to get through what will be, for them, a very long tail of recession and downturn while others do a lot better and perhaps do not need the same degree of support. He is absolutely right that, going into the 2015-16 Budget, if I am going to make a recommendation for a scheme that is similar to the small business rate relief scheme, at whatever quantum or extent that will be, I will have to be able to persuade Executive colleagues on the basis of evidence that the previous scheme worked and what a new or adapted scheme might look like. He is absolutely right. This is not an evaluation of it at the end of its life; it is to see genuinely whether there is a need for the scheme to continue to exist in some way or another beyond the end of the next financial year.

Members might wish to note that I have been in touch with the newly established Northern Ireland Centre for Economic Policy to ascertain how best to assess the small business rate relief scheme's effectiveness and consider the need for longer-term support measures. The reason why that work cannot be undertaken earlier is because we need to know what the

impact of revaluation will be on small businesses. We will not know that for another few months yet. That said, I will have to complete the evaluation by October at the latest, which, again, is in line with the desires of those who have proposed the amendment. I will have to do that by October at the latest in order to ensure that we have the regulations in place for whatever replaces the current scheme. So, I have no difficulty with the timescale that is laid out in the amendment.

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

Before I conclude, I want to turn to some comments that were raised during the debate because there were a few that are worth picking up. One was the reference to the specific example of indoor go-karting as a business that has a large square footage but small turnover. Having researched those various businesses, the locations of some of which were mentioned during the debate, and having looked at the outstanding rates balances of those businesses, I see that, certainly for the ones that I looked at, a total of over £600,000 of outstanding rates debt can be attributed to them. Even though Members mentioned certain businesses, I cannot go into the individual details of each one. However, it strikes me that, even if I had the power and vires right now to extend the small business rate relief scheme to those businesses, the 20% relief that they would receive would not be sufficient to eliminate the outstanding rate balances that they have on their accounts. It strikes me that many — not all, but many — of those businesses have issues beyond not being eligible for the small business rate relief scheme.

The review that I am committed to will look at the success or otherwise of the small business rate relief scheme and its future. Many of the issues that were raised, certainly by Mr McLaughlin and Mr McKay, were more about the totality of non-domestic rating rather than specifically the small business rate relief scheme. I want to put on record again my commitment to reviewing the whole business rates system post-revaluation. When the revaluation is out of the way, it will be close to 10 years since any review of non-domestic rates in Northern Ireland has taken place. It will be timely that, around nine or 10 years after the last review, we once again look at the totality of the system.

Mr McKay mentioned that he wanted to see something done before many businesses go to the wall. To reiterate Mr Wilson's points: a report will not do anything to stop any business

from going to the wall. Certainly, if I was to bring forward a report in the next week, it would not make any difference. If I brought it forward by 31 October, it would not make any difference. What could make a difference to a business is the recommendations that any report would contain, not the report itself, but the recommendations that it makes. Even if those recommendations were in place by October, as the amendment requires — as I said, I have no intention to try to meet that as a deadline — I would probably still need legislation to be in place to make a new scheme or extended scheme work. That will not be in place for a whole host of reasons, principally practical reasons, by the next rating year. So we are talking about it being 13 months from now before any measures included in any report could be put into action.

Mr Bradley again talked about businesses that have a large square footage or square metreage but a small turnover. I think that that is one of the problems that arises. It is not that I do not accept that there are issues. That is one of the issues that arises when you have a property-based tax, which is what rates are. To move away from — I appreciate that he did not argue for this — basing it on property size and move towards basing it on turnover is a fundamental change, the like of which would, I think, be incredibly difficult. I will not close my mind to any change at all, but I would want to look at the evidence. Problems such as the fluctuations that come from a local tax-based system based on turnover would be incredibly difficult to address. I ask the question that others asked about what constitutes small turnover. One business might be eligible for relief on the basis of small turnover this year, but what happens if its turnover rises next year? Do we continue the relief? If we did, there would need to be all sorts of manual interventions in the system, which can complicate things quite extensively.

Mr McLaughlin was very effusive in his praise for me. I much appreciate that. It is a very rare thing, so I will take it from whichever quarter it comes. I would like to think that I am responding to circumstances. In fact, the small business rate relief scheme, although not my responsibility, has responded, on at least two occasions, by its extensions to include, as I say, over half of all business properties in Northern Ireland. The Member talked about having the tools in place to make a change and a difference. However, I point out to him respectfully that the amendment before us does not offer any tools. It offers a timetabled review, which I am already committed to doing without the need to legislate. I again wish to

point out that the wider non-domestic rating review might be more relevant by providing better, more up-to-date and more tailored tools to address some of the problems that he talked about.

In conclusion, I oppose the amendment to the Bill. I see it as being unnecessary and inappropriate in the context of the Bill. A commitment to review is already provided for in the Programme for Government. I assure Members that my Department will meet the terms of the amendment without it having to be set out in statute. I hope that the assurances that I have given today will be sufficient to see the House reject the amendment. Thank you.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the amendment. Far be it from me to impugn the integrity of the current Minister or, indeed, his predecessor; I am sure that he will endeavour to do what he says that he will do. My colleagues laid out clearly the reasons why the amendment was put forward. The idea is to give the Minister some flexibility by making something available to him in legislative terms. I think that it was Mitchel McLaughlin who mentioned explicitly having the tools in his toolbox. I think that that is a reasonable argument for putting forward the amendment.

Paul Girvan had some sympathy for the type of business that we are talking about. I will be very parochial and give a specific example of a situation that exists in my constituency in Newry. I think that the example puts into context the difficulty that some businesses have with being rated based on size rather than turnover.

The Minister seems to oppose the amendment in principle. He seems to be not in favour of legislative change for the sake of legislative change. I think that the argument in this case is that the amendment has been put forward for very good reasons. Mr Cree may well be convinced. He is keeping his powder dry, and I hope that it stays that way. I will try not to dampen it in the process of my winding-up speech.

There are good reasons for putting forward the amendment. It does not seem unreasonable to have a particular date in mind for a review to happen and a report to be laid.

I will give the example from my constituency. The Minister talked about £600,000 in rates being owed. As I said, this puts the issue into context. A go-kart business in Newry has a turnover of approximately £350,000 net VAT,

and its rates are £39,281. Another business that is not that far away has an annual turnover of over £46 million, and its rates are £42,941. We are talking about a difference of maybe £2,500 to £3,000 maximum, and yet the turnover is just as incomparable in those terms, so that puts it into perspective. My colleagues and Mr Bradley mentioned that particular situation. It may well be that that business will go to the wall because of the amount of rates that it has to pay. The business employs people and creates opportunities for young people coming off schemes, etc, and it has won awards. Nevertheless, the amount of rates that it has to pay makes it almost impossible for it to carry on. That was one of the reasons for the amendment.

The Minister has admitted that the scheme works very well, and over 50% of business have benefited in the North as a result. However, some businesses are not benefiting from it and that is one stark example, although other businesses along the same lines are having the same problems. I have not heard anybody really putting forward a strong argument against the amendment. It seems, as you said, Minister, a matter of principle, and that you do not want to introduce legislative change for the sake of it. However, if it is good legislative change, I do not see why it should be opposed.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: Surely.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I want to pick up on something that the Minister addressed, which was the accumulation of rates arrears over time, and that is a significant issue for the Assembly when you take it right across the board. With regard to the examples before us, the point is that the current system, good as it is, has not helped those people. In fact, the accumulation of rates arrears was an indicator that those businesses were in distress, but there was no response from the system. By the time the review is over, it is quite possible that some of those business will have disappeared, not necessarily because they are facing this year's rates bill, but because of the accumulation of arrears that will be subject to court action at some stage. The Minister also has in his toolbox the ability to deal with write-offs, and we get a report each year on that. What we were attempting to put forward was that the system, good as it is, could still be tweaked and refined. The pressure that those

businesses are under is a demonstration of that need.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention. Mr McLaughlin made a very valid point, because it is an accumulative problem for many businesses. While not being too sweet about the Minister, I accept that he is open to innovation and innovative change where it can do something specific and concrete to help businesses in this situation. I do not want to be too flowery with my language, but it is an opportunity for the Minister to be innovative and look at these things in an innovative way. I do not see any reason why he should be afraid of good legislation. This is not all about a point of principle; this is about trying to save jobs and save businesses that may well go to the wall. On that note, I will finish.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 38; Noes 54.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, 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, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Mr McKay

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Budget Bill: Final Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Budget Bill [NIA 32/11-15] do now pass.

As Members will be aware, the Final Stage of the Budget Bill draws to a close the legislative process for the 2013-14 financial year. The House has engaged in robust and, at times, spirited debate on the Bill and the Supply resolutions over the past few weeks, and I do not intend to rehearse the arguments here. The past few weeks' debate has been informative, and I welcome the opportunity for Members to have their say on this important legislative process.

The Budget Bill covers the 2013-14 financial year and provides the legal authority to spend in the first few months of 2014-15. Looking at the management of public expenditure in 2013-14, we began the year with an overcommitment that we sought to manage through the monitoring rounds and the in-year monitoring process. Through the three monitoring rounds, we were able to manage down successfully that overcommitment, as well as reallocate surplus funding to key areas to support our economy and our public services. However, the process by no means draws a line under the 2013-14 financial year, and it would be remiss of me as Finance Minister if I were to give that impression to Members. Five weeks remain of the financial year, and Ministers and Committees must continue their vital work to ensure that departmental budgets are maximised using sound financial management principles, thereby ensuring that we minimise underspend and the risk of having to return unspent funding to Treasury.

1.00 pm

Ministers and Committees should also now turn their attention to 2014-15. Departments are, undoubtedly, in the latter stages of planning for the next financial year, the first few months of which this Budget Bill covers. That planning will be further complicated if we continue to delay progress on welfare reform. Should that delay run into 2014-15, we face significant reductions in our block grant from the Treasury, which will have an impact on all departmental budgets.

I want to spend a moment or two reflecting on 2013-14. This year was yet another important one for our tourism industry. Northern Ireland hosted the UK City of Culture, the World Police

and Fire Games and the G8, which brought much-needed publicity and tourism to our shores. The Titanic building received its millionth visitor in July, exceeding all expectations for that wonderful attraction.

Our local economy has begun to show determined signs of recovery, with unemployment falling, activity in various business sectors increasing, and, despite what the governor of the Bank of England may think, house prices are now rising. The Executive allocated £430 million for public expenditure in 2013-14 in the three monitoring rounds of this year. Nearly one third of the available capital departmental expenditure limits (DEL) funding was allocated to the Department for Regional Development, recognising that investing in our road and transport infrastructure is a key economic driver. Almost one third of our available resource DEL was reallocated to the Department of Health to respond to pressures in our health system.

The Executive also issued £40.9 million of financial transactions capital loans in 2013-14. That was loan funding that went directly to our private sector to deliver housing schemes and to support the University of Ulster in taking forward its relocation project. I could go on, but I hope that these things give a flavour of the different ways that the Assembly has delivered for our citizens, not to mention the delivery of ongoing routine public services on a day-to-day basis.

Moving on to 2014-15, the Assembly must ensure that public services continue to be delivered, which is what this Vote on Account legislation intends to facilitate. I look forward to hearing from Members on this important legislation.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister said, the robust and spirited debate on the Budget Bill has already happened. I am sure that most Members are saving themselves for the climate change debate this evening.

By this stage in its passage, Members will be well aware of the purpose and scope of the Budget Bill. Its aim is to provide the statutory authority for expenditure in 2013-14 as specified in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which encompasses the year's monitoring rounds. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year, until the Assembly votes on the Main Estimates for 2014-15 in early June.

I do not intend to rehearse the Committee's contribution to the debate on the Supply resolutions. As the Finance Committee recognised, the legislative stages of the Budget and financial process are cumbersome and need to be streamlined. The Committee and the Minister are concurrently considering a proposed memorandum of understanding between the Assembly and the Executive on the Budget process, which, if operated effectively, would support future streamlining of the legislative stages of the Budget and financial process, thereby expediting Assembly approval of the Executive's annual Estimates and Budget Bills.

This proposed memorandum of understanding would aim not to reduce Assembly input to the Budget but would enable it to be front-loaded to enable Committees and Members to undertake effective scrutiny and provide advice at a formative stage in the Budget-setting process and, critically, before the Executive have agreed the draft Budget. Although Budget Bills would still require Assembly approval, the proposed improvements would maximise the opportunity for the Assembly to provide constructive input, add value and influence decisions. I recently briefed the Chairpersons' liaison group on progress on the memorandum of understanding. Hopefully, the wider Assembly will have the opportunity to debate the proposal in plenary in the coming months.

As I outlined, the Committee took evidence from DFP officials on the Bill on 5 February. That marked the culmination of a scrutiny process of the 2013-14 in-year monitoring rounds at a strategic and departmental level. On the basis of that process of engagement, the Committee determined that it was content to grant accelerated passage under Standing Order 42(2). In that regard, the Committee welcomes the engagement with DFP during the quarterly monitoring rounds and on the Estimates and the Bill. It was particularly helpful for members to receive clarification on the details of the in-year technical changes to resource and capital allocations to Departments, some of which were quite significant.

The Committee raised the issue of whether to increase transparency. A final out-turn report could be laid in the Assembly in a similar format to the provisional out-turn report that the Minister provides in June or July each year. I acknowledge the Department's responsiveness to that request and welcome its willingness to provide that data to the Assembly.

Regarding the residual issues to be addressed in the weeks ahead, the Committee reiterates the importance of Departments minimising any year-end underspend to ensure that the Executive keep within the limits of the Budget exchange scheme agreed with the British Treasury. In that regard, I recommend that all statutory Committees closely monitor the forecasting and expenditure of their respective Departments during the remainder of this financial year and over the course of the next financial year.

Full and timely engagement by Departments with their respective Committees will be crucial in ensuring that all statutory Committees can fulfil their important advisory and scrutiny functions in that area. In turn, the Committee functions are exercised most effectively when they provide constructive input that adds value to the Budget considerations.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I support the Bill's passage. The Minister alluded to some of the positives we achieved in the last year, including the City of Culture, the World Police and Fire Games, jobs and inward investment. Those have been great to see. We also had investment in our infrastructure, and some moneys have been set aside to improve it, which encourages inward investment. Also, help has been given to small businesses through the continuation and extension of the small business rate relief scheme.

We are dealing with £16.6 billion of spend, and one area causing major concern is the possibility that we will not be able to spend all of that money on the delivery of services. Some of it might well have to go back to pay for the delays that the House has put on welfare reform. Potentially, we could end up with some of our block grant disappearing as a consequence. We have already heard that it is £5 million a month, and once the computer system has to be changed there could be a very big expense. That will focus our minds in the near future on ensuring that we do not lose part of our block grant. We heard the figure of up to £1 billion over the next few years, so we have to be mindful of how that could impact on what we have to deal with.

We came into this Assembly mandate with a Budget reduction of £4 billion. A Budget was set in 2011, which included that £4 billion reduction over the next number of years up to 2016. As a consequence of those reductions, a number of Departments have done very well.

It has been noted that, although Committees seem to be dealing with the business, some of them are not that interested in dealing with the budgets associated with their Departments. As a consequence, this is something that there needs to be more focus on to ensure that we get the correct and proper spend of that money and, as the man says, more bang for our buck. I want to ensure that we do not have to waste money. What has been good is not having to hand money back; that is important.

The monitoring rounds have been a very helpful and worthwhile exercise. There have been lessons learnt. Gone are the days when we were handing tens, if not hundreds, of millions of pounds back to the Exchequer. That is to the benefit of Northern Ireland, and it is good to be able to do it. It is down to good management, and it is something that we have to encourage. I appreciate that the Vote on Account is to allow us to go ahead and make some of the spend up until the Budget is approved in June. We have progressed quite well on that. Ensuring that we do not have any moneys to hand back is important.

I support the Bill's progression at Final Stage.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch díot as an deis cainte ar an Chéim Dheiridh de Bhille an Bhuiséid. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate in the debate at the Budget Bill's Final Stage.

At this time, the Assembly is not held in particularly high esteem among the general public. That is partly due to the fact that, to date, there has been a failure to reach agreement on the various issues involved in the Haass talks. That failure to reach agreement does have an impact. It has an impact on our ability to attract foreign direct investment. The failure to agree on important key legislation in the House also impacts on public spending.

At earlier stages of the budgetary process and in the various debates that go with it, I mentioned, for example, that the education and library boards and other education sectoral bodies are reporting that the reduction in their staffing levels and the moratorium on recruitment is preventing them from being able to process various capital projects that they would like to bring forward. I said that I believe that the £180 million capital programme for education is in danger because the staffing complements in those bodies are reduced to such an extent that they cannot process the various projects that they would like to bring

forward. I mentioned that earlier and do not recall the Minister responding to it.

Sometimes, when we fail to agree on important legislation in the House, we think that it is something that affects only those within the parameters of the House. However, the fact of the matter is that it has far-reaching implications outside the House. It affects the public services that we deliver and how we deliver them. It also has an impact on jobs and the economy. I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about the Education and Skills Authority Bill.

Previously, when we have had issues with Whitehall about such things as air passenger duty, we were able to muster a very strong team, including the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and others to enter into negotiation with the Treasury to get a good deal on the issue. I think that we probably did get a good deal on that issue.

1.15 pm

The same applied to the Presbyterian Mutual Society. We had top-level ministerial involvement, DETI involvement and the involvement of the Minister of Finance, and we managed to get a good deal on that issue. But when it comes to welfare reform, that is left to one Minister: the Minister for Social Development. It is potentially the biggest issue, far bigger than air passenger duty and far bigger than the Presbyterian Mutual Society, yet we leave it to one Minister to negotiate the terms with the Treasury. Why do we not have that high-powered delegation? Why do we not have the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Social Development? Why do we not have that high-powered ministerial delegation over, hammering out the best possible bargain for us here? There is still time. I think that such a powerful delegation should meet again with Lord Freud and the others to look at the bargain that we have and to get the best possible bargain. I do not believe that we have that at the moment.

One of the major impacting events last year was the announcement of the financial pact, yet there has been no mention of it throughout this budgetary process. As we all know, a pact is an agreement involving two or more parties; in this case, two: the Executive here and the Westminster Government. We never learned exactly what the terms of that pact are. They were never revealed to us. It would be interesting to know what they are. One of the elements of the investment plan was that:

"we are on course to deliver the commitment to £18 billion of capital funding over the period 2005-2017".

We all agree that we have had a commitment to the £18 billion in capital funding, and we have had it for many years, but can we now move on to delivery? Can the Minister say whether anything has changed to give him the confidence to believe that we will get that £18 billion? I have heard no reference to it to date.

Can the Executive, in conjunction with the Westminster Government, devise any specific legislative plans to unlock the financial benefits of Belfast port? As I remember, that was one of the elements of the financial pact. We need to be sure that there is something in that pact for Northern Ireland and that it is not merely sleight of hand to create the illusion of action on the economy when, in fact, nothing may have changed. I am interested to hear from the Minister how he sees that financial pact having impacted on this Budget, hopefully, in a positive way.

During the course of these debates, several Members referred to the reform of the financial process. We remember that a report was published some years ago by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants on parliamentary financial scrutiny in times of austerity.

That report compared the levels and quality of financial scrutiny across different countries and jurisdictions. The report noted:

"The outdated 'estimates supply votes' process that exists in Westminster-style systems is a key barrier to effective parliamentary scrutiny of the budget and financial reports. In countries using the Westminster model of government, parliaments cannot realistically amend spending proposals, and many are barred from substituting a budget of their own. Instead, they are confined to assenting to spending proposals that are put to them ... The focus of financial scrutiny needs to be re-aligned with the budget, spending plans and resource accounts, but this will require significant structural and cultural reform."

In one of my earlier speeches, I outlined the proposals that arose from the Committee's inquiry into the financial process. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to hear that I am not going to reiterate those today. However, I asked the Minister how much of it he can go

ahead with, in light of the fact that the Education Minister is not cooperating with his plans to reform the financial process. Will he continue to press on to introduce as many of those reforms as possible?

In various speeches during this budgetary process, I have outlined the SDLP's position on a number of matters. Colleagues will make a contribution later in the debate. Ach don bhomaite tá mo sháith ráite agam, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, agus fágfaidh mé aige sin é. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will leave it at that.

Mr Cree: I support the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. As has been highlighted, it provides a statutory authority for expenditure in 2013-14. Two weeks ago, we approved the spring Supplementary Estimates, which covered the monitoring rounds, and the Vote on Account, which permits public expenditure in the early part of the next financial year. The Main Estimates for 2014-15 will be considered and decided by the Assembly in June. We will then be entering the final year of the four-year mandate. As I have said before, it is crucial that the Executive ensure that all Departments engage fully with their respective Committees by providing adequate information in time for scrutiny.

Mr Bradley referred briefly to the review of the financial process. I make no apology for raising it again. It was intended to provide clarity to make such engagement meaningful. I ask the Minister, again, whether he expects the Executive to agree and implement the improvements in time for the Main Estimates. The current system is ineffective and does not show transparency or direct read-across. Moreover, Ministers must make every effort to ensure that departmental budgets are adhered to and that underspend is capped to an absolute minimum. We have to avoid the risk of having to return any unspent funding to the Treasury. The Minister said that such an occurrence would be extremely difficult to explain to the taxpayers as we work through one of the tightest Budgets in recent years. It remains so.

Another concern that I have is that the Departments may well have failed to make the efficiency savings that they announced. The Minister is well aware of the Audit Office report, and I would appreciate any comments that he is able to make on the situation and how it will have a direct effect on the Budget figures. We need to up our game and illustrate delivery during the incoming year. The Estimates in June will be a critical time in defining the

success or otherwise of this government. We will be judged on that. We need to illustrate the achievements against the Programme for Government, and it is crucial that all the financial targets be achieved and all savings be made. We also need clarity on all spending in all Departments and on credit balances, which have yet to be applied. In the hope that this will happen, I will support the Final Stage of the Bill on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. As we heard from other Members, the Budget Bill provides statutory authority for expenditure as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14. The discussions that we had during earlier consideration of the Bill have covered all the ground required in the debate. The systems that we have developed and implemented together are working quite effectively, and are being worked effectively. In the earlier stages of the Bill, I referred to the fact that a number of significant allocations and easements have been made over the three monitoring rounds. I drew particular attention to the hardship scheme and the funding that has been directed to assist farmers through DARD, which shows how we can target resources effectively and efficiently. That said, we can always focus on further enhancement and learn from improved practice to date.

The A5 remains a challenge, and, on moving forward, we must consider how we can progress this much-needed infrastructure. This significant project, which will strengthen our economy, must come to fruition. We must pay particular attention to building the infrastructure that supports our local economy and enhances our ability to channel the potential of the island economy, which generates £2.3 billion for the island and provides a larger return to our local economy.

We must also ensure that we get the maximum return for our budgets within the provisions of the financial system that we are operating in. Our challenge is not only to manage our budgets effectively but to ensure that we are accessing all available resources. That means ensuring that we effectively channel the return from the Barnett consequentials. We need to scrutinise British public expenditure plans and maintain a close watch on the British Budget announcement in March. We must do all in our power to protect our budgets.

We should identify exactly how much finance should be directed to our budgets as a result of the British policy on free school meals, and with

respect to British Rail upgrade projects that will be coming on line. We must be vigilant with the March statement to identify how British expenditure will affect our budgets, and we must ensure that we use our ability to target the Barnett consequentials effectively.

We should also be mindful that the announcement in March could trigger further consequentials, which will benefit us all. We must also have our eye to the future and take the opportunities to grow our economy in a just, fair and equitable manner to the benefit of all our citizens. To do this means exploring all potential tools and levers for economic growth.

I support the Final Stage of the Bill.

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge the work of the Committee, the Department and the Minister on the Budget Bill. However, if I may, I will return to a number of themes from earlier debates, in particular, comments by the Finance Minister at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. He made a comment about the economy in Northern Ireland, about where it is and where he thought that it would go. On both occasions, he commented on welfare reform and the situation that faces Northern Ireland given the threat from the Treasury through the monthly penalty clause that will arise from the failure to take forward welfare reform legislation.

1.30 pm

The first issue that I will deal with is the Northern Ireland economy, because that theme was touched on by the Minister. The House will recall that, on that occasion, the Finance Minister chose to use the word "booming" when describing the economy generally and said that, by the end of this year, that word, as I think he understood it, could apply to the North. When challenged on that, he commented on what the anticipated growth in the Northern Ireland economy might be between now and the end of the financial year.

Of course, only a matter of days later, his big boss in London, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, began putting down some caveats. He said that people needed to show a bit of caution as to whether the recovery was "stable" and "sustainable". I understand that those were the words that he used on that occasion. Although I would not rely very much on the words emanating from the Chancellor — that might be a part of the rebuttal, if there is one, from the Minister of Finance — I thought it curious that people in London were beginning

to urge some caution about the recovery: was it stable or sustainable? The word "selective" could be added to that question, because any recovery in Britain is selective in that it is concentrated in the southern part of England. Given that comment, the Minister may want to reflect upon his use of the word "booming" and how it might apply here.

In any case, he may also want to reflect on research produced by the Resolution Foundation since Further Consideration Stage. It found that, between 2008 and 2013, income per head in Northern Ireland fell by 10%, from £17,910 to £16,130 — the highest fall in Britain and Northern Ireland. The average reduction across Britain and Northern Ireland was 5.8%; in the south-east of England, it was 3.3%; in Northern Ireland, it was 10%. That suggests that the recession had a deeper and longer lasting impact here than elsewhere. The foundation indicated that that was influenced by the particularly severe crash in the property market. I put it to the Minister that he should be somewhat cautious about using the word "booming", given that the Chancellor is more cautious than that; the recovery is selective; and the recovery from recession is, in this part of these islands, a more exaggerated process than elsewhere.

The second major political issue in the Budget, which the Minister relied on at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, was welfare reform, which my colleague Mr Bradley touched on. I will echo some of his comments and then try to add to them.

During an earlier debate, I said that, in my view — I think that I have some evidence to confirm it — the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had the measure of DSD when it came to welfare reform. To that, I now add that DWP has the measure of DFP. On the last occasion, there was nothing in the Minister's reply to indicate that he was beginning to think outside the box or, to borrow that phrase again, acting more like Swinney than like Sammy when it comes to how to scope out, grapple with, resolve, interrogate and move forward the issue of welfare reform that he, very significantly, touched on. Any media commentary on the Budget was on the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments about welfare and the penalty from the Treasury rather than any of the other arguments being made at the Bill's various stages.

I want to put the SDLP's point of view on the record. If a penalty of £5 million a month is imposed by the Treasury arising from the failure to bring the Welfare Reform Bill back to the

Chamber, that is a price that should be paid. It is a price that is being paid by tens of thousands of people and thousands of families already in this part of the world, because welfare is measured in multiples of £5 million. Let us be very clear about this: if, at this time, the British Government are imposing a £5 million penalty a month on the Budget of Northern Ireland, we say that that is a price that should be paid, because the price of welfare and the quality of experience of thousands of families in this part of these islands is so much greater than the £5 million that the Minister says London now intends to impose.

In September 2013, NICVA published research undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University that stated that the impact of welfare to date and welfare change to come was going to take £750 million out of the Northern Ireland economy. Work it out yourselves: £5 million into £750 million results in a figure that is many multiples of £5 million. The £750 million that will be taken out of the Northern Ireland economy will take £650 per annum away from every adult of working age in Northern Ireland. By comparison, the impact of welfare change on each working adult in Britain is £470 per annum. The impact on citizens of working age in Belfast is £840 per annum.

My question to the Minister is this: is the withdrawal of up to £750 million from the Northern Ireland economy, which would have an impact on the working-age citizens of Belfast of £840 per annum, not something that should be waved in the faces of Ministers in DWP, the Treasury and Downing Street before they casually and idly wave in our faces the threat of the withdrawal of £5 million a month from the Budget?

What is the strategy to deal with the threat to the Northern Ireland Budget that the Minister outlined? My colleague Mr Bradley outlined it earlier, and it is to recognise that DWP has the measure of DSD and that the negotiation with London on welfare should be escalated beyond DSD in order to maximise the impact that it has on the people in DWP, the Treasury and Downing Street. That was the model of choice that was deployed in the case of the PMS, is being deployed for corporation tax and was deployed when it came to the very moderate economic pact of May 2013.

If that was the model of choice to maximise outcomes for all those issues, it should be the model of choice when it comes to negotiations on welfare reform and the threat from London. That negotiation should involve all parties from the Executive and should represent all of

government in Northern Ireland to drive home the point that the Minister for Social Development has failed to drive home. That point is that, for all the reasons that I will rehearse yet again and will add to, the impact of all this on the people of this part of the world will be so disproportionate that it is intolerable that a Minister of Finance and Personnel should come to this House and warn it about £5 million without, at the same time, saying that he will join in the effort to interrogate the London position to get results that are more favourable to the people of Northern Ireland.

Why should he do that, Mr Deputy Speaker? I will ask the Minister a question. I must point out that I do so not to score a point but to ask a question that I think that he and his officials, as well as other Ministers in government, should answer in such a powerful way that responds positively to the strategy that we are pointing out. OFMDFM, on a rolling basis, commissions research on child poverty and working-age poverty in Northern Ireland. The most recent research that it published, which was commissioned from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), was published just last month. I do not deny that I have not read it all, but, if I have read anything that is a manifesto for the argument on welfare that the Northern Ireland Executive should be putting to the Treasury and DWP, this is the manifesto. This document explains, as does Save the Children, the reality of child poverty in Northern Ireland and how it will all be compounded by what is happening with welfare reform.

So, what is the argument that the Minister and his colleagues should be deploying to London? It is that the figures, not mine or those of the SDLP but those produced by government, show that, by 2020, in six short years, child poverty levels in Northern Ireland will be 38%. That is when there had been an ambition — pre-recession, I give you — to get it down to 10%. So, at the time when we are meant to have the relevant figures down to 10%, they will be nearly 400% higher than what we as a government intended to achieve pre-recession. I put it to the Minister that, if that is the scale of what is now predicted for child poverty in Northern Ireland and if those figures are the worst in any part of Britain and Northern Ireland, that is an argument that needs to be more fully deployed with Treasury, Downing Street and DWP. The Institute for Fiscal Studies forecasts that child poverty will increase across the UK, with the sharpest increase in income poverty among children in Northern Ireland. IFS warns that relative child poverty will increase to 30.9% and that absolute child poverty will increase to 38.5% in Northern

Ireland by 2020-21. I give you that that is not just because of welfare reform but is a cumulative impact of that, recession, rising costs and other austerity measures.

This part of this world, the children in this part of this world and the families in poverty in this part of this world suffer disproportionately more because of all those factors, including welfare. Yet, we do not bring that argument to London.

I ask the Minister to join in taking that argument to London.

1.45 pm

When it comes to my constituency, and when they were analysed at ward level, the figures revealed that 43% of children in West Belfast are living in poverty, which is the second highest level in the UK. My argument to the Minister before he makes the argument again about the threat of Treasury is this: have you made that argument? Have the First and deputy First Minister made that argument? Has the Minister for Social Development made that argument explicitly and on the basis of evidence to London, relying on the very report that the IFS produced, which was commissioned by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and published on the OFMDFM website a matter of days ago? I wait to hear that argument.

I also suggest to the Minister, and it is relevant to this debate, that we came out of Haass/O'Sullivan attempting to deal with the past on a more comprehensive and ethical basis. To be fair to all parties, there seems to be more unanimity around Haass/O'Sullivan when it comes to dealing with the past than when it comes to one or two other issues. At the heart of dealing with the past is a recognition that there needs to be support to the victims of the years of state violence and terror. There is a recognition that they need to be supported. If you look at the words of Haass/O'Sullivan, they very much acknowledged the work undertaken by the Victims' Commissioner in respect of the review of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). That begins to open up the potential for further conversations about how there should be support.

Just last Friday, the First Minister and deputy First Minister rightly came out and completely endorsed the recommendations of the Victims' Commissioner and her team when it came to the review of the VSS in order to ensure that support, financial and otherwise, that goes to

our victims and survivors is done in a way that is empathetic, sensitive, well managed and done properly and not bureaucratically. Given that the London Government, to some degree, has begun to talk about their support for Haass/O'Sullivan, and given that, at the heart of this, is the need for support for victims and survivors who have suffered because of the years of violence, how is the argument being made to London that that needs to include a recognition that our incapacity levels are, in part, of such a scale because of the legacy of conflict?

If we are going to really measure up to the Haass/O'Sullivan ambition when it comes to dealing with the past, then we should do what the Victims' Commissioner and her team did on Friday, which was to make recommendations that support individuals in need and families who are still in pain. That argument needs to be deployed with London because we cannot, on the one hand, say that we want to deal with the past, hopefully, in a comprehensive and ethical way, and, on the other hand, not take the argument to London that part of the scale of incapacity in the North is a direct legacy of the conflict, and that, as such, the British Government have a responsibility to recognise that and financially assist in addressing that issue. It is a matter that should be done ethically, but it is a matter that is, in my view, a political consequence of Haass/O'Sullivan.

Thirdly, with respect to the bedroom tax, the Housing Executive explained that it has more than 26,000 tenancies with the potential to underoccupy either one or two bedrooms, and, as a consequence of universal credit, the tenants who live in those properties will have to pay between £7 and £15 per week extra to stay in those properties.

I have not heard any dispute around the House, and there is consensus that Northern Ireland does not have suitable alternative accommodation, given what is being proposed under the bedroom tax, which is part of welfare reform, which is part of what the Treasury is threatening Northern Ireland with in respect of the £5 million, which the Minister referred to in Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. All that — the particular profile of housing in the North and those 26,000 tenants who might be impacted on by the proposed bedroom tax — is compounded by the segregated nature of our housing, which, whatever their circumstances, makes it very difficult for people to move. I do not believe that that argument has been deployed fully and faithfully in the negotiation with DWP.

It may be that, in the current conversation that is going on on the Back Benches between the previous Finance Minister and the current Finance Minister, I may be rebutted and contradicted. I will give way to the Member if he wants me to.

Mr Hamilton: Do not flatter yourself.

Mr Attwood: They might have been talking football. I hope it was not football; I hope it was welfare.

Mr D Bradley: Sunday football.

Mr Attwood: Yes, Sunday football. Given that that is what the Housing Executive says, the point is about whether the Social Development Minister has fully deployed the argument about the 26,000 tenants to DWP in London. Has the argument about the segregated nature of housing in Belfast and beyond been fully deployed? I am not convinced that it has. If you are not convinced that it has and if the negotiation has been silent for close to a year, how can a Minister come to the House and tell us to swallow welfare reform because of a £5 million penalty?

Mr Wilson: Will he give way on that?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Wilson: I cannot understand the argument that the Member is making. It is as if he had never had any knowledge of all the negotiations around it. He knows full well that the straw man of the spare room subsidy, the bedroom tax or whatever he wants to call it is only a straw man. That issue has been resolved. It will not apply to existing tenants. Furthermore, the Executive have made a decision to allocate £17 million a year to ensure that it does not apply. If that is his excuse for handing £5 million a month over to the Exchequer, it is a fairly flimsy one.

Mr Attwood: It is curious that the first time that the former Finance Minister found his voice was not to try to address the issue of incapacity and the particular issue of people who have physical and emotional needs arising from the years of terror and conflict. It is interesting that he did not rise to his feet when the argument was being made, informed and compounded by the publication of the IFS report on OFMDFM about the impact of welfare on children and families in poverty. I find it curious that, having made those points and made them at some length, the former Minister of Finance and Personnel has nothing to say on them.

Mr Wilson: Will he give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. In any case, even if some money has been found and some potential decisions might be taken by the Northern Ireland Executive to deal with the bedroom tax, it is a domestic response to what should be a national obligation. The national obligation, for want of a better term, on London is to recognise what the Housing Executive says about the tenancies that would be impacted and to recognise the full consequences of our segregated housing and how limited people's opportunities to move to alternative housing might be.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I encourage the Member to please return to the Budget Bill. The same advice applies to those who ask to make interventions.

Mr Attwood: The London Government, if they say that they govern this part in part, subject to the constraints of devolution, should recognise the objective different circumstances when it comes to housing, the 26,000 tenancies and segregation. London should recognise it, not just Belfast; otherwise, we are sending a message to London that, when it comes to the next 50% of austerity cuts and the further £12 billion of welfare cuts, we will swallow the medicine. Whatever arguments we have, which are deep in evidence and compelling regarding the lived experience of our citizens and communities, we are now sending to London the message that, whatever else you want to impose when it comes to welfare change and welfare cuts, we will swallow it. It is not simply an argument and a response of the Northern Ireland Executive to deal with these issues: it is the responsibility and the response of the London Executive to deal with them. For all the success that Sammy may well claim that there might have been around the Executive table in respect of these matters, that misses the point, because of the responsibility and political obligation that London has to recognise what everybody in this room and others recognise about the different circumstances that our people face.

Mr Wilson: I think that the point that the Member has got to now in his speech well illustrates the tactic that people use when their argument is weak, which is to start shouting. That is where his argument is weak. He knows full well that he and his party cannot justify, in a time of austerity, handing over £5 million a month — and rising — to the Exchequer in London. Of course, the reason why he now points the finger at London and says that it

must recognise that is to try to divert attention away from the argument.

Let me just take up the point that the Member made about people who are claiming disability living allowance and what the Executive have done to recognise that. The Executive have done a lot to recognise that in so far as they have put £6 million aside so that those people can get independent doctors' reports done to help their cases when it comes to having their independent assessments done. Therefore, the Executive have —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member has not taken my advice. We are discussing the Final Stage of the Budget Bill.

I will use the intervention to remind the speaker that Question Time begins at 2.00 pm. He may wish to conclude his remarks by then. Otherwise, he will be called after Question Time.

Mr Attwood: I always want to be very attentive to the words of the Chair. However, maybe, on this occasion, I will not be able to comply with them.

I will deal with the question. Sometimes, you do have to raise your voice in order for an argument to be heard. The last time these sorts of arguments were outlined to the Finance Minister in this Chamber and the point was made to the Benches opposite, for all the talk about the imposition of the £5 million, there was very little talk in that debate at Further Consideration Stage about the impact of welfare reform and cuts on the citizens of Northern Ireland. Given that that argument was made and deployed, sometimes, you have to turn up the volume to hope that it might be heard more fully.

That is true for other issues as well. Previously, in this House, I have referred to what I saw as the defeatism around the Executive table when it came to trying to save Driver and Vehicle Agency jobs up in Coleraine. Here we are, a couple of years later, when it may yet be the case that some or all of those jobs might be saved. We will know soon. At least the arguments were deployed and defeatism did not prevail. If that required my raising my voice, which I have done quite a few times, including with transport Ministers in London in respect of that particular issue, I will not apologise or seek forgiveness.

The point that Sammy misses is that, although money has been found in the Northern Ireland Budget to ease some of the welfare burden, I

remember that, in the 2011 Budget negotiations — Sammy, as the former Minister of Finance and Personnel, will remember — that I made an argument for a welfare hardship fund.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The run down memory lane will have to continue after Question Time because it begins at 2.00 pm. I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the honourable Member will have an opportunity to conclude his remarks.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to please take their seats as we move to Question Time.

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

E-safety

1. **Mrs Overend** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what actions they have taken in response to the recommendations in the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland publication 'An exploration of e-safety messages to young people, parents and practitioners in Northern Ireland' prepared by the National Children's Bureau Northern Ireland. (AQO 5597/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We very much welcome the report that the Safeguarding Board recently produced on e-safety messages. Indeed, junior Minister Bell and I were present at the launch to provide our support. We believe that the report's findings represent a major step forward in addressing how e-safety messages should be relayed in today's fast-moving online community. We support the recommendations in the report; in particular, the need for the Executive to develop an overarching strategic and coordinated approach to e-safety.

We believe that we must act now to ensure that our children are protected in all aspects of their lives and that our approach should be consistent with the best child protection principles. That is why junior Minister Bell and I have written to the Minister of Health asking him to take forward the development of a policy framework on e-safety as part of his responsibility for child protection. We have also advised the Minister that we believe that Delivering Social Change governance structures provide the mechanism through which that framework can be developed. We have undertaken to provide whatever support we can to assist him in his role.

We also note and support the report's recommendation for the establishment of an e-safety forum, which is being taken forward by the Safeguarding Board. We believe that the report's findings on the quality, accessibility and impact of current e-safety messages will provide a critical contribution to the work of that forum. Our officials will meet the Safeguarding Board shortly to discuss OFMDFM participation in the forum.

In addition, since the publication of the report, we have helped to promote Safer Internet Day on 11 February, through ministerial visits to schools and through the issue of press releases, locally and in conjunction with the UK Safer Internet Centre, on internet safety.

Mr Speaker: Questions 7 and 8 have been withdrawn.

Mrs Overend: I thank the junior Minister for her response. I am sure that she knows only too well that good advice is available. However, there is a failure in getting the right message and the same message across to all Northern Ireland's children. It is government's responsibility to ensure that all Departments work together to enable that to happen. I refer primarily to the development of a policy framework.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to her question.

Mrs Overend: Can the junior Minister confirm that the Health Minister has agreed to take on the formation of the strategy? Has she any further information on the time frame in which that strategy will be drawn up?

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware that we all attended the launch of the report. We have written to the Health Minister, although we have not yet received a reply, because he has overall responsibility for child protection policy. We are willing to work with him, using the Delivering Social Change governance structures, because we realise that this is a cross-departmental, cross-cutting issue. The Member will be aware, from meetings that we attended with her, that we are fully supportive of the recommendations in the report. We will play our role in the e-safety forum as well.

Mr Rogers: Minister, many of the young people who are cyberbullied are reluctant to tell a teacher, a parent or even a trusted friend. What are the Executive doing to ensure that the

message is put out and that the stigma is stamped out?

Ms J McCann: We in the Department are taking particular measures. During Safer Internet Day, we visited two schools: St Ita's Primary School and Wellington College.

We discussed the issue with local children and young people, asked how they felt and whether they had encountered such issues. We also asked them about the best way forward. When raising awareness, we feel that it is necessary to make sure that children and young people come up with ideas. We also commissioned research to gain a better sense of how P7 children use the Internet, because we realise that younger children are using the digital world. There was a review of activity on Internet safety across Departments. My Department has also engaged with the UK Safer Internet Centre, so we are doing a number of things. However, it is about raising awareness and working with parents, teachers and children about the best way forward.

Investment Trip: USA

2. **Mr McKay** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for details of their forthcoming trip to the USA. (AQO 5598/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I will travel to the United States in early March to promote inward investment opportunities on the west coast. We will also travel to Washington, DC, to attend a number of high-profile political events connected with the annual St Patrick's Day celebrations. On Monday 10 March, we will meet HBO's president of production and six other top executives. We met HBO for the first time in Los Angeles in 2009 when we persuaded them to take a leap of faith to locate the production of the 'Game of Thrones' series here.

We will also support the Cinemagic charity at an evening event in Los Angeles, which will include young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from here and LA. We will then travel to San Jose to meet Seagate's senior management team. As you know, Seagate Technology is one of our most prestigious high-tech companies, whose facility in Derry employs over 1,300 people. The company makes a major contribution to the economy of the north-west, and this is our first opportunity to meet Seagate's senior management team at its US headquarters, and we look forward to it.

We will host an investment luncheon for over 120 Silicon Valley business executives to discuss the merits of doing business here. Later that day, we will travel to San Francisco to officiate at the official opening of Invest NI's new office on the west coast. The remainder of our time in the United States will be spent in Washington, DC, where we will participate in a range of other engagements connected with the St Patrick's Day celebrations.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Clearly, job creation and inward investment need to continue be a top priority for OFMDFM and the Executive, especially given the recent job losses at KPL in Dungiven. Will the deputy First Minister outline the importance of foreign direct investment from the United States to the local economy and how the Executive will position themselves to increase such investment?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely agree with the Member; the loss of 200 jobs through KPL's difficulties in Dungiven is very disappointing. However, in recent years, we have become increasingly successful in attracting foreign direct investment, particularly from a number of key United States-owned multinational companies such as Citi, Seagate Technology, Allstate, Caterpillar and Liberty Mutual. The companies have sought to capitalise and build on the success of those investments, and many have already reinvested or are preparing to invest more.

Attracting and retaining foreign direct investment (FDI) is an important means of promoting economic growth in a region such as ours. Foreign-owned firms are associated with higher levels of productivity, wealth creation through exports and the introduction of new skills and technologies. The United States is one of our largest target markets for FDI and as such plays a major role in the development of the economy. Within the past week, the First Minister and I attended a very important engagement hosted by the Japanese ambassador to London, where we met a large group of Japanese businesspeople and senior executives. The evidence of success is very clear, given that we have had three important job announcements for Derry, Carrickfergus and Larne from three Japanese companies during the past couple of months.

So foreign direct investment is very important, but we also understand the huge importance of our indigenous businesses and their massive contribution to employment. That is why we are so disappointed at the collapse of the company in Dungiven, which has left 200 people on the

dole. We hope that every effort will be made to ensure that they get support to find further employment.

Mr Wilson: Does he anticipate that his trip to Washington and America will produce sufficient jobs to replace the 1,600 potential job losses that will result from the way in which his party and the SDLP have dragged their feet on welfare reform?

Mr M McGuinness: It is important to emphasise that we have been told that the cost to the local economy of welfare cuts — I note that the Member chose to use the word "reform" — was estimated, in NICVA's contribution to the debate, at £750 million a year, which many thought was widely exaggerated. That was then downgraded by other experts, who told us that it would represent a loss of not £750 million to the economy but something like £450 million. This is big stuff. There is a huge responsibility on all of us to do everything in our power to ensure that whatever outcome we reach protects the most marginalised and disadvantaged. My party has been involved, even in the past week, in further discussions with representatives of the British Government, with further discussions to take place in the time ahead.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the deputy First Minister would agree with me that a satisfactory outcome of the Haass process would greatly influence potential inward investment from America. Will he discuss the Haass process with political representatives, which I know might depend on getting an invitation to the White House?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not think that there is any possibility of our travelling to the United States and not having a conversation about the Haass process, given that Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan are two highly respected diplomats and well known on Capitol Hill. So there can be no doubt whatsoever that the United States of America remains very engaged in this work. After all, the Vice-President of the United States, Joe Biden, took a very personal interest and I know that President Obama has done similarly.

We can be sure that the report from Richard Haass to the State Department and the White House will have been very accurate on how we found ourselves in a scenario that meant that we could not go forward with agreement from the five parties. I am certainly honoured that my party was prepared to sign up to the Haass proposals. The big challenge ahead is to

continue to explore how we can conclude an agreement that will mean us all moving forward on the important issues of the past, parades, flags, symbols and emblems.

Social Investment Fund

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the social investment fund. (AQO 5599/11-15)

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

Ms J McCann: On 10 February, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced that £33 million would be invested in the 23 projects of the first tranche to be delivered through this important programme. The 12 capital projects and 11 revenue projects are aimed at tackling poverty and deprivation through improved community-based services and facilities. They represent the beginning of an exciting period of innovation, community-led cooperation and, most importantly, delivery against the most important objectives that the Executive are required to meet.

The projects range across all nine social investment zones and demonstrate that, despite the challenge of addressing the most durable issues in the most difficult of circumstances, the Executive remain committed to Delivering Social Change through significant investment and working with communities in areas of greatest need. These first 23 projects were identified as priorities by local steering groups in each zone. Letters of offer will issue to the successful projects following completion of the verification and governance checks that are taking place.

The release of funding to each project is subject to all the necessary approvals, but we have made significant progress in cutting through the red tape requirements of managing public funds to accelerate delivery to address local needs.

2.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: Perhaps you will indulge me, Mr Speaker. The deputy First Minister said that Dr Haass was reporting to the White House and the State Department. Not with my authority he was.

I thank the junior Minister for her answer. Given that her colleague the deputy First Minister, the First Minister, the Executive and, indeed, the Assembly all agree that the

economy is at the front and centre of our work, particularly in the Programme for Government, can she explain why the businesspeople who were supposed to sit on the zonal advisory panels have not been appointed after all this time despite the support and offer of encouragement and help from organisations such as Business in the Community?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be fully aware that the steering groups that were set up were decided on by people in local communities. It was always a community-up approach. As you say, steering group membership includes people from the voluntary and community sector and political members. When the steering groups were first set up, the idea was that they would invite other people on to them as soon as the projects were identified. That was the right way to do it, because there was no point in bringing in someone from a group that had no impact on the projects being decided on in communities. It is very important to remember that the projects have been brought forward by the community — the people who live and work in the area and know what the area needs. Through the nominations, a Broad Church has been brought on board. However, the community and voluntary sector had the primary role to play in the first stages.

Mr Campbell: Looking to the next stage of the social investment fund, I ask whether the junior Minister agrees that there is a need for all the communities, particularly those in the social investment zones, to ensure that agreement is reached on the essential and necessary projects that can deliver real change for them for the next round.

Ms J McCann: I certainly agree with the Member. To reiterate what I said, it is a community-led process. The community was very much involved in setting up the steering groups by deciding who went forward for nominations. There was a lot of consultation, and the community and voluntary representatives on the groups are going back into local communities to ask stakeholders what the area needs. That dovetails with other area plans in the local communities. Therefore, yes, I agree that it is very important that those needs be met.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What will happen if some projects fail their economic appraisal?

Ms J McCann: I am not sure whether the Member has any specific project in mind, but the projects that are undergoing economic

appraisal are those that each zone has already prioritised. In the light of that, it is very important that we work with steering groups and project promoters, because, when some projects do not make the economic appraisal stage, we need to give people feedback on why they are not meeting the requirements. We need to make sure that consultation, dialogue and engagement is continuing with our officials and the steering groups on the ground.

Winter Weather: Emergency Funding

4. **Mr Gardiner** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, under their civil contingencies remit, what steps they have taken to improve emergency funding and planning in the face of worsening and extreme weather patterns. (AQO 5600/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: We will continue to improve our preparedness for severe weather and other emergencies through the work of the civil contingencies group (CCG) and other groups of key responders. The civil contingencies group is the principal strategic-emergency-preparedness body for the public sector, comprising representatives from Departments and agencies, the emergency services and councils. Just over a year ago, OFMDFM, which chairs the multi-agency group, put in place new and enhanced arrangements to ensure effective delivery of the civil contingencies group's functions. Members identify, agree and oversee the delivery of priority work to enhance our collective capability to prepare for a range of emergencies. Severe weather emergencies and their damaging impacts are a key element of that work programme, which continues to be developed in response to identified need. For example, in line with good practice, following the spring blizzard of 2013, civil contingencies group members participated in a multi-agency debrief to capture learning from the emergency. That has since been incorporated into actions that the civil contingencies group is delivering. In a similar way, learning from a recent coastal flooding test exercise and the emergency at the start of this year will be used to inform the further development of that work programme.

As a member of the civil contingencies group, the Met Office plays an active part in progressing the civil contingency agenda here by advising on weather issues. A meeting of the Met Office's public weather service customer group was held in October 2013 and proved very useful in developing a further

understanding of the services that the Met Office offers to assist emergency planners.

OFMDFM does not provide a central funding stream for the civil contingencies function; rather, individual Departments fund emergency preparedness in their organisations and sectors.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response in length. Will he join me in congratulating the Police Service of Northern Ireland for the exemplary role that it played in preparing for the recent threatened flooding event in Sydenham in Belfast? In the event of serious flooding in Northern Ireland, will he outline what fast-track arrangements are in place to deploy the troops that are locally stationed?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely and wholeheartedly congratulate and pay tribute to the PSNI for the lead role that it played in working with all Departments and groups that are involved in civil contingency situations. I think that it did a tremendous job.

When you consider what has happened in the south-east of England and, indeed, in the South of Ireland in places such as Cork, Limerick and Kilkenny, you can see that we have been very lucky to escape the worst effects of flooding on this occasion. I certainly hope that we can come through what has been a very difficult winter in a way that ensures that our farmers and homes, particularly homes in the most vulnerable areas, will escape the very high levels of rainfall that are affecting us at the moment.

There are no plans whatsoever for the involvement of troops. I think that we will always deal with those situations by working closely through the civil contingencies group and with the advice of the PSNI.

Mr Douglas: Does the deputy First Minister agree with me that the Executive should be working with local groups that are involved in contingency work such as the Connswater Community Greenway? It recently received tremendous support to alleviate the floods in east Belfast.

Mr M McGuinness: That is obviously a hugely important project. I absolutely agree with the Member that we all have to work in a very joined-up way to ensure that communities, the civil contingencies group, Departments and the PSNI, all working together, can alleviate the challenges that we face with extreme weather.

I know that there are one or two sceptics about global warming and all the rest of it in the House. One of them is now looking up at me with a big smile on his face. I think that the rest of us believe the scientists when they tell us that the planet is facing enormous change.

Mr Wilson: Which ones do you believe?

Mr M McGuinness: We believe the ones that we want to believe, not the ones that you want us to believe.

More seriously, it is an important subject; of that there is no doubt. I think that we have all come to the conclusion that something very dramatic is happening to our weather. In turn, that can have a massive impact on people's lives. So, yes, the community, the civil contingencies group and the police have to work together to ensure that we head off dangerous situations at the pass.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Will the Minister give us an idea of the central response to the recent weather emergencies?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said, it is important that we deal with each issue on its merits with respect to the different challenges the weather throws at us. We have to take account of each situation as it arises, and that is what we are doing. The important thing is that we have a high level of preparedness. That has stood by us and ensured that, for the most part, people have been protected.

When serious incidents arise, the relevant Minister has the opportunity to raise the issue of funding, for example at the Executive and with the Finance Minister, to seek additional support if they feel it is required. As I said, we look at each situation on its merits and base our decisions on that.

Mrs McKeivitt: Given that the adverse weather caused a lot of damage along coastal roads, and a crisis in the fishing community, particularly at Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie, would the Minister agree that more help is needed, including financial help, for those?

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly have a lot of sympathy for what the Member said. Undoubtedly, it has been a difficult time for the fishing community with the poor weather over the past few months. It has meant that they have not been able to put to sea as much as

they would like and that has undoubtedly caused hardship.

The main fishing season runs from April to October, so we are hoping that things will improve. The DARD Minister, Michelle O'Neill, has agreed to meet representatives of the fishing industry. I think that that meeting is tomorrow, and she will agree with them what assistance may be available. Michelle was able to support the industry last year by paying for landing fees and satellite equipment to the value of £400,000 to offset overheads. I know that she is dedicated to seeing that the industry is sustainable.

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

5. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. (AQO 5601/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: There is no current agreement on Maze/Long Kesh. We continue to discuss a way forward with this important project. The development corporation continues to ensure that the site is secure and maintained and is progressing plans to facilitate the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) show on the site in May 2014.

Mr Cree: I thank the deputy First Minister for his crisp reply. What are the continuing costs of the corporation? You mentioned some of the work that it is undertaking. Is there anything of a strategic nature in that work?

Mr M McGuinness: We will write to the Member about the specific costs of the corporation. I do not have that information to hand except to say that it is an important body with an important function, and my hope is that, at some stage, we can see the difficulties that afflict us in relation to the further development of the site resolved in a way that will progress the employment prospects of many thousands of people who are looking for jobs.

At the minute, the corporation's work is to ensure that the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society show goes ahead and that its project on that site is developed. I am a big fan of the RUAS. Its courageous move from Balmoral to the site was a tremendous vote of confidence in the site. The fact that it had such a massive increase in attendance at its show last year, and will probably do so again this year, shows that there is huge community support for the development of the site. I look forward to the

difficulties that are before us being resolved in a way that will see us develop the site consistent with the original vision, which is really about providing employment for our people.

Mr A Maginness: I listened carefully to the deputy First Minister and I share his sense of loss regarding the vision of developing the site, the loss of the stadium and the loss, at least temporarily, of a peace and reconciliation centre. Have the deputy First Minister and the First Minister entered into any discussions with the European Commission on any of the lost funding?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member will know as much as anybody else in this room that it is the Special EU Programmes Body that takes up the challenge of how that funding is effectively distributed against the backdrop of the non-development of the peace building and conflict resolution centre. It is important to stress that the project caught the imagination of the international community. For example, it caught the imagination of President Obama, the White House and the US State Department. It also caught the imagination of the European Union, with President Barroso being very much involved in and excited by it. I have not given up hope.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That concludes listed questions to the deputy First Minister. We move to topical questions.

Racist, Sectarian and Sexist Abuse

1. **Mr Flanagan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the deputy First Minister's recent rightful condemnation of the disgraceful racial abuse directed at our Assembly colleague Anna Lo, whether they will take this opportunity to join with me in condemning all online racist, sectarian and sexist abuse directed at public representatives. (AQT 761/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: First, I was appalled and absolutely disgusted that a Member of this House, Anna Lo, who is hugely respected as an elected representative and is hugely respected in the community, could be subjected to such vile treatment. Anna Lo stands head and shoulders — head and shoulders — above all those bigots and racist criminals who clearly attempted to target her through the social networks over the past number of days.

There is not a lot that we can do. On sites such as Twitter, there are all sorts of headbangers. There are all sorts of people out there who are very racist and who use every opportunity to try to influence situations for their own benefit. However, there is one thing that we can and must do as elected representatives, which is to be seen to be standing together. That must be done without any equivocation. We must unreservedly condemn the activities of those people.

I stand by Anna Lo, and I am sure that the vast majority of people in our community stand with her also. However, we have to raise our voices, get angry about this and make it absolutely clear to everybody in society that not one Member of this House is prepared to tolerate the sectarian or racist abuse not just of a Member of this House but of anyone in society.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomh-Chéad-Aire as an fhreagra shoiléir sin. I thank the deputy First Minister for his clear and concise answer. Does he agree that, in circumstances in which a public representative is abused, whether it is online or elsewhere, it is incumbent on all political representatives and all political parties to condemn such threats and abuse plainly and unequivocally?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely agree that, where people are inflicting sectarian or racist abuse on any elected representatives, it is very important that all of us speak out and do so very loudly so that everybody in society knows where we, as the political leaders of our society, are coming from. It is hugely important that we show solidarity. It is hugely important that we make it absolutely clear that that is unacceptable behaviour. It is also incumbent on all of us to do that at a time when racism and sectarianism are clearly out there in society. We must defend, not just elected representatives, but anybody who has been affected by racist abuse.

We have seen over the past couple of weeks people from different ethnic groups having their cars and homes targeted in absolutely disgusting behaviour. We have to stand by all those people, not just elected representatives. We have to stand by everybody in society because we should know that being subjected to that type of abuse makes this a very lonely place for people who come here and contribute to our society. We have to let them hear where we stand, and we have to stand with them.

Fair Employment

2. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to clarify how much weight public authorities should give to Equality Commission advice on fair employment practices. (AQT 762/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: It is very important that, where there is Equality Commission advice, that is taken into very serious consideration by all groups. It is also very important that we recognise the huge challenges that there are in society. Where there is a clear perception of inequality, organisations such as the Equality Commission have to be taken very seriously in the promulgation of their views.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the deputy First Minister. Does he think then that the Executive or the Policing Board should disregard the concerns of the Equality Commission that the current criteria for appointing a Chief Constable may be discriminatory towards women, those with dependants or those with disabilities?

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): Or when they comment on the —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: I am sure that the Policing Board and everybody else, including the Executive, will take what the Equality Commission says into very serious consideration. There has been discussion on this particular subject at the Executive and outside the Executive. Further discussions will happen over the next very short period.

Shared Education

3. **Mr Kinahan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action their Department has agreed with the Education Minister on shared education and its funding. (AQT 763/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I take very seriously the whole issue of shared education and how we continue to promote and encourage it. The evidence of that is the way in which the Education Minister has gone into the community during the consultation process to encourage people to bring forward further ideas and suggestions for the further development of shared education in our society. Of course, the iconic scheme in Omagh, where six schools will come together on a former military site at Lisanelly, is a very clear indicator of where we

want to go on this matter. It is hugely important that we continue to provide opportunities for our young people to come together and to do so in meaningful ways, as opposed to what, in the past, some people might have thought were symbolic ways. This new approach is likely to gain huge support in our society.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. I welcome any move forward on shared education. However, in last week's debate, the DUP amendment took out all reference to sharing in education other than shared campuses and the signature projects. The dFM's party supported that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kinahan: — by abstaining. Does the deputy First Minister actually believe in trying to achieve the long-term goal of a single, shared education system?

Mr M McGuinness: There can be no doubt whatsoever that the Executive's commitment to shared education is absolute. We all understand the importance of our children, from different religious denominations, coming together in meaningful ways. The projects that we are encouraging through the Department of Education are a very clear evidence base of where we want to go.

The First Minister and I are on the public record as saying, for example, that, if we were starting with a clean sheet of paper and without the baggage of history, we would both absolutely favour a single education system. However, we have to deal with the realpolitik of where education is at and the fact that people out there want and believe in choice. We certainly believe that people should have the opportunity to choose. We must present all the individual sectors in education with the opportunity to answer the big question of whether or not they accept — I think that the vast majority of people do — that we need to progress and accelerate a process of bringing our young people together in shared education campuses. The other shared education projects that DE is involved in are also very clear testimony of our commitment to sharing in the education of our young people.

Social Investment Fund: Northern Zone

4. **Mr McQuillan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that social

investment fund northern zone funding is ring-fenced. (AQT 764/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: I will ask junior Minister Jennifer McCann to answer that question.

Ms J McCann: As I said earlier, the allocations in the social fund have been set out. When the fund is ring-fenced, it is not in the baseline of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; it is in DFP because it is a central fund and an Executive fund. However, the money will be ring-fenced for the entirety of the social investment fund.

Mr McQuillan: With only £500,000 announced and confirmed so far, when does the junior Minister believe that her Department will be in a position to announce other projects in the northern zone?

Ms J McCann: The northern zone is like any other zone. If there are projects there that have already been approved, and I am aware that there are, when the next tranche of projects meet the criteria in the economic appraisals, they will go forward. The difficulty at the moment is that there are some projects across all zones, not just the northern zone, that are not yet at that stage. Our officials are engaging and consulting with steering groups to bring them up to the stage that they need to be at and to tell them why they are not yet at that stage. That engagement is ongoing, and if the Member wants more information on who is dealing with the steering group in the northern zone, I can provide him with it.

Maze Site: US Investor

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what advice they would give a potential investor if, in the course of their forthcoming trip to the USA, they receive a serious business enquiry about a potential investment at the Maze site. (AQT 765/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: I have no doubt that the Maze/Long Kesh site is of huge national and international importance, and I have no doubt whatsoever that quite a number of businesses are very interested in seeing it developed. However, it is important to point out that, of the initial assessments that were done, even by people with an international reputation in development, all pointed out the huge importance of the peace-building and conflict resolution centre in the development of the site.

Mr McNarry: Give up.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr M McGuinness: It was made clear to me, and to the Rev Ian Paisley when he was First Minister at the very early stages of this project, that those people saw the peace-building and conflict resolution centre as the jewel in the crown of Maze/Long Kesh.

Mr Lunn: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Unlike the people behind me, I support the concept of a conflict resolution centre, but does the deputy First Minister think that it is reasonable to allow a political disagreement in his office to impede potential economic progress on the site?

Mr M McGuinness: I have always described myself, and have been characterised throughout my involvement in the peace process over 20 years, as being a problem-solver and a solution-seeker, and I am still in that mode. I think that we need to try to overcome the difficulties that we face.

I am also very conscious that there are people associated with victims' groups who feel strongly about this project not going ahead. I have every sympathy with them, even though I have a different point of view. The peace centre was designed to be just that: a centre for peace and reconciliation. The only shrine at that centre would be a shrine to peace and reconciliation. However, I am also conscious that there are other, politically motivated, people on the extremes of loyalism who have attempted to use the situation and, indeed, on occasions, use victims against this project.

It is time for a big debate within unionism and loyalism about how we should move forward in our society. Does the construction of a peace-building and conflict resolution centre on that site contribute to our providing a normal society that is coming to terms with the challenges of the past but is prepared to move forward in unity in the future? I think that, clearly, it does.

2.45 pm

Social Development

Housing Need: North Belfast

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the analysis used to reach a determination of equal unionist and nationalist housing need in North Belfast. (AQO 5612/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I have stated a number of times now that the need for social housing in both communities in the North Belfast constituency is roughly the same. That is not my view or interpretation of the figures; it is a case of the facts speaking for themselves. The figures are the Housing Executive's own figures, and they are based on housing waiting list figures for the North Belfast Assembly and parliamentary constituency. They are the Housing Executive's totals for the number of applicants for social housing who self-identified as "Protestant" or "Roman Catholic" within each common landlord area in the constituency. The latest figures that I have received from the Housing Executive, which are from the end of December 2013, again speak for themselves, with 1,994 Protestants and 1,988 Roman Catholics on the waiting list in the North Belfast constituency. The figures are very clear that the need in North Belfast, according to the waiting list, is roughly the same in the Protestant and Roman Catholic constituencies. That is very different, of course, from the impression that has often been given in the past that there is a huge differential. Those are the executive's own figures, which they have produced and provided to me.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. You have provided us with statistics, but you have not given us the basis on which the analysis was carried out. Will you provide us with that? What was the process of analysis that led you to that conclusion?

Mr McCausland: Everyone who registers for social housing self-identifies as "Protestant" or "Roman Catholic" and there are other categories that can be grouped together as "Other" for people who do not designate as one or the other. The Housing Executive has detailed figures for every common landlord area across Northern Ireland. It has simply taken the figures for the common landlord areas in North Belfast and totalled those figures for those who self-identified as "Protestant" or "Roman Catholic". The figures that it came up with are, as I said, 1,994 people who self-identified as "Protestant" and 1,988 who self-identified as "Roman Catholic". There is, of course, the issue of people who do not identify as one or the other. You can go through a process of trying to put those people into one category or the other, which is contrary to what they want, but, even if you do that and assume that, if a person puts down Ardoyne, for example, they are probably from the Roman Catholic community and, if they put down Woodvale, they are probably from the Protestant

community, it does not change the balance between them. The figures still work out roughly the same. Those are the figures for those who have self-identified. All you would do by designating people in a way that they have not done is increase the figures, but it would not change the balance.

There is a suggestion — I read it again in 'The Irish News' this morning, coming from someone in the SDLP — that there is discrimination and a differential. The figures speak for themselves: 1,994 people from the Protestant community and 1,988 from the Roman Catholic community. That is a difference of six.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister yet again for pointing out the figures for housing need in North Belfast. In the Minister's opinion, how has the obvious lack of focus on dereliction and decay in certain housing stock over the years led to the breakdown of our communities?

Mr McCausland: The Member makes a very important point: the role of the Department for Social Development does not include only housing; it also includes regeneration. We have areas with high levels of dereliction and decay, with empty houses boarded up, and they drag communities down. They become magnets for antisocial behaviour and dumping. They blight the lives of the residents, creating despair, and they are a lost opportunity. In the past, the solution to these problems was to bulldoze the empty properties, clear the site and walk away, but, as I have said before, a bulldozer and a packet of grass seed do not solve the problem.

Building Successful Communities is therefore a new initiative that is part of the Facing the Future housing strategy for Northern Ireland. It aims to use housing intervention as one of the main catalysts for local regeneration. The six pilot areas selected to take forward this new initiative meet the criteria for selection, as detailed in the housing strategy. All are already designated areas of deprivation but, critically, have good potential for recovery, with available land or properties that can be refurbished. I am pleased that, for example, in lower Oldpark, all of the first group of refurbished houses have been allocated and are fully occupied.

Mr A Maginness: At first, I thought that the Minister was simply spinning, but now I believe that the Minister is also self-delusional —
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: — in relation to housing in North Belfast. Irrespective of whatever spin or self-delusion he indulges in, there is a basic need for housing in North Belfast.

Mr Speaker: I urge the Member to come to his question.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Minister properly address that need and urgently?

Mr McCausland: First, I will deal with the Member's point that I am self-delusional. The figures that I quoted — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCausland: The figures that I quoted were in fact produced by the Housing Executive. They are not my figures; I did not create or write them. They were given to me this morning by the Housing Executive. If the Member thinks that the Housing Executive is delusional, that is his opinion. He is entitled to that, but he cannot get round the fact that these are the figures. They may not be the figures that he wants to hear or the figures that he heard in the past, but they are the facts. The reason behind them is very simple. The North Belfast constituency embraces all or part of four housing areas: Shankill, north Belfast, Newtownabbey 1 and Newtownabbey 2. In the past, certain people who were trying to manufacture figures took the part of the constituency that is predominantly Catholic and nationalist and ignored the figures for the other parts of the constituency, which are predominantly unionist and Protestant. The Housing Executive has taken the figures for the entire constituency, treating everybody equally and fairly, and including people from both communities equally and fairly. Not being partisan, partial or biased in any way, but taking the entire constituency, these are the figures. The figures previously quoted excluded people who lived in Rathcoole, Woodvale, Rushpark, Rathfern or Queens Park. Those communities are as entitled to have their housing needs met as any other. I believe in fairness, equality and equity for everyone.

Housing Executive: Overcharging

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the negotiations between the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and their contractors relating to the £18m overcharging alleged by the Minister. (AQO 5613/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Member is well aware, I am sure, that negotiations in the matter are ongoing. We must ensure that the Housing Executive's ability to conclude the negotiations successfully is not compromised in any way, particularly by talking openly about them here in the Chamber. The details of the negotiations remain commercially sensitive, and it would not be appropriate to comment further until these are concluded. The Housing Executive has advised me that it continues to explore the issues with the contractors, and its assessment is that a settlement is possible. The Housing Executive's board has assured me that it wants this resolved as soon as possible and that it will continue to strive towards that outcome.

Mr Allister: From what the Minister now knows, does he accept that his enthusiastic announcement of £18 million of overcharging was a gross exaggeration and did gross damage to contractors and their credit standing?

Mr McCausland: A similar question was asked last time, and I will give the answer that I give on each occasion: I did not invent the figure of £18 million of estimated overpayments to contractors. I was advised of the figure by the chairman of the Housing Executive board, following a report to the board in May 2013. The Campbell Tickell report estimated that the sum of overcharging was in the region of £9 million to £13 million, and I have already stated that, although that remains a substantial amount of taxpayers' money, I was somewhat relieved that the level had slightly reduced. However, I have already stated clearly this afternoon that we must all await the outcome of the current negotiations, and I am hopeful that we are coming to the point at which those negotiations will be concluded and a settlement between the Housing Executive and the contractors reached. Until that point, we must leave the matter with the Housing Executive.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate the Minister's steer on confidentiality about where the negotiations are currently. However, there were two Campbell Tickell reports — a draft report and the main one — so let us talk about the main report, because it is in the public domain. Will the Minister outline some of the other findings that were in that report?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question, which is an important one. The key thing in all of this is to learn lessons that will ensure that never again do we have the problems that the Housing Executive has had with its contracts and the management of those

contracts over a period. The report found that shortcomings in management and governance in the Housing Executive had led to a situation in which there were substantial overpayments to contractors on planned maintenance contracts. Secondly, it found that a lack of understanding and implementation of a new form of partnering contracts was the root cause of the failings. Thirdly, it found that the current situation appeared to have improved but was still not fully satisfactory. The report found no evidence of fraud or corruption and, in order to remedy the situation, stated that a wide-ranging programme of change and transformation was required. I am pleased to say that, under the leadership of the chairman of the Housing Executive, we now see that action plan put in place and implemented to ensure that the mismanagement of contracts, which existed over quite a number of years but which I recognised when I came into the Department, is now being addressed to make sure that it does not happen again.

Mr Dallat: The Minister refuses to confirm that there was not significant overcharging. Does he agree with the House that there was, in fact, significant undercharging? At this stage, will the Minister consider parking the ministerial car and perhaps giving the briefcase to someone else? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCausland: I do not know whether the Member concerned has a problem with hearing answers or with understanding them. Clearly, he did not get the point that I made a short time ago. It would be utterly irresponsible of people in the House, from whatever side of the Chamber, to interfere in this in a way that would compromise what, I have already stated, are delicate negotiations to reach a settlement between the Housing Executive and the contractors. Until we get to the point at which the matter is concluded, the less that is said, the better. It is important that we get the best outcome for the public purse and ensure that the matter is resolved satisfactorily all round.

I simply say to the Member that there is a need for a little patience. This matter is with the Housing Executive. It is dealing with it and negotiating, and we should leave it to get on with that in commercial confidence.

Mr Speaker: We still have Members who, for whatever reason, seem to have a difficulty rising in their place.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have to say that I had stood up that often that I was getting dizzy.

Can the Minister confirm whether all the contractors that he referred to have been or are about to be allocated new contracts?

3.00 pm

Mr McCausland: The planned maintenance contracts have not yet been awarded because, as is well known, the matter is tied in with getting a resolution with the contractors. That is one of the difficulties that we and the Housing Executive have faced, because where contracts have not been awarded any work that was in the system has, more or less, been used up and a situation is created where there is an underspend. However, it is important that we get this matter resolved satisfactorily. I encourage people to be patient until we get a resolution.

As regards companies being given other contracts that were not planned maintenance contracts, there is no technical or legal way in which people can be barred from being given contracts. Whatever questions might remain, there is no legal basis for that. This applies, for example, to the double-glazing contracts. That is something that has to happen; it does not help to sort out what happened in the past which, let us be honest, was a mess. Over a number of years, the handling of contracts by the Housing Executive was unacceptable.

Mr Clarke: Who was the Minister then?

Mr McCausland: The Member may indeed ask who the Minister was then. That is a question that people might well ask, but it is important anyway. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Clarke: Did he give up his ministerial car?

Mr McCausland: He does not have a car to give up. *[Laughter.]*

Housing: Fitness Standard

3. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister for Social Development when he will launch a consultation on the introduction of an enhanced statutory minimum fitness standard for housing across all tenures. (AQO 5614/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The statutory minimum fitness standard requires all dwellings to be structurally stable and free from serious disrepair and that there should be adequate provision for lighting, heating, bathing and the preparation of food. My officials are examining options to identify how the current minimum standard for housing across all tenures can be most effectively enhanced. Work is progressing in line with the housing strategy action plan and, that being the case, I expect to launch a consultation on the introduction of an enhanced standard in the coming year. The consultation will provide an opportunity for all stakeholders to formally submit their views on the future of the standard. Any enhanced statutory fitness standard will apply across all housing tenures, including the private rented sector.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. A few years ago, the Savills report said that Housing Executive houses were of a very high standard. Does the Minister agree that that standard needs to be maintained and that investment is required for it?

Mr McCausland: I welcome that question. I feel passionately that we need to maintain the standard of our social housing stock. In fact, there has been very substantial underinvestment in our social housing stock in recent years. I am not going to ask people to get briefcases or ministerial cars on their way out; I will simply point out that the evidence is clearly there that there has not been the investment by the Housing Executive that there should have been. That is why there are thousands of properties with no cavity wall insulation. That was identified as a major issue, and we are making real progress on it at the moment by getting the right technical approach to dealing with it.

That is why, when I came into the Department, we had to initiate the double-glazing programme. Initially, the executive said that it would take 10 years, but I said, "No, that is unacceptable. We will have that done within the term of this Assembly". It will be done by May 2015. In just over a year, that whole piece of work will be completed.

Those are the issues surrounding double glazing and insulation. The executive is also looking at the energy efficiency of all its stock. There is a substantial amount of work to be done, and it is important that it is kept up. I regret that a significant number of tenants were left for a long time in properties that, because of the lack of insulation in particular, were not of a standard that we would expect today.

Mr McQuillan: How do the fitness standards of urban and rural properties compare?

Mr McCausland: The Member makes an interesting point. The house condition survey indicates that 60% of unfit dwellings are located in rural areas. This is largely attributable to the higher vacancy rates among these properties. My Department recognises the importance of rural areas as places to live and work, and it aims to create a living countryside with strong, vibrant communities. To that end, last May, I launched the Housing Executive's latest rural housing action plan. That plan is designed to ensure that rural areas get their fair share of available resources and will help to reduce unfitness rates outside our urban areas. Overall, across Northern Ireland, the unfitness level of the housing stock stands at 4.6%; however, when vacant dwellings are removed from consideration, that figure drops to 1%, which is the lowest figure to date. There is a higher number of vacant properties in rural areas, and, therefore, the figure appears to be higher.

Mr Dickson: Minister, given any minimum standard for fitness of property, how will you ensure that the private rented sector is adequately dealt with in this matter as the largest growing sector, particularly with regard to fitness of property, heating and other aspects? Sometimes, properties in the private rented sector are among the worst.

Mr McCausland: As I pointed out in my initial answer, any enhanced statutory fitness standard will apply across all housing tenures, including the private rented sector. It is important that we look on the private rented sector as a significant provider of accommodation. The tenancy deposit scheme was brought in to make it a more attractive option, and landlord registration is now under way because of that. All those things are small steps. The area was maybe neglected in the past by others. I want to make sure that we make the right interventions, and I think that those are starts. The point about landlord registration is, of course, that, if we have direct payments to landlords, it will be in the interests of landlords to be on the register.

Social Deprivation: Portadown

4. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of his recent visit to the Corcraun and Redmanville estates in Portadown, what opportunities exist to tackle social deprivation in these estates. (AQO 5615/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Having visited both estates, I have witnessed at first hand the issues of concern. My Department is already to the fore in taking forward work to endeavour to address the issues, and both estates have benefited from a number of opportunities to tackle social deprivation. On both estates, the Housing Executive has undertaken a very comprehensive multi-element improvement programme, and a working group has been established with the PSNI, Craigavon Borough Council and the policing and community safety partnership to help to tackle antisocial behaviour.

In addition, the Corcrair Redmanville Community Partnership received community support programme funding totalling some £2 million, sorry £2,689, which was awarded in 2013-14. I think that it was going to do better than it thought for a moment. The CSP is a unique and collaborative initiative involving DSD, the 26 district councils, local community and voluntary groups and local advice organisations and aims to strengthen local communities, increase community participation and promote social inclusion through the stimulation and support of community groups, community activity and advice services.

My Department's SPOD scheme, which aims to drive physical, economic, social and community renewal and improve living conditions at a small scale, is in its final year and provides the potential to further direct regeneration funding. I will be considering whether there is any scope to consider a bid from the Corcrair and Redmanville estates. The Northern Ireland Executive have agreed to transfer a range of powers to the 11 new councils from April 2015, enabling councils to take responsibility for community development and regeneration, including tackling social deprivation. In the meantime, I intend to meet David Simpson, the MP for the area, to explore further opportunities to tackle social deprivation in these estates in the period up to April 2015. I look forward to that meeting.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that detailed response. I appreciate some of the comments that have come forward today. I also thank him for taking the time to visit the Corcrair and Redmanville estates in Portadown. Minister, as you are aware, those two estates fall outside the neighbourhood renewal area —

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

Mr Anderson: I will, indeed. They find it very difficult to attract funding. What investment has the Department already made in those areas?

Mr McCausland: The Member is absolutely correct in saying that they fall outside the boundary of the neighbourhood renewal areas. However, the Housing Executive has invested £2.6 million in improving its housing stock in the two estates of Corcrair and Redmanville. Gas heating was installed in 2011, at a cost of £1.1 million, and an ECM scheme took place in 2011, at a cost of £266,000. Some properties in Redmanville received new kitchens last year at a cost of £266,000, and uPVC windows were installed in both estates in 2012, at a total cost of £968,000.

Three blocks of flats — approximately 30 in total — were passed to the South Ulster Housing Association in the 1990s and are currently included in that association's 2014-15 ECM programme for the spring/summer of this year. I was also pleased to note that a play park at Corcrair Road was provided and is being maintained by Craigavon Borough Council. The Housing Executive is aware of ongoing discussions between residents and the council about the future of the park and a potential upgrade scheme.

I refer back to the initial answer: my Department's SPOD scheme has some potential, and we will consider very soon whether there is any scope to consider a bid from Corcrair and Redmanville estates to the SPOD scheme.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome any investment in areas of deprivation. As the Minister stated, those areas fall outside the neighbourhood renewal areas. How are you ensuring equity across all areas in relation to investment and tackling social deprivation?

Mr McCausland: The schemes that I inherited from my predecessors, who were from the Member's party, were based around neighbourhood renewal, areas at risk and SPOD. The resources that have been put out through neighbourhood renewal during the time that I have been in the Department are very much the same overall as they were under predecessor Ministers. So, if there is any criticism of what I have done in that regard, it is criticism that would rebound on certain other predecessors. However, it is important that we keep these issues under review. That is why we brought in some guidance on how a neighbourhood renewal partnership should function. We have also tried to see what is

good practice, so that it is not simply the amount of money that you put in; it is the value that you get out of it as well. There are lessons that some neighbourhood renewal areas could learn from others, hence the guidance.

Moving forward into the future, in the longer term, councils locally may decide to abandon neighbourhood renewal and go in a different line. Focusing on the top 10% creates a difficulty in that, over the years, areas that were in stayed in, and areas that were out were left out. The result was that some areas have fallen significantly. They might have been just outside it before, and now they are within the 10%, but, because the boundaries were set previously, they have not been included. That is something that also needs to be reviewed. So, there is quite a bit of work to be done to get a system that is really fit for purpose.

Mr Gardiner: What progress is being made on narrowing the gap outside — the outcome indicators in neighbourhood renewal between Corcraun and Redmanville and the rest of Northern Ireland?

Mr McCausland: I think that that question is "What are the figures for that area compared with other areas?". I do not have those detailed figures to hand, but we can get some figures for that estate. I hope that the small pockets of deprivation will make a difference. I think that the question was about narrowing the gap between that area and other areas in Northern Ireland. The core point here is that a neighbourhood renewal area is in the top 10%, and the areas at risk are below that. We need to check back on where particular estates sit at the moment, but I am happy to do that and come back to the Member.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes oral questions to the Minister. We now move on to topical questions to the Minister.

Welfare Reform: Church Statements

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Social Development to share his views on the recent statements from Church leaders in Great Britain on the implementation of welfare reform. (AQT 771/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Recently, a number of statements were made in regard to welfare reform from Great Britain. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster — and, I

understand, incoming cardinal — commented on welfare reform in an interview with the 'Daily Telegraph' on 14 February, and we also had an open letter sent to the Prime Minister on 19 February from 26 Church of England bishops in relation to changes in welfare reform. Actually, many of the points that they made were points that I would not really disagree with. Interestingly enough, I even noticed a Conservative MP on a television panel programme the other night saying that there were many things that he agreed with as well.

First, I think that it is valuable that civic and religious leaders engage on important social and economic issues such as welfare reform, and we should listen carefully to what is being said. Many of the points that they made have some validity. It is also important to say that we are not necessarily doing things or intending to do things in Northern Ireland in exactly the same way as in Great Britain. We are actually doing things better in Northern Ireland than across the water.

What they were talking about, I think, was the fact that the welfare system should be there as a safety net for those who are particularly vulnerable or who find it impossible to secure work because of a disability or illness or because they are in an area where there is not work available. We all agree with that. It is important that there is a safety net for some of the most vulnerable people, and I hope that, as we move forward in Northern Ireland, that will also be the case here. It should be the priority of all of us.

I met a number of groups from the faith sector in Northern Ireland, including the four main Church leaders, to talk about those things. That is something that we will want to continue with.

Mr I McCrea: In light of the Minister's answer and, indeed, the statements made by the Church leaders, will the Minister outline how he sees Northern Ireland implementing those changes? Can he see it being any different from what has been said?

Mr McCausland: There are two things that I will pick out in particular in answer to that question. For many years the social fund has been the social security benefit of last resort for the most vulnerable people in our society, ensuring that they are not left in a position of hunger or destitution. I recognise the need to put in place a new discretionary support scheme to replace the current social fund, which will be available across Northern Ireland, so I have secured funding for the scheme from

the Treasury and plan to extend it so that it is available not only to people in receipt of benefits but to low-paid working families, who have often lost out in the past. That extension to low-paid working families is something of real value.

The new discretionary support scheme is only one example of where we can see the devolution of social security working for the people of Northern Ireland by enabling us to do things differently from other parts of the United Kingdom. I also believe that the package of measures that I have developed to shape how welfare reform might be implemented in Northern Ireland addresses many of the concerns raised by the Church leaders.

The other thing that we have done with great commitment here in Northern Ireland is maximise income from benefits. The benefit uptake campaign has been particularly successful. In fact, over the past few years we have trebled the amount of money; it went up from about £1.4 million or £1.5 million to about £5 million. We are now up to around £15 million, and there will be further progress on that. Those are things that we are doing differently in Northern Ireland, and I think that that is important.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Councils: Transfer of Powers

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the progress of the new council transition committees in transferring urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal from his Department. (AQT 773/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for the question. I was assured by my officials that the transfer and conferring of powers on local government authorities would be smooth and seamless. It is hugely important that it is smooth and seamless and that, first of all, in neighbourhood renewal and tackling deprivation, we do not find a cliff edge where difficulties arise at the transfer.

Secondly, there was the issue of public realm schemes and big urban regeneration schemes, which not only benefit town centres but are hugely important to the construction industry at a time when it has been under significant pressure. It was important, therefore, that those were smooth and seamless. You do not want to be in a position in which a scheme starts and then falls into difficulty because of

power being conferred on councils. We conducted a gateway review from the Department's side to see how DSD was geared up for the changes.

There is also the other side: the councils. We are moving into a period of real change. We will have new councils and significant numbers of new councillors. Many councils will have new staff at senior levels to deal with those issues. Councils are taking on new and enhanced additional responsibilities. It is not surprising, therefore, that concerns have been expressed about changes with neighbourhood renewal and urban regeneration and the fear that that will not be smooth and seamless. For that reason, I have been keeping a close watch. I have written to the chairs of the transition committees about meeting them to hear their views on where we are, and on the basis of those meetings and the gateway review, we will have a better idea of where this is going.

Mr Easton: Does the Minister accept that those functions are key to the survival of town centres and to tackling deprivation and economic inactivity in communities throughout Northern Ireland?

Mr McCausland: I agree entirely with that. As I said in answer to an earlier question, regeneration is one of the main thrusts of the Department. If we look at the two issues of areas of disadvantage and deprivation and town centres, we see that it is hugely important that that work proceeds smoothly, seamlessly and effectively. We do not want it to be disrupted in any way.

Town centres, which are providers of employment as well as having great social value, are under real pressure for a whole range of reasons: economic climate, out-of-town shopping, online shopping, and so on. Public realm schemes and town centre master plans have made a significant difference to many of those towns. They make them much more attractive for people to shop and to socialise. From the point of view of town centres, we need to keep that work moving smoothly.

One focus of the work to tackle deprivation through neighbourhood renewal, and so on, has to be on increasing employability and making people ready for employment, perhaps by supporting a social enterprise that creates employment. All those things are ways in which we help to address unemployment levels and increase levels of employability. Therefore, with town centres and neighbourhood renewal

work, those are hugely important aspects of what we do.

Welfare Reform: Outcomes

4. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister for Social Development, given that, if we do not do things differently, we cannot expect the outcomes to be different, to outline what measures we can put in place to ensure that the outcomes are different, albeit that I am greatly heartened by his earlier answer to Ian McCrea in which he stated that he shares the concern of Church leaders about welfare reform. (AQT 774/11-15)

Mr McCausland: This is an area in which certain things are in the public domain officially, and others seem to be in it unofficially. Certain things seem to be bogged down because of the inability of some people from one side of the Chamber to face up to the challenge that we need to do things differently and move on doing them differently.

Over a year ago, I indicated that we negotiated flexibilities for Northern Ireland for direct payments to landlords, split payments when those were necessary and fortnightly instead of monthly payments. Those things were identified at a very early stage when I was negotiating directly with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in London.

As the Member will be aware, since then, my Department has been doing ongoing work on and looking carefully at what other things need to be done differently. There were conversations not just with London but with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. By June last year, I had a package of measures that, I think, goes a very long way to making the situation in Northern Ireland much better than it is across the water. Those things have been tabled in the Executive on a number of occasions but have not quite managed to get through to discussion, so it is difficult for me to spell out all the detail.

I continue to have meetings in the hope that people will recognise that, if we do not move on the issue, we face a £1 billion penalty or levy from Westminster. I do not want to be in a situation in which we have to explain to people why, because of some people's intransigence, we are taking £1 billion out of the budget for health, education or whatever over a period of years. One billion pounds is an awful lot of money to have taken out.

Some people have suggested that we could do it differently and commission our own IT

system, the cost of which would be £1.62 billion. That is on top of the £1 billion. In anybody's finances, £2.62 billion is an awful lot of money to take from health, education, farming, deprivation — all the areas that we are trying to work on. I do not know where that will come from.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule. I understand that Ministers sometimes need more time because of the nature of the question.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his detailed answer, which is appreciated. If we are going to do things differently, which the Minister now accepts, they have to be seen to be different. The way that they will be seen to be different is in the lives of the vulnerable people whom we all represent. Given the caution of senior Church leaders following the experience in England, how can we satisfy ourselves that we are not signing up to something that will have a devastating effect on people?

Mr McCausland: It is because of those concerns and because I believe that we have a responsibility to show compassion to vulnerable people that I developed a package of measures, flexibilities and interventions.

Also, it is important to bear in mind the cost impact, not just of the penalties, levies and development of an IT system but of not moving forward. Over the course of 2016, various groups in Northern Ireland entitled to certain benefits will no longer be able to receive them because the Northern Ireland Assembly will have failed to move ahead fast enough. It will be the end of 2015 before we can get the legislation and the regulations through the Assembly. That is very close to the point at which the changes in IT would be such that people ceased to receive certain benefits. HMRC benefits, for example, would no longer be paid.

Having to say to families in Northern Ireland, "You could've had that benefit, but you can't have it because we have fuffed around, wasted so much time, talked so much and procrastinated for so long", would be the most appalling position to be in. I do not know how the Member opposite or others from his party could possibly explain that away to the vulnerable people who would suffer directly from that procrastination.

Giro d'Italia: Paramilitary Murals

5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Social Development what action his Department will take on paramilitary murals on the route of the Giro d'Italia, given his reference to its work on public realm activities. (AQT 775/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I do not have direct responsibility for the route or for what is or is not on it. I have to confess that I have not pursued with a map the full detail of the route. There are all sorts of paraphernalia — murals and other things — in all sorts of places that I am sure Members would prefer not to see there. On the other hand, there are murals that I find very pleasing, as they are cultural and historical and enrich our society.

3.30 pm

I was lobbied some time ago about the restoration of one particular piece of graffiti in east Belfast. There are some very attractive murals in east Belfast that tell its football and the shipbuilding history and other aspects. Whether it is those on the route, the situation that you have in Castlederg, where there is a paramilitary IRA memorial on public property or some of the paramilitary memorials of a republican nature at the side of roads, the problem has been around for quite some time. I want to see a position adopted in Northern Ireland where we celebrate our culture and our heritage. There is a long tradition of murals in Northern Ireland. I think that the first ones appeared around 1912. They were very fine and reflected the unionist perspective at the time. I think that King William featured extensively on a number of them.

However, on the issue of offensive things, this is not a one-sided thing, yet sometimes people seem to think that it is. There are challenges, and it is an issue for both communities. I hope that the situation can be addressed over time. We have done a lot of work with reimagining. I have seen quite a number of paramilitary murals in different areas being replaced by much more acceptable ones.

Mr Speaker: Time has gone. That concludes Question Time. Before we move on to the question for urgent oral answer, I invite Members to take their ease as we change the top Table.

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

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

KPL Job Losses

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Cathal Ó hOisín has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the steps InvestNI can take to offset the negative impact of KPL contracts going into administration.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): In partnership with the local jobs and benefit office, a redundancy clinic has been organised for 2.00 pm on Wednesday 26 February at the Elk inn in Toomebridge. Advice will be provided not only on benefit entitlements but on business start-up support for those who may be considering self-employment as an option.

Invest NI will continue to work proactively with the other stakeholders in the area, including the council, the chamber of commerce and the local enterprise agency, to promote the wide breadth of support available for those businesses in the area looking to grow in order to stimulate and encourage employment opportunities in the locality.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer and for coming to the House to answer the question.

I do not necessarily share her assessment of Invest NI, as my constituency of East Derry is one of the lowest recipients of funding from it. It is sometimes referred to in the vernacular as "Invest NO". However, the Minister will be aware that 202 direct employees have lost their jobs and probably the same number again in employees of unpaid subcontractors and attendant businesses. In a town of fewer than 3,000, that is more than a devastating blow.

Will she recognise the enterprise, experience, skills, workforce and equipment that there is on the ground in Dungiven, that these jobs need to be done, and that the contracts need to be honoured? Should any rescue package come forward, and I am led to believe that one is being worked on as we speak, will the Minister give her full support to that and ensure the delivery of any such package?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his point. I do not think that his preamble added anything to what he had to say about the 202 workers in KPL, which, of course, is what we are here to voice our concern about. I agree that there is a skills base in the area that, in and of itself, will be a catalyst, I hope, for someone else to have a look at the skills available.

There are a number of contracts that KPL are involved with. Some are with Roads Service and others are with private institutions such as BT and NIE. We have made contact with all those individual organisations. They are expressing a willingness to work, but they have to do so within a legal framework. In many cases, the next tender will take over the jobs in which KPL have been involved. I hope that, particularly for the subcontractors, they will be able to work with whatever organisation takes over the work that is available.

I recall standing here talking about Mivan a short time ago. I said that the skills would, hopefully, provide a base from which we would be able to work. I am glad to say that that has been the case in respect of Mivan, and I very much hope that it can be the case for KPL as well.

Mr Campbell: The news broke on Friday, and I spoke to the administrator at lunchtime on Friday and again today. It appears that there is a considerable volume of work there with large employing bases, which the Minister has outlined, such as the DRD Roads Service, NIE and BT. Will the Minister endeavour to have discussions, particularly with her Executive colleague and others, to ensure that former KPL employees in the skilled work base that is there are offered employment by companies that will carry out the required work that still needs to be done?

Mrs Foster: If companies are looking for workers, they will find them with skills in abundance in relation to KPL. We will assist any companies that want to come forward to us in looking for help in relation to job fund applications and what have you.

I have already had a brief opportunity to speak to my colleague the Regional Development Minister in relation to the matters, and he is looking into this, as you would expect him to, in terms of the agencies involved with KPL. I am sure that that is the case for the private companies as well, which have assured us that they have contingencies in place in relation to their customers. Of course, that is not the question that we are talking about here today. The question that we are talking about relates to those who have found out that they no longer have a job. We will do all that we can to support them, of course, and assist them in finding a job or starting their own business, and we will do that through Invest NI.

Mrs Overend: The news that 202 people have been made redundant by KPL has come as a blow to the economy in east Londonderry, and our thoughts are with those who now seek alternative employment. Will the Minister confirm that the main reason for the company going into administration is connected to its property development side and not its previous core business of maintenance work for utility companies across Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I am sorry, I cannot confirm that. I have only speculation in that respect, just like the lady has. So, unfortunately, I cannot confirm that that is the case, but I know that KPL had a good contract base, so one can only conjecture from that.

Mr Dallat: I have listened carefully to the Minister, and I am pleased that the Minister for Regional Development is present. I, along with Patsy McGlone, look forward to meeting them after this. Does the Minister agree that this is a time when there has to be absolute unity across the Chamber to address the needs and the plight of people? In the past, Minister, you have shown a warmth towards a special economic task force to address the particular needs of east Derry. Are you still of that mind? Will you help us establish such a task force to identify the problems and to promote the advantages of east Derry?

Mrs Foster: I very much welcome the Member's plea for unity on the issue. This is not a time for political point scoring around the Chamber in respect of agencies. This is a time when we have to look to those people who have been made redundant and, indeed, the subcontractors, who I know are very concerned about their future as well. We need to find a way to address those concerns.

As I said, there will be a jobs and benefits clinic on Wednesday of this week. We are open to anyone who wants to come to us to look at starting a business or employing the people who have been made redundant to see whether there is any way that we can help in that respect. We stand ready to meet Members from east Londonderry or elsewhere, and the Chairman of the Enterprise Committee spoke to me today about the issue. We, as Executive members, will do all that we can. All I ask is that everyone works together.

Mr Kinahan: It is good to hear that so much has been done for those who have been made redundant. In the Ballyclare area, everyone was looking forward to the Ballyclare West bypass and the meadows, particularly to take away the congestion in all the surrounding area. Will the Minister work with other colleagues and maybe with Treasury to try to find ways, whether through public-private finance or other ways, to make sure that we get that project finished as soon as possible?

Mrs Foster: I imagine that there will be contingency plans in place for the different projects that KPL was involved with. I am sure that the Member will take the matter up with the appropriate Minister to make sure that that is the case.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Final Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Budget Bill [NIA 32/11-15] do now pass. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Alex Attwood, who I understand was interrupted in full flow.

Mr Attwood: The full flow will conclude shortly.

As I was saying, the report produced and published by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister confirms the continued rise between 2011-12 and 2020-21 of child poverty levels in Northern Ireland, both relative poverty and absolute poverty. Child poverty figures have increased relentlessly year-on-year in those 10 years. There are a number of factors around that but, in the earlier period of that decade, the impact of the welfare changes and welfare cuts has a material and real impact upon those figures. The figures confirm that, as we speak, relative poverty for children is 23%. It will be near 31% in seven or eight years. Absolute poverty is up from 28% by 10 points to 38%-plus, and so on and so forth. My argument with the Minister is this: does that give him and the Executive more of an argument to deploy regarding the welfare proposal?

I will make a final point before my concluding remarks. The entire thesis of universal credit and welfare reform, as engineered by Lord Freud, Iain Duncan Smith and Treasury, is to make work pay, and universal credit is predicated on making work pay by having in place suitable childcare provision to enable access to work and training. That is at the heart of the thesis. Make it pay and make it pay because there is affordable and accessible childcare. While there have been some interventions, including through Bright Start in Northern Ireland, we do not have in place the legislation, the architecture or the appropriate and reasonable costings to ensure that people who may wish to go into work have in place accessible and affordable childcare.

We do not have a premium piece of legislation like the Childcare Act 2006 that they have in England. In the North, provision is limited and

costs are high. The Employers For Childcare organisation has said that the costs of childcare here are some of the highest in Europe, and Save the Children has said that evidence is emerging from 2012 that mothers in low-paid work are thinking about leaving work because of the costs associated with childcare.

3.45 pm

All those circumstances — be it the profile on incapacity, that of affordable and accessible childcare, or that of our housing and its segregated nature — are arguments that, if fully deployed, may get a fuller response from London. It is my view — I have made it clear before — that my sense — in some instances, it may be more than a sense of things — is that those arguments have not been fully deployed. If they have been deployed at all, they have not been deployed as robustly as they should.

Taking all those factors together, it seems to me that the Minister should consider doing a number of things. First, I would encourage him to quickly meet the children's alliance, made up of 70 different organisations and stretching from Save the Children across welfare organisations and so on and so forth, in order to hear from the horse's mouth the true character of child poverty in the North, the true impact of welfare changes to date and the impact of those that are coming down the road. The scale of those changes is still uncertain. According to the Chancellor, we are halfway down the austerity road, as he might put it. If the Minister of Finance is to define his tenure in office, maybe somewhat differently from that of his predecessor, he might be well-advised to listen to the argument about the profile of childcare in the North from those advocates and those children.

Secondly, the Minister should consider whether, to get the argument over the line, the negotiations with DWP now need to be escalated beyond the limitations — I use that word advisedly — of DSD, as other negotiations with London have been. He should make his own assessment, as a Minister, of whether he believes that all the arguments about housing and incapacity have been deployed and, if so, whether they have been deployed fully. That is separate from the growing narrative in Britain about the failures of the universal credit IT system, the evidence that it is the poorest who are hit hardest, and the fact that even the Treasury and DWP have had to recognise that they have to slow down the implementation of universal credit until the far side of the next election. All that was touched on, if not fully elaborated on, in the letter that was sent by 26

Church of England bishops, 11 Methodist chairs, a group of Quakers and members of the United Reformed Church and that was published in the papers last week.

It was curious that, in response to a question earlier about the appalling treatment of Anna Lo as a citizen and a public representative, the deputy First Minister, Mr Speaker, sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker — you could maybe be Mr Speaker yet, but maybe not depending on how things work out — said that it was time to "get angry" — those were his words — and to "raise our voices". On that issue, I completely agree. I wonder whether the deputy First Minister agrees that it is also time to "get angry" and to "raise our voices" on the issue on welfare and the withering impact that it will have on so many of our people now and in the future. Would he agree that we should raise the collective voice of the Executive, to collectively go to DWP, Treasury and the British Prime Minister, to collectively make the argument on behalf of the citizens and communities of the North and to deploy all the arguments that should have been deployed robustly but that, in my view, have failed to be deployed robustly by DSD? The Church of England ministers and others were echoing the comment of Archbishop Nichols, who has just been elevated to the post of cardinal in Rome. What did all those churchmen say? Half a million people have visited food banks in the UK since last Easter; one in five mothers reports regularly skipping meals to better feed their children; tens of thousands of older people must choose between heating or eating; wages have stayed flat while food prices have gone up by 30% in just five years; and more than half the people using food banks have been put in that situation by cutbacks to and failures in the benefits system.

There was an acute moral imperative to act, the churchmen wrote, concluding:

"We call on government to do its part: acting to investigate food markets that are failing, to make sure that work pays, and to ensure that the welfare system provides a robust last line of defence against hunger."

If that is the narrative of Church leaders in England and Wales, the narrative is worse in Northern Ireland because of the factors that were outlined during this and other debates.

What was the response of the British Prime Minister? In a rather high-handed, dismissive way, he declared that welfare reforms were morally right, stating:

"For me the moral case for welfare reform is every bit as important as making the numbers add up".

It was Mr Maginness, who has now left us, I think, who in the last debate referred to bean counters. It seems to me, and I trust that this does not apply to anybody in this Chamber, that the British Prime Minister was indicating that he was a bean counter who did not recognise how the beans were falling for all those in welfare need.

Mr Wilson: I had not intended to speak but, having heard the thrust of the last speech, I thought that it was important that we got balance in the discussion. The Budget Bill is about more than welfare reform, but the job of the Finance Minister is made much more difficult by the kind of attitude that we have seen towards welfare reform and the response of the Assembly and Executive to welfare reform.

There will, as was pointed out, be demands on the Budget next year, and the Minister has to make provision for those demands as a result of the way in which the Assembly and Executive have dragged their feet on welfare reform. He has had to make — and this is in the public domain — unexpected provision in this year's Budget of £5 million per month, and that will escalate as a result of the fact that we have not introduced the changes that are required here and which are being introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom.

It is significant that the SDLP feels so vulnerable on this issue that its Member who spoke on the Budget Bill felt that he had to major on a justification for the way in which it has led Sinn Féin by the nose on welfare reform. It has created the situation where the second major party in the Assembly is now almost afraid to move on an issue that it knows it has to move on. It knows that it cannot forever ignore the changes that are required to the welfare system.

At the beginning of this process, we recognised that there were things that would create difficulties and things that we believed the Government were wrong in. As a result, we sought concessions, and Nelson McCausland took the lead on that. In his speech, Mr Attwood suggested that the arguments for change had not been fully employed. He was the Minister for Social Development when we started to make the arguments, so if they were not fully employed, instead of pointing his finger all around the place at everybody else, he ought to consider whether he fully made the

case for changes. I suspect that he knows the answer to that, and the answer —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a moment or two.

I suspect that he knows the answer to that. He knows that the case was made, was made robustly and was made with some success, but that there is not a chance that we will get any further change from the Government at Westminster on welfare reform.

It was significant that, during his speech — I have listened to the Chairman of the Social Development Committee on this issue on a number of occasions — he made the argument that we have not fully pursued all the issues, yet I still do not know what changes he wants the Social Development Minister, the Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to pursue.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that the Member will understand my confusion. He voted against the Welfare Reform Bill at Westminster, so I wonder what set of principles he is adhering to this afternoon.

Mr Wilson: Of course, we voted against some of the provisions in the Welfare Reform Bill at Westminster. In Northern Ireland, we have succeeded in changing some of the things that went through at Westminster.

It is very easy for us in Northern Ireland to get parochial and think that all the problems that we suffer are not suffered elsewhere. We can get dead inward-looking. I assure the Member that there is very little sympathy at Westminster for special concessions for Northern Ireland. At Westminster, Ministers have said to me, "We do not have any votes in Northern Ireland. We are getting it in the neck for welfare reform here in England. What justification can we give our constituents for making special provisions for people in Northern Ireland but not for them?" If people thought about the arguments that they put forward in the House, they would realise how ridiculous they are. They are asking Ministers and politicians in England, whose constituents face the same issues that we do, to make concessions for us.

Already, some measures that we asked to be changed because we believed that they would place a difficulty on the public purse are coming to pass in England. Those measures will not come to pass here because we got special

concessions. We have already secured significant changes. We have secured a change — even this does not seem to satisfy the Member for West Belfast — on the spare room subsidy — the bedroom tax, as he wishes to call it. I do not care what it is called. We believed that it would lead to disruption for existing tenants, would be difficult to implement because we did not have sufficient housing stock to move people into and would lead to rent arrears. That is already happening in other parts of the United Kingdom, but it will not happen here because existing tenants will be exempt.

We will have to pay for that, of course. The Member says that not only should we have been given that concession but we should be beating down the door of the Treasury and saying, "We do not want to pay for it either". He talked about it being time to get angry, but I think that it is time to get real. What kind of world does he live in? He has never had to talk to Treasury Ministers about some of these things. They already think that they subsidise Northern Ireland too much. That is an important concession. It is one that Nelson McCausland secured and the Executive have agreed to finance.

4.00 pm

Another issue that caused great concern was the direct payment of rent to tenants. It may well be OK for Duncan Smith and some of the other Cabinet Ministers who earn substantial sums to think, "Well, you can budget." However, we recognise that it is difficult for people who are on low incomes. If they are given the rent in their hand and are then hit by a crisis in the house, they may well spend that rent money on something else and get into arrears. Of course, that would eventually fall on the public purse. We secured direct payment to landlords rather than tenants.

It is the same with the monthly payment of benefit. Monthly payments may be OK if you are on a large income. However, if you are on a very small income and get a big lump of money at the beginning of the month, by the time that four weeks have passed, you may be in difficulties because you have spent it too early. Again, the theory was, "Well, it will teach people to budget." I do not think that Ministers who thought that have dealt with too many constituents who live on a low income and find that difficult. If people have a whole pile of money handed to them at the beginning of the month and then some emergency comes up, it may be spent early, leaving them with nothing at the end of the month. We have secured a

default position whereby people can have money paid to them every two weeks.

It is the same when it comes to split payments. Again, we were able to obtain certain concessions so that people have options. The Executive have even committed to not changing the current arrangements for the payment of housing benefit for rates. That will cost £30 million in the first year, but there is a commitment to do that so that people on low income will not be adversely affected.

So we have obtained all these concessions, and I know, having spoken on this in the House of Commons, that English MPs, Welsh MPs and Scottish MPs are jealous of our position in Northern Ireland. Yet there is a belief among the Members opposite that, somehow or other, we can go and knock on the door and say, "It is not enough. We want more." That kind of Oliver Twist politics will not work.

Mr D Bradley: You are shouting.

Mr Wilson: I am not shouting; I am just emphasising my point.

It will not work. The problem is this: with one hand, we are holding out the bowl for more; with the other hand, we are handing £5 million a month back to the Exchequer. That will rise to £105 million a year and eventually to over £200 million a year.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Attwood: Many of the comments made by Mr Wilson prove that he has become too much the Westminster man. After all, it was he who proposed at the Executive that pensions be dealt with by a legislative consent motion. He has spent most of his contribution to this debate relying on the arguments used by English MPs and English Ministers. The Member comes into the Chamber and uses the analogy of Oliver Twist holding out the begging bowl in reference to the plight being suffered by thousands of people in Northern Ireland. How dare he use that language in our context?

Mr Wilson: The analogy has probably escaped him. I was trying to paint the ironic picture that we hold out one hand and say, "We want more" — his own words were that we have not got enough and we want more — while we hold out the other hand and say, "By the way, here is £5 million a month. Take that £5 million a month,

and take more." If the irony is lost on the Member, I may have to spell it out for him.

I will come to his point on child poverty in a moment. The public will find it incomprehensible that, on the one hand, we say that we cannot afford to go down this route. On the other hand, however, we will quite happily give away money willy-nilly. That is one of the problems that the Finance Minister faces with this Budget. He is being hampered by an unwillingness on the other side of the Chamber to understand the reality of the situation. It is difficult to defend the position of giving money back to the Treasury monthly, and one of the reasons why I feel that we have had so much discussion on that from the Member for West Belfast is that he has to hide his party's embarrassment on the issue.

He went on to say that we will have an increase in child poverty and need to do more to deal with it. I agree with him on the issue of childcare. I had a meeting this morning with the people who administer childcare vouchers in Northern Ireland, and they indicated to me that the cost of childcare here is now around £158 a week. The Member is quite right: that places many people in a situation in which they have to choose between going out to work and paying almost all the money that they get from that on childcare or staying at home and remaining economically inactive. That is something that the Executive should address. It becomes much more difficult, of course, if, at the same time, the very resources that might be used to address that are given away by the Executive to Westminster because of our unwillingness to do something that we know that, at the end of the day — although we might do so kicking and screaming — we are going to do, because we cannot afford the other consequences.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: It is not simply the financial consequences; there are other consequences. Before I move on to those, however, I will give way.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way yet again. He has been most generous. Will he concede at least that, over the past seven years, the Executive led by Sinn Féin and the DUP have singularly failed to agree a childcare strategy? Will he therefore accept that some of the blame lies with a lack of political leadership?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before you resume, I will make two points. First, I think

that we should recall just what it is that we are discussing here today. Secondly, Assembly Broadcasting has indicated that you are speaking between two microphones, Sammy. I am sure that you would not want it to sound as though you are speaking from a spare bedroom. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Frew: You need to shout, Sammy.

Mr Wilson: I thought that I did not need a microphone. According to Members opposite, there was no requirement for a microphone.

The whole issue of the childcare strategy and child poverty in Northern Ireland has been dealt with. I know that the Member is fixated on the childcare strategy of the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister, but child poverty will really be addressed by the actions of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, because there is no surer way of taking children and families out of poverty than by putting people into work. We have a Minister who has been more successful in doing that by attracting more inward investment to this region than any other region outside the south-east of England, even during the middle of a recession, and more than any other Minister during the life of the Assembly since 2000. That, of course, has helped to take a lot of children out of child poverty and a lot of families out of poverty.

However, there is one worrying thing, which Members opposite, who are dragging their feet on the issue, have to answer and which will create even more difficulties for the Finance Minister in the Budget. As a result of our becoming out of sync with the rest of the United Kingdom on this issue, the 1,600 jobs in the Social Security Agency that are currently administering benefits for other parts of the United Kingdom are being put in jeopardy. They are being put in jeopardy because, if our system is different from that in the rest of the United Kingdom, we will not have the expertise, the ability or even the computer systems to administer the benefits that we currently administer. There are 1,600 people who, potentially, will lose their jobs. As a result, their families, and the children in those families, are likely to find themselves in poorer conditions than they would have been in had we gone along with what we know is inevitable as far as welfare reform is concerned.

I do not know how soon the Minister is going to have to make his mind up on this, but the other thing for which provision will have to be made in the Budget as a result of this foot-dragging exercise is what we do as computer systems get turned off and universal credit is gradually

introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom. As jobseeker's allowance, income support, employment and support allowance and housing benefit systems get turned off, will we have to purchase them? Will we have to maintain them, because we will be keeping the old benefit system going? What will that cost? What implications will that have for the Budget over the next year and the year after that?

I suspect that that is why the parties opposite have engaged in the kind of rhetoric they have engaged in over this part of the Budget. They know that we are storing up consequences over the next year and the year after that: the ability to administer the benefits to people who are currently on the system and the ability to keep the jobs of those who currently administer them. Do not forget this: some of these jobs are located on the edges of some areas of highest unemployment in north and west Belfast. When it comes to those people losing their jobs, I would like to see the SDLP and Sinn Féin explaining, "We did it for the best of reasons". I do not think that that will wear too well with those impacted by it. Billions of pounds are being spent on other things in the Budget, which, of course, we could and should be debating, but this is crucial because it will have the impact I described.

In his intervention, the Member said that I had taken the stance on pension reform that we should simply put it through by legislative consent motion. He is quite right; I did. I happily admit that I did. It was borne out of the experience we had with welfare reform. We could have run into exactly the same position with pension reform. I suspect that the SDLP and Sinn Féin learnt their lesson and did not get themselves on the same hook with pension reform as they did with welfare reform. They kicked up and shouted about pension reform, but, when the Finance Minister brought the Bill to the House, they had the option to use the blocking mechanism if they were so concerned about the impact it was going to have on tens of thousands of people across Northern Ireland. They did not use it; they did not use the petition of concern. They huffed and they puffed and they put amendments down, but, at the end of the day, they allowed it to go through.

One of the reasons why I was keen that we should not go through the same with pension reform was that it would have landed us with another £250 million bill. Thankfully, we did not have to do it. If the parties opposite learnt their lesson on pension reform from welfare reform, then —

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will give way in a minute.

If they learnt that lesson, I hope that, during this session of the Assembly, they will do with welfare reform what they did with pension reform — bite the bullet and do what they know they have to do. Otherwise, the Finance Minister will have a much more difficult time with the Budget that he has to take through.

4.15 pm

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for giving way. First, I will borrow his phrase, though it would not be the phrase I would normally use: have you learnt your lesson on pensions legislation? If the Executive had listened to the advice that you gave, we would not have come to the Floor, and we would not have had the opportunity to build into the legislation some opportunities for some workers now, and some opportunities for other categories of worker in the future after review, on pension provision. Do you not regret your argument, which you were quite rigorous about, of denying to this place the opportunity to look after the interests of our working people in the way that that legislation at least did? I will come back later on other things.

Mr Wilson: At the danger of being ruled out of order as we wander further and further away from the issue, I will take that particular question. No, I do not regret it, and I believe that one of the things that has happened is as a result perhaps of the experience that the parties opposite have found with the welfare reform issue and the tangle that they have got themselves into. We have learnt to deal with some of this legislation a bit more responsibly.

It has always been my view that, if something is devolved, of course it should be decided on by the devolved Administration. I have explained my position that, having seen the tangle that we got into with welfare reform, it was always my view that there was not the maturity to deal with some of these issues, and that people would simply engage in a knee-jerk reaction that would be very expensive and could cost us a lot of money in the longer run. As I said, I am glad that people, having got into one tangle, did not allow themselves to get into another tangle.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way, yes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I have no intention of stifling debate, but the debate is on the Budget Bill. I have allowed latitude

because there are issues that have direct implications for the spending programme going forward, but I am coming close to the end of my patience on that, because we now have started debating the whole welfare issue. Welfare reform will be debated on a separate occasion; I just remind people of that.

Did you give way to Mr Allister?

Mr Wilson: I did; I gave way.

Mr Allister: Given that the knock-on effect of welfare reform has very severe budgetary impacts, as the Member has been outlining, if that logjam and belligerence continues, does the Member think there comes a point where the conclusion might be reached that it would be better if welfare policy was not devolved, and that we might be better to petition for the return of it to a pure parity basis with Westminster?

Mr Wilson: I hope that that situation will not arise, but I have to say that the Member has hit on the last point that I wanted to make, and that is the long-term consequences. All I can say is that, if we continue down this road, it will become much more difficult for the Finance Minister in future, when there are particular considerations for which we do need support, to say to the Government at Westminster, "We need support for this", because of the attitude — I spoke to Ministers in England and, indeed, Ministers expressed their view publicly on the issue here — that we are so flush with money that Westminster does not really need to help us out in special situations.

That is the long-term consequence, and if that were to be the case, maybe it would be better, if we find ourselves in that logjam, to allow these things to be decided at Westminster. However, given the changes that have been made, I think it is important that we persevere and try to keep this issue with the Northern Ireland Assembly but deal with it in a rational and reasonable way. The longer-term consequences of that kind of irresponsible — and I mean irresponsible — behaviour will come back to bite us, and unfortunately will make the Minister's job far, far harder in the future as he tangles with the Treasury over issues such as corporation tax and others. They will want to hold on to every penny, and they will employ the argument, "We believe that Northern Ireland can finance these things itself, because Northern Ireland seems to take the luxury, even when it has been given changes through certain legislation, of still wanting to hold back, and is prepared to pay penalties for it". That is the

real, worrying, long-term consequence, as well as the immediate payments, the job losses, the inability to make payments available to those on benefits as computer systems go offline and the longer-term costs of having to purchase those computer systems.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly, and I will try to stick to the item, which is the Budget. I have listened attentively to many of the speeches delivered, not just today but over the course of the debates on the Budget Bill. It is clear that there have been two distinct types of contribution. The first group is those who appear satisfied with the status quo, and the second has some more ambition.

In my opinion, we need a lot more ambition if we are to fulfil the expectations that people have placed on us. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the first group I referred to includes many of the Minister's party colleagues who, during the debate, did much to support him and his Budget. Surprisingly for me, however, that group also contains members of Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party. I imagine that many of those individuals have little faith in the Budget, for reasons that I will outline in a moment, but, sadly, they still try to defend it for the sole reason that they were trapped with it some 35 months or three years ago.

We need to get a grip of ourselves and develop some meaningful vision, hope and ambition. We need to use our public expenditure to maximise economic benefit. Let me draw attention to the Scottish Government. We need to take a leaf out of their book. They did not run scared. They stood on their own feet and stood their ground. They have sought and obtained authority to issue bonds in their own right, and, I understand, subject to correction, that they will be able to raise up to £2.2 billion or £2.3 billion for urgent developments. Why can we not find a mechanism of doing that? Why not issue an education bond, to use for the badly-needed building of new schools? Why not a health bond to improve and replace health facilities that are not fit for purpose? Perhaps we could even call it an "Ulster Health Bond".

In his speech at the Second Stage of the Bill, my colleague Pat Ramsey explained that one of the reasons why the SDLP voted against the Budget in the first place was that it failed to provide clarity on student finance. Many of the students of today, who are leaving university or graduating and beginning their careers in the coming months, were still at school when we first talked about this Budget. Yet we are still stuck with this same Budget.

My colleague Alban Maginness, who added a bit of colour to proceedings, spoke about the dreariness of these debates. His assessment of the limp dialogue, and the reason for it, was very accurate. There is little or no ambition here; little or no effort is made to maximise the full benefits that could flow from a proper budgetary process. There is little to add to our economic recovery. And I have serious concerns that this Budget process is not a real Budget at all but little more than a financial management process.

In Westminster, Dublin and Edinburgh, when they discuss a Budget, they have a meaningful, robust — sometimes very robust and tough — annual process that generates wide participation and healthy debate, good ideas, improvements and the best possible outcomes. It aids discussion and airs imaginative proposals that help towards the development of initiatives that grow the economy, create wealth and spend it in ways that best support the community. Sadly, in my opinion, we have failed to do so here.

Every time the SDLP proposed a new idea or suggested a bit of ambition on behalf of our community, Members who originally voted for this Budget shouted us down. I suggest that Members, individually and collectively, should reflect further on the whole point of devolution. To me, it means that we have the option of doing our own thing and being flexible for the benefit of the population of Northern Ireland. It means that we have the benefit of being able to think outside the box, act innovatively, be creative and maximise value for money.

When this Budget was published originally, the SDLP outlined seven key reasons why it was necessary for us to be more ambitious and to be prepared to do our own thing. All seven issues are a lot more pressing now, three years later, than they were in 2011. There was no Programme for Government at that time, the cart was placed before the horse and, consequently, the first problem was that there was no coherent, sustainable, strategic thinking. We are now seeing the legacy of that process, particularly in our health planning, where we must think and act strategically in all that we do.

The second point was that, clearly, the Budget did not provide sufficient money for health. That was illustrated recently by the need for an extra £30 million to deal with hospital admissions following the much-publicised problems in the Royal Victoria Hospital's accident and emergency department.

My third point is that in the middle of a global economic crisis, the Budget gave little priority to job creation. Today, well over one in five of our young people are still out of work. I agree with the former Finance Minister that it is useful to get people back into work if you have work for them. However, our biggest difficulty here is that we have not created the jobs for them. A large number of our young people — we all know who they are because we all have neighbours and relatives — have been forced to leave these shores, many of them ending up in Australia, just to find work. We are risking the development across our community of a lost generation.

My fourth point is that the Budget gave insufficient resources to education. Subsequently, we have seen that the common funding formula has created all sorts of complications and the proposed closure of many rural schools.

My fifth point is that the purpose and distribution of the social investment fund was another serious concern when this Budget was published. Until recently, the money went unspent and has now been allocated to a number of projects, some of them questionable. We remain totally unconvinced that this fund is anywhere near the best way to support the vulnerable in our society.

The Budget failed to recognise that public expenditure is and can be a major economic lever. To better stimulate the economy, we have proposed a number of options, including increased capital expenditure, particularly for social housing. Sadly, that has been resisted by the party on the opposite Benches, which seems uninterested in helping close to 10,000 — the last number that I had was 9,878 — households that were accepted as statutory homeless by the Housing Executive.

Our final reason for being unhappy about this Budget in 2011 was its absolute failure to identify any new revenue streams. As I have said, the detailed SDLP revenue proposals that we put forward prior to the publication of the 2011 Budget were shouted down, in my opinion, because of a lack of ambition.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: Yes, in two seconds.

We received a promise from the previous Finance Minister that additional revenue-raising proposals to the tune of £900 million would be incorporated into the Budget between 2011 and

2015. When I give way, he might update us on what has happened there.

4.30 pm

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that it was very difficult to take seriously the revenue streams that the SDLP suggested when it included the sale of the Speaker's house, the sale of an airport that the Executive did not own and £80 million of developers' contributions from the construction industry at a time when that industry was going bust? Will he accept that no great ideas were coming from his party?

Dr McDonnell: I accept that it is difficult to take money from someone who goes bust, but I do not accept that there was not a pile of ideas that were well thought out. The former Finance Minister has chosen not to answer the question that I put to him and to ignore 90% of the SDLP proposals. I still ask him where the £900 million that he intended to raise went to. During the Bill's Second Stage debate, my colleague Dominic Bradley put that question to the current Minister, and maybe he will be more forthcoming than the previous one.

For all the critical reasons that I outlined, I again appeal to the Minister and to the House to look much more imaginatively at things in the future. The SDLP has been criticised throughout the debate for daring to say that we can do things differently, and we will not shirk from that. We will hold our ambitions for the public good. We will strive to do better. We have never claimed to be perfect, but it is worth thinking outside the box occasionally. There is room for thinking outside the box, and I make the point again that the Scottish Government have done that again and again. Somehow or other, we seem to be unable to take a leaf out of their book. I am not saying that to be politically controversial or to annoy the Minister or any of his colleagues. I am saying it because there are ways and means.

We are small, with a population of fewer than two million people, and we are very mobile and can do things and be innovative in a way that a larger community, nation or group cannot. We will strive to do our best. I am sorry if that upsets people, but we believe that our people deserve better.

It is imperative that we properly assess any possible alternative proposals, whether those are from the SDLP, the wider economic community, particularly economists, or from wider society. It is imperative that we challenge orthodoxy and stagnation, because stagnation

brings only a dead hand to everything that it touches. It is imperative that we assess, through the establishment of a Scottish-style commission, the options to extend and to deepen devolution and the opportunities to take control of additional fiscal levers.

I emphasise that, as I said, because of our small size, we can be nimble, innovative and flexible in a global market and provide our workers with the skills that are required to meet rapidly evolving business needs. Finally, if we are bold, brave and ambitious and take risks for the benefits of industry, business and wider society, the public will thank us and appreciate it. They will not thank us for stagnation.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank the Members who contributed — I think that I am thanking them — to the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. I believe that, in their own inimitable style, Members have sought to add to the debate. They have probably gone beyond the subject matter, but they have certainly added to the debate, and I welcome the fact that Members raised relevant issues. I am not trying to avert my gaze from anyone in particular in respect of relevance.

There will always be one or two who seek to use Budget Bill debates as a platform for issues that are tenuous to the legislation, but I welcome all input in these debates. I emphasise that it is important for Members to have the opportunity to debate this financial legislation and to air their views and represent their constituents. I will do my best to respond to the points raised as fully as possible.

However, before I do that, I once again thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel and its Chairman, Mr McKay, for their assistance in the accelerated passage of the Bill through the Assembly. The support of the Committee will enable the Bill to receive Royal Assent by 31 March and allow a smooth continuation of public services into the new financial year.

I will now turn to some of the issues raised, and I begin with Mr McKay. In his capacity as Chair of the Committee, he talked about the review of the financial process. In particular, he mentioned the ongoing discussions between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Finance and Personnel on developing a memorandum of understanding for the Budget process. As I understand it, the discussions are going well, and I encourage them. I hope that they are fruitful, but he will know — it is an issue habitually raised by Mr Cree on occasions such as this — that it is my view that our whole Budget process needs to

be overhauled. We need better oversight and a bit less debate, but no less scrutiny.

The current process owes its origins to the direct rule era. I think that dispensing with an old, out-of-date and archaic direct rule process is a good thing. I welcome and encourage the discussions on a memorandum of understanding, but I think that moving forward with the review is a far better way to deal with the issues that the Member and the Committee have raised in the past.

Mr Girvan raised a couple of issues, in particular about infrastructure. He emphasised its importance not just in improving public service delivery and giving a short-term boost to the construction sector but in bringing in foreign direct investment. The Budget before us includes several major investments in infrastructure across Northern Ireland. I am particularly pleased that it includes a loan of £25 million in this financial year to the University of Ulster for its redevelopment in the centre of Belfast and the relocation of its Jordanstown campus to the centre of Belfast. Significant road projects include early investment in the Magherafelt bypass project.

Mr Girvan also mentioned financial management, and he was right to do so. Sometimes, on occasions such as this, we forget the utterly disastrous financial management that we inherited when devolution was re-established some seven years ago and the huge habitual underspends right across Departments that resulted in money being lost and returned to Treasury. It is worth noting that since the inception of the Budget exchange scheme a number of years ago, a scheme that my predecessor and Finance Ministers from other devolved regions successfully negotiated, we have lost no money back to Treasury. That is despite the scheme's fairly tight constraints on what we can carry forward each year: £10 million in capital and roughly £50 million in current expenditure. We do not always highlight enough how much better the financial management is now in all Departments compared with a number of years ago.

Mr Bradley started by expressing his view that the Assembly was not held in the highest esteem. I sincerely hope that no one else is watching today — the debate will not have improved anyone's view on whether the Assembly should be held in high esteem. He raised a number of issues, and I want to deal with a couple of them now before trying to deal with welfare reform, if you permit me, Mr Deputy Speaker, towards the end of the debate.

The Member mentioned the non-movement so far on the reform of education — specifically the "Education and Skills Authority Bill", for want of a better name — and the pressures that that puts on education and library boards. I accept that and that the pressure frequently manifests itself in staffing issues. He expressed some concern about the impact on delivery of capital projects, and he is right to be concerned. We should all be concerned to ensure that the money for all the capital projects that we want, particularly building new schools and repairing existing ones, is being spent where it should be.

However, I want to point out to the Member that, although there may be some validity in his being worried, that concern has not manifested itself in reality. This year, the £2.7 million in capital surrendered by the Department of Education was as a result of greater than anticipated capital receipts. So, in short, the money that should have been spent is being spent and that is out of the Department of Education's capital budget of around £109 million. So I can understand where the Member's concerns are coming from, but I do not think that they are borne out by the reality, which is that only a small amount is being surrendered by the Department of Education, and that is as a result of better than anticipated capital receipts.

The Member also mentioned welfare reform, which I will come to later. He moved on from that to the economic pact. Unfortunately, he seemed somewhat clueless about its contents. I had cause to go and look at it myself last week. The PDFs of the document are still available on the OFMDFM and Downing Street websites. He will recall that there are many aspects of it that are well discussed in the public domain and in the House. I think that I have fielded questions about it in the House, principally around corporation tax and the commitment that the Prime Minister has given to taking an early decision on it after the Scottish referendum.

There has been an extension of our reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing profile by some £100 million over the next two years, as long as it is spent on shared education and shared housing projects. Of course, there is also work ongoing on the commitments contained in the economic pact to explore implementing enterprise zones in Northern Ireland and the possible devolution of additional fiscal powers.

The Member also mentioned the financial process, as did other Members. I think that he was encouraging me. I am not sure that

somebody who tries to be as consensual as the Member does was suggesting that I ignore the Minister of Education's concerns over the review of the financial process. How I wish that I could ignore the concerns of the Education Minister. I believe that the concerns that the Minister has expressed have been addressed, and proposals have been put to him. We have had no response to those proposals. As much as I might like to proceed — I think that the broad view held by most, if not all, parties in the House is that we should proceed with the policies as outlined in the review of the financial process — on something as important as that, I do not want to proceed, not least because legislative cover is required.

I am not in a position in which I can move without the Minister of Education's support. I hope that what has been proposed will address his concerns, and I am happy to discuss those concerns further with him so that we can progress the totality of the review, as opposed to fragments of it. In the absence of agreement, I will do all that I can to ensure that the process is as transparent and effective as possible.

Michaela Boyle's speech was pretty much a synopsis of Sinn Féin fiscal policy. She encouraged me to make sure that we get every single penny that we can from the Brits, asking that I get every penny in Barnett consequential and others that I can from the British Exchequer, but, of course, acknowledged no benefit at all from British involvement in Northern Ireland. We are, of course, handing the British Exchequer back some £5 million a month as a result of penalties on welfare reform.

Before I come to welfare reform, I will pick up on the comments that Mr Attwood, who is no longer in the House, made on economic recovery. We have rightly acknowledged over the past five years or so the true extent of the recession and downturn and the impact that it has had on individuals, businesses, communities and entire states, so it is only right and proper that we acknowledge when the economic performance is improving, as I believe it is. The UK economy is clearly performing better than many expected. That then translates to Northern Ireland in a positive way.

We see various indicators that, over the past half a decade or so, have all been moving in the wrong direction. If they should have been going up, they were going down, and if they should have been going down, they were going up. So, when I see the Northern Ireland composite

economic index show that, between September 2012 and September 2013, the economy grew by some 1.2% in Northern Ireland, although that is not a massive increase in economic output, it is welcome. When you see, in the quarter 3 figures for 2013, an increase of 1.6% in that quarter alone, I think that there is cause for optimism.

That has encouraged many economic commentators from the likes of PWC and the Northern Ireland Centre for Economic Policy to revise their estimates of economic growth in 2014 to upwards of 2%. Although that is not outrageously high growth, it is far better than we faced over the past number of years and is to be welcomed. Those figures are backed up by what the Ulster Bank is finding in its purchasing managers' index, which has now, for six months in a row, shown growth across all sectors, including construction and retail, order books filling up, companies employing more people and firms entering new markets.

4.45 pm

In its consumer-confidence survey, Danske Bank found that it had the highest levels of consumer confidence in Northern Ireland since it started doing the survey in 2007-08. That confidence is manifesting itself in figures such as the 10% increase in new car registrations recorded last year and in the relative buoyancy in the housing market, where we have seen a 4% increase in 2013 as recorded in the Land and Property Services' residential property prices index, but, more encouragingly, the 4,800 sales in the fourth quarter of last year, which was the highest level of sales recorded since 2007.

It is little wonder that the likes of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors is happy to say, as it did last autumn, that the construction sector is now exiting recession. Last week, I attended a dinner hosted by the Chartered Institute of Building. It was clear that the mood among members was decidedly more optimistic than it had been previously. However, I acknowledge, as any right-thinking person would, that even though there are encouraging signs, and we are in the early stages of economic recovery, there will be patches and bumps along the road. We will get bad news, such as we did over the weekend with KPL, and a number of weeks ago with Mivan going into administration. Sectors, including construction and retail, are still doing badly in many areas. However, by and large, the economy is moving in the right direction. When the economy is doing well, we should justifiably acknowledge it,

just as we acknowledged that it was doing badly in the past.

I will return as briefly as I can to welfare reform, which, it is fair to say, was raised by several Members. I will do my best to quickly address many of the issues raised. I will preface my remarks — as if I needed to do so — by saying that I do not think that anybody who stands here and says that proceeding with welfare reform is the right thing to do, so that we can avoid the very high penalties that we face, can do so without acknowledging that there will be difficulties for people as a result of welfare reform. We know that. We recognise that. It is not an ideal piece of legislation from anybody's perspective. Aspects of it are positive and will have a beneficial impact on people in Northern Ireland. However, we do not say that about every aspect of it. Indeed, that is why there have been such protracted negotiations with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that the legislation is amended as well as it possibly could be.

Mr Attwood cited the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) research. I am sorry, I should not say "NICVA research" because it was carried out, I think, by Sheffield Hallam University on behalf of NICVA. The research concluded that £750 million would be taken out of the Northern Ireland economy. First, it is worth recognising that the report gave no cognisance to the actual benefit to the economy of universal credit for many people. Therefore, the figure would be decidedly less than that. Indeed, DSD's research acknowledges that less would be spent on welfare in the future in Northern Ireland.

Let us be clear about the situation. In 2010-11, the amount of money spent on welfare, social security, in Northern Ireland stood at £4.9 billion. By 2018-19, without welfare reform, that figure was expected to rise to £6.7 billion. With welfare reform, the figure will be £6.3 billion. In effect and in short, there will still be £1.4 billion more spent on welfare in Northern Ireland even though welfare reform and the changes coming through from it will take effect. Therefore, it is not that there will be net less money, it is more that it will not rise by as much as it did in the past. In fact, some individuals will be better off.

When Mr Attwood stands before the House, as he has done now, I think, at the last three Stages of this legislation, and basically says the same thing regarding people being worse off, in poverty, badly off or deprived, he never addresses the question, no matter who puts it to him, as to how much worse off these people, who are in poverty, badly off, deprived, sick or

ill, will be as a result of not proceeding with welfare reform. Indeed, he also never addresses the others who will also be worse off if we do not progress welfare reform, and if the public spending, which is meant to provide a safety net for the very people whom Mr Attwood talks about, is not there because it has been cut. There will be a cut to those services for many of those people if the blasé attitude to welfare reform of the Members opposite continues.

It would be cut quite decidedly, because, as Mr Wilson and others mentioned, and as I repeated before, the Budget Bill that is before us does not include £15 million that can be spent this year within the next five weeks on our hospitals, schools, roads and other public services. So, there is an immediate loss. I think that some people maybe think that £15 million is not a lot of money and that we can afford to lose that. However, that figure rapidly rises next year to £105 million, which is equivalent to a 1% cut right across the Budget for every single Department and is equivalent to the money that we would spend on 2,500 nurses or 2,100 teachers.

So, when Mr Attwood stands before the House and says that the £5 million a month that we are currently losing, and by extension the £105 million that we will lose in the future or the £1 billion that we will lose in totality over the next five years, is a price worth paying, what he is saying to the people who receive the services that that money pays for is that the fact that they will not receive those services is a price worth paying. When he says that casting aside the amount that we would spend on 2,500 nurses or 2,100 teachers next year is a price worth paying, he is basically devaluing the service that they provide and, of course, the service that people receive.

When he says that it is a price worth paying, he fails to address, even when prompted by others, the fact that not proceeding with welfare reform will ultimately result in Northern Ireland having to develop its own IT system, at a cost of anywhere between £1 billion and £2 billion. That, according to Mr Attwood, is a price worth paying.

Of course, he fails to address the issues that were again raised by others about the 1,410 job losses that, I am sure, are inevitable by not proceeding with welfare reform. Why would any Minister in DWP in London want to continue to employ people in Northern Ireland to provide services when we have not continued with the same IT system or the same benefit system? When those jobs are lost, Mr

Attwood and the SDLP can turn to people in Derry and Belfast and say, "The loss of your job was a price worth paying".

I am not sure how Mr Attwood or anybody can stand before the many people in Northern Ireland — tens and tens and tens of thousands — who, although entitled to support through the social security system, will fail to receive that support by 2016, because we have failed to proceed with welfare reform and to put in place our own IT system or updated systems, and because, by that stage, the systems across the water will have been progressively run down.

Perhaps Mr Attwood and the SDLP could come forward then and explain to the 207,000 — let me repeat that: it is 207,000, not 207 — low-income families who are working that they will no longer receive the financial support that they currently receive through family and child tax credits, because those tax credits will have been abolished, and because their entitlement will have become part of universal credit, which of course we will not have in place. So, by the end of 2015 or the beginning of 2016, perhaps Mr Attwood and the SDLP can explain to those 207,000 low-income families why not proceeding with welfare reform was a price worth paying.

Perhaps he can also explain to the 14,000 working-age claimants, many of whom are lone parents, who will not be able to make a claim for the additional social security support that they need, why not proceeding with welfare reform is a price worth paying. He can also have a go at explaining that to approximately 30,000 working-age people who will be unable to make a claim for financial support because they have an illness or a disability, or, indeed, to the 34,000 claimants who wish to claim income-based benefits but will be unable to claim housing benefit.

At that stage in 2016, the SDLP, Mr Attwood and his colleagues can perhaps explain to all those thousands and thousands and thousands of low-income, marginalised, badly off, disadvantaged people why they are not getting the benefits that they are entitled to and why, according to them, not proceeding with welfare reform in 2014 was a price worth paying.

I have heard my party and myself being lectured by the Members opposite about our lack of willingness to show leadership on a range of issues. I put it to them: where is your leadership on this issue? This will cost this country and this economy hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of millions of pounds. It will put 1,400 people out of work, and it will

harm tens and tens and tens of thousands of people who are entitled to benefits but will not be able to access them, because, according to you, that is a price worth paying.

A whole range of figures has been waved in our face, which we have been asked to take across the water and wave in the face of the Department for Work and Pensions or Her Majesty's Treasury. The question that I put to the Members opposite is this: why would waving any figures faze the Department for Work and Pensions or Her Majesty's Treasury? Mr Wilson outlined eloquently that the reforms that we have been trying to change, and that we are, in many respects, not in favour of, are already being done to their own constituents, so they are not going to be fazed by any figures, numbers or reports that we waft in their face about the impact on Northern Ireland. If they are already doing those things to their own constituents in England, Scotland and Wales, they are as sure as hell not going to be concerned about what is happening in Northern Ireland.

As Mr Attwood acknowledged at Further Consideration Stage, the motivation behind those reforms is every bit as ideological as it is anything else. He does not have to convince me about some of the concerns and the issues that he raised. I am well aware of them. I was Chair of the Social Development Committee for a number of years when Mr Attwood was Minister. I still represent a constituency and speak to people weekly about their concerns. So, I do not need to be convinced about the Member's concerns. The people who have to be convinced are the Ministers responsible for the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury and the Prime Minister. However, one only has to listen to the Prime Minister's response, which Mr Attwood helpfully read out for us, to Church leaders in England last week when they raised concerns about welfare reform. He dismissed them; he paid no attention to them; he gave them no heed; and he is proceeding nonetheless.

It is admirable, in fact, beyond admirable, what the Minister responsible for the Department for Social Development has managed to achieve. It was an exceptionally good performance by my colleague Mr Nelson McCausland, and I commend him for it. He has ensured flexibilities in respect of split payments, direct payments to landlords and the greater frequency of payments, as well as other concessions that others have alluded to. Mr Attwood knows fine well what those are, because he was in the room when they were discussed months and months ago. He stands up and complains and

gives off about not negotiating beyond what we have already publicly acknowledged when he knows that other things have been agreed.

I say to Mr Attwood and to others who have extolled the virtues of our friends across the North Channel that, when the issues about the concessions that we have already agreed, and the others that are not in the public domain as far as the Ministers in other jurisdictions are aware of, such as split payments, direct payments and frequency of payments, are discussed at Finance Minister quadrilaterals that I attend and my predecessor attended, the person who gave off the most about it was Mr Attwood's seemingly political idol, John Swinney. For all the great powers and mystery that Mr Attwood bestows on John Swinney, he was singularly unable to do anything about it. However, Nelson McCausland and the Executive were able to do something. We have ensured that concessions are in place that will assist our people in Northern Ireland in the circumstances that they find themselves in. We have agreed other concessions, which all mount up to a package that of course we will have to pay for. However, that package will ameliorate the worst effects of welfare reform in a way that the people of Scotland are incredibly envious of.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you for giving way, Minister, and thank you for your response so far. Can you honestly — I ask this without being contentious — give us some insight into some of the advantages that the Scots have got? They may very well not have the advantage, as you rightly suggest, and I do not dispute that. However, they appear to have gained a degree of autonomy around fiscal matters. Would it be possible for us, at some stage, to attempt to gain that same type of autonomy on the bond issue specifically?

Mr Hamilton: I will come on to that momentarily. I understand why the Member might want to encourage me to move off discussing welfare reform, and I have come to a conclusion on that. Before addressing the points that Dr McDonnell made, I want to refer to an earlier issue.

There is much to laud in Scotland, and I look to Scotland for many things, and I will happily copy some of the good things that it does, as, I am sure, it will copy some of the good things that we do. However, on the issue most before us today, the impact on the Budget — not just that which is before us today but those in the future — of not progressing on welfare reform, the Scottish, the Welsh and the English were unable to do anything. In Northern Ireland, we

have been able to do things, and we have put in place a package that will ameliorate the worst effects of welfare reform for people here.

5.00 pm

I turn to Mr McDonnell's comments, and first, those on the Budget process. Much has been made today, as it has in the past, about the Scottish Budget process. What is not acknowledged is that this Executive put in place a four-year Budget where the Scottish did not. The Scottish attempted and failed to do that. We put it in place, which, in my view, gave us, and I have had this argument during the passage of the Bill, a four-year Budget that gives greater certainty to Departments, particularly in capital expenditure and in planning for investment and infrastructure.

There is, I think, an impression that, having set our Budget for four years in 2011, it remains rigid, firm and inflexible. However, we change our Budget three times a year, every year. Part of the Bill regularises some of that expenditure that has changed from one Department to another. To revisit welfare reform briefly, I have to say that setting Budgets for next year and beyond with any degree of certainty is made all the more difficult with the failure to have any certainty on welfare reform.

On the issue of revenue raising that Dr McDonnell raised: all the Scottish Government have been allowed to do is to borrow either from the UK Consolidated Fund or to issue bonds up to a limit of £2.2 billion. On examination, that seems similar to the borrowing powers that we in Northern Ireland already have through the reform and reinvestment initiative. So, in many respects, that is something that we already have. In fact, our borrowing limit on that is £3 billion as opposed to the Scottish limit of £2.2 billion. So, in many regards, we have much more than the Scottish.

The Member encouraged us to be bold, ambitious and to take risks. To divert from the issue of being innovative in government and to address the matter of taking risks, I will bear that in mind the next time that some poor civil servant or official is having the head torn off him in a Public Accounts Committee hearing, probably by someone in the Member's party. However, we will set that to one side and move to the issue of innovation in government. Although I accept that they are not the sexiest examples of innovation in government, I cited three from my Department to his colleague Mr Maginness during Further Consideration Stage,

when he similarly encouraged my Executive colleagues and me to be bold and ambitious.

The first of the three examples that I cited was the introduction of project bank accounts to ensure that payment to subcontractors was secured on contracts valued over £1 million involving a significant number of subcontractors. No other jurisdiction in the United Kingdom has done that. I would not be surprised if other jurisdictions follow suit and copy what Northern Ireland is doing, including possibly Scotland, which, listening to the debate, I thought was some sort of Utopia.

SparkSafe is another initiative, with which Mr Frew will be familiar from his past life, where we use the power of the public sector to ensure that the highest possible standard of work is done by electrical contractors on public contracts, which then has an influence across the whole sector. That, again, is something that is being done first here in Northern Ireland, on a pilot basis, over the next six months. I hope that it is so successful that it will continue thereafter. I am sure that it, again, will be something that colleagues in other jurisdictions will look at carefully.

However, one of the best examples of innovation was introduced by my predecessor, Mr Wilson, in response to the downturn, to the recession and the impact that it was having on town centres and high streets, and that was the introduction of empty property relief. That scheme, which extended a 50% rates rebate for empty properties into the first year of occupation, has seen close to 200 new businesses open across Northern Ireland, employing hundreds of people. Although, at that level, it has not done everything to address the issue of voids and vacancies in town centres, it has done something positive, and many people are in business today through using that who would otherwise not have been.

However, the reality is that we have set the pace in Northern Ireland. Scotland copied it first, so it followed our lead. Scotland was followed very quickly by Wales and, more recently, in his announcement in the autumn statement, by the Chancellor of the Exchequer for England. There are many examples of our being innovative, creative and trailblazing in Northern Ireland. Perhaps we need to recognise and highlight those a little bit more.

Dr McDonnell mentioned housing, as a couple of members of his party have during the passage of the Bill. Given that he is encouraging us to be bold, ambitious and to take risks, I hope that, when the Minister for

Social Development comes forward with his proposed reforms on the restructuring of the Housing Executive, Dr McDonnell and his party colleagues support him.

I again thank Members for their contributions today. This is the final Assembly stage of a long process that began in March 2011 with Budget 2011-15 and was followed by the Main Estimates in June 2013 and three monitoring rounds. This is now the final legislative stage of 2013-14. The review of financial processes will seek to streamline what many perceive as an onerous process, and I look forward to Ministers signing up to that in due course.

We are nearing the end of the third year of a challenging Budget for Northern Ireland's public services. Throughout the process that has led to today, the Assembly has sought to prioritise available funding to best benefit our citizens. We face difficult times ahead, but there are increasing signs that our economy is turning a corner, and we as an Assembly must continue to work together to ensure that our citizens face the future with the best possible public services at their disposal. On that note, I commend the Budget Bill to Members.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, cross-community support is required.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 32/11-15] do now pass.

Committee Business

Reservoirs Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 4 July 2014, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Reservoirs Bill [NIA Bill 31/11-15].

On Tuesday 4 February, the Assembly referred the Reservoirs Bill to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development for scrutiny. The Bill will seek to create a legal and administrative framework to reduce and manage the risk of flooding from the 151 reservoirs in Northern Ireland.

At one of its recent meetings, the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee agreed to call for written submissions from organisations and individuals. In addition to signposting notices in the local press, stakeholders have been contacted directly and have confirmed their intention to respond to the Committee's request for evidence. The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee firmly believes that it is essential that all stakeholders are given the opportunity to comment on the Bill as it will impact not only on public reservoir owners but on private owners and those reservoirs regarded as community assets.

The Bill is highly technical and has nine Parts, 121 clauses and four schedules, and the Committee wants to afford the maximum amount of time to scrutinise the Bill and hear from a wide range of stakeholders. The Committee believes that it is essential that it be afforded the time to exercise its scrutiny powers to the full and asks that the House supports the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Reservoirs Bill to 4 July 2014.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 4 July 2014, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Reservoirs Bill [NIA Bill 31/11-15].

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notification from members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 24 February 2014 be extended to no later than 9.00 pm.— [Mr Dickson.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The House may sit until 9.00 pm this evening if necessary.

Private Members' Business

Rural Communities: Key Services

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

Mr Byrne: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the ongoing work on the rural White Paper; calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to incorporate key services that are important to rural communities, including rural schools, rural post offices, rural broadband facilities, rural transport services and home-help social care services; and calls on other Executive Departments to contribute meaningful rural proofing to ensure that rural communities can be sustained into the future.

I thank the Business Committee for allowing the motion. I welcome the fact that a rural White Paper was published in June 2012 by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and I also welcome her presence in the Chamber. Many of those engaged in and campaigning for rural issues saw it as, at long last, a first step. Many of those concerned with rural matters, as well as the Rural Community Network and the Rural Development Council, have long campaigned for a rural White Paper to set a framework for sustainable rural development. The Executive also signalled the importance of rural issues and rural proofing and incorporated some commitments in the Programme for Government.

DARD is regarded as the lead Department in initiating, sponsoring and coordinating the implementation of the rural White Paper action plan, which was published in June 2013. Just recently, the first annual report was published and gave a summary assessment of progress to date, which was welcome. Unfortunately, however, it was patchy on outcomes in each Department. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has the coordinating responsibility and is responsible for convening the interdepartmental committee on rural policy (IDCRP). As the chairperson of the committee, the Minister has a crucial responsibility in making sure that the action plan progresses in all Departments, not just DARD. It appears that more vigour is needed so that the coordinating

committee meets more often and with a more ambitious and vigorous agenda.

DARD has had some notable successes, such as the maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas (MARA) project and the farm families health checks programme. Some interdepartmental projects, such as those between DARD and the Department of Health, have been good, as have those between DARD and DRD on rural community transport, between DARD and DSD on rural fuel efficiency and, sporadically, between DARD and DETI on the vexed issue of rural broadband services.

Unfortunately for rural people, there has been a diminution of services and facilities over the past two years: the continued closure of post offices, the closure of bank branches in many smaller towns and villages and the threat to many primary schools all add to the collective pressure in some communities. The ultimate test of the effectiveness or otherwise of the rural White Paper will be whether people in rural communities feel that government agencies are helping, supporting or contributing to the development or decline in the sustainability of a vibrant rural community.

One of the big disappointments in many rural areas across the Northern Ireland is the vexed question of no or poor broadband services. That greatly hinders existing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the potential for existing or new businesses to develop in those areas. Many people who are trying to run small rural businesses in places such as Gortin and Greencastle in mid-Tyrone, parts of the Derg and Glenelly valleys, the glens of Antrim, Fermanagh, south Armagh and the Mourne, feel totally frustrated and angry that the regional Assembly cannot fix the problem. Despite the millions spent by DARD and DETI, people have not seen any real progress. Indeed, many get only sporadic and patchy mobile telephony network coverage, and rural proofing in these parts is an abstract illusion. Proper investment in telecoms and broadband infrastructure is needed so that all parts of Northern Ireland are connected to the technology.

5.15 pm

Recently, more money — £19.3 million — was allocated by DARD and DETI for an initiative called the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project. I hope that we see better progress this time because previous DETI contracts for some broadband/telecom companies were a failure. We have heard of green boxes and blue boxes, but people still see no difference.

The other big failing for many in the rural areas is the total inadequacy of the home-help carer service. For many years, the service has been starved of resources. It is a nightmare for many isolated elderly people who need it and also for the visiting home-help carer, who is allocated payment for only a 20-minute slot or visit. That is inadequate for the rural people. The home-help service should be one key indicator of the Executive's commitment to rural life and care for older people.

Rural community transport, particularly in areas with well-established community projects such as Easilink, has benefited greatly. It is a flexible and targeted community transport service, but it gets only £3.5 million in subsidy per annum, whereas Translink got £200 million per annum over the past five years.

The real question moving forward is this: can DARD seize the initiative and drive on with a more vigorous rural action plan that forces other Departments to implement rural-proofing initiatives meaningfully and allocate the resources for delivery that meet the needs of rural people?

The interdepartmental committee on rural policy, under the chairmanship of the Minister, must stiffen its resolve within the next year to have a more beefed-up set of outcomes in the next annual action plan report. The time has come for the rural White Paper and the consequent rural-proofing and rural development initiatives to be put on a statutory footing to make sure that all Departments start to deliver for rural people in a real and meaningful way.

Although the White Paper provides a template, it has got to the stage at which a statutory legislative framework needs to be established for all Departments to measure up to making rural proofing and rural development a real and meaningful exercise. More sustained progress needs to be made, and there needs to be practical progress on the issues mentioned in the motion. I commend the Minister and DARD for starting out on the journey and for beginning to form a workable rural-proofing and development plan for the rural community across Northern Ireland.

The Executive must now collectively demonstrate that rural proofing and rural development are not just fancy slogans but real and tangible. My colleagues will talk about others issues in the motion, but, given that the rural White Paper was published in June 2012 and we have had one year with an annual report summary since, it is timely that we have

this debate to make sure that rural proofing and rural development are meaningful and meet the needs of the local people. I ask for support for the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. Being a representative for West Tyrone, a large rural constituency, I face rural issues daily. In my constituency, we have seen many cutbacks and the closure of schools, post offices, and so on, causing grave concern to the people of the area. The closures involve a wide range of issues and challenges, from health to education, from businesses to broadband, from transport to home help and from social care services to post offices, among other essential rural services. Therefore, it is important that those services, which are key to the sustainability of rural communities, receive the collective support of Departments in the Executive.

I commend the work already done by various Departments and their ongoing work. I also commend them for their commitment to the rural White Paper action plan. I acknowledge that delivery on the issues involved is much more difficult in large, isolated rural areas than it is in an urban setting. Nevertheless, within a proper strategic framework, and with the full support of Departments, meaningful rural proofing into the future is achievable. The rural White Paper action plan must be brought forward as quickly as possible.

It is important to recognise the social and economic contribution made by our rural areas to wider society. I hope that the action plan, with its 94 action points, will provide the essential foundation on which to build a renewed focus on the needs of rural communities. I also hope that rather than witnessing the continual threat around, and in too many instances the closures of, rural schools and post offices and cutbacks to our public transport sector, we will see them being strengthened and sustained.

The motion calls on the Minister to include rural schools, post offices, broadband facilities, transport, home-help service etc. When a rural school is closed, there is a serious impact on the entire community. What was a community hub or focus goes, which creates a vacuum in the area and causes further isolation for the community. Rather than taking such drastic actions across the board, more could be done, in many cases and with a little flexibility, to save those facilities from closure.

There was a debate in the House on rural post offices, and an all-party group was set up to

look at the issue and the essential part that such post offices play in rural communities. Again, when we see the closure of those post offices, there is a devastating impact on the rural community, especially in areas where banks have closed as well.

One of the other big factors in rural areas is broadband provision. In some areas, it is failing rural businesses. I commend the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for the work already done in rural areas to upgrade broadband services and facilities so that they reach out to rural businesses. However, there are still black spots and areas that need to be reached, which is having an effect on rural businesses, which are trying to expand, and on schoolchildren and students. Further work needs to be done there.

Further work also needs to be done on the home-help service. If we are seeking to ensure that elderly people can remain at home for as long as is practically possible —

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way and for raising the issue of home helps. Does he agree that raising the criteria for the delivery of community meals, or meals on wheels, in rural areas has meant that the service has come under awful threat in recent times?

Mr Buchanan: Absolutely. That is an important point. It is an essential area in which a service has been provided to rural areas and it is coming under threat. This needs to be looked at seriously in the action plan, because if we want to keep our people at home for as long as possible, we need to ensure that we have the packages there and have all that is required in place to maintain and sustain that.

One of the other areas is rural transport, which has come under severe pressure. When we see a school closing, we have the added problem of transporting pupils to another school.

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

Mr Buchanan: All these issues need to be brought into play in the action plan, and hopefully it will deliver for the rural community.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome and support the motion. In today's society, we still have a massive gap between the services provided to the urban and rural populations

respectively. Such services are in health, education and employment, and I include socialising in that list.

I listened to the first two Members who spoke in the debate, and practically everything they said was directed at the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. This is a cross-departmental motion, and I hope that the rest of the contributions will reflect that.

Mr Buchanan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: I have only started.

The motion should not be used as another platform to attack. Please do not do that: we are too well ready for you. *[Interruption.]*
Please: your turn will come.

We have these services, but there is an awful gap between urban and rural. Getting access to a lot of the services that the urban dweller takes for granted is a massive task for the rural dweller. I think that everybody will agree with that. Getting access to services poses a whole new raft of problems to the rural dweller. The cost of transport to work, hospital appointments, community transport and rural isolation are just a few of the issues.

One of today's main means of communication is through broadband. It is vital for businesses and the farming community. We talked about this when debating motions in recent weeks. Broadband is essential for making online applications for a single farm payment, which results in quicker payments. The Agriculture Minister has invested something like £7 million in rural areas that do not have a fixed wire infrastructure to access broadband. We hope that this will stimulate companies to get out there and connect the something like 37,000 rural dwellers who do not have access to the service. Broadband will also act as a stimulant to investment in rural businesses. Over 14,500 people benefited from the Minister's previous investment of £2.5 million. This is all part of the rural White Paper, which has Executive approval and was set up to deal with rural issues. As I said at the start, each Department has a commitment to that.

In health matters, the rural dweller is really at a disadvantage. Access to most health services is a big problem. Going to hospital for any treatment can involve a 100-mile round trip, and transport is very sporadic. You can see the problems that are there. The effect on patients' health is not allowed for. Carers in rural areas face massive problems such as low pay, the

high cost of transport and a feeling of social exclusion.

Fuel poverty is fast becoming one of the main fears of the rural dweller. The system of natural gas is not going into rural areas. It is going only into urban areas where there are massive profits to be made. We are going to end up with large rural areas, which are not supplied by natural gas, becoming an industrial wasteland. The elderly will be faced with the same old problem of whether to heat or eat, which can affect their well-being.

Another major problem is the lack of knowledge about benefits. In 2012, the Agriculture Minister jointly launched the MARA project, which, to date, has been a great success. Some 5,000 home visits have been completed, with 14,000 referrals made to relevant agencies. Approximately 100 people have secured benefits totalling somewhere in the region of £360,000. We must remember that the present Tory plan for benefit cuts will have a more a major effect on the rural dweller than it will on the urban dweller. Take, for example, the lack of housing in the countryside. We have seen a stagnation in the building of houses.

The farming community is one of our biggest employers, with around 48,000 people directly involved. I want to finish up here, as I am mindful of the time. What we say today about helping rural areas is all fine. However, what we must come back to is the case that the DUP Minister took to court and the cut in the transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2. That will have a massive effect on the rural communities.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member not realise that pillar 1 money goes straight into the pockets and purses of the people who farm in this country? It is a direct payment right into the hearts and households of the people who serve the rural communities the most, that is, the farming community. Does he also realise that there is already €227 million in the pot to spend on pillar 2 issues and that that may well be supplemented by the Executive?

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

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

Mr McMullan: Is the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee telling me that what happened in court will not have an effect on the rural community? You sat and listened to the members of the LAGs present their case to the

Agriculture Committee and state that they need the extra money and that they do not know where it is going to come from. For the Chairman to say that there is not a problem, well, I do not know. However, that is the main thing that we must get right —

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

Mr McMullan: Without this money and without the Executive giving the Minister their backing —

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

Mr McMullan: — we will have a bigger problem.

5.30 pm

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to speak in the debate today and will do so mainly from an education point of view.

When I made my maiden speech, I promised to stand up for rural communities, and I will carry on doing so to the best of my ability. When this rural White Paper was published, I remember a local community group representative saying to me that there was virtually nothing in it; that it was all too vague, promised very little and was really just a loose strategic framework. If so, maybe the best way of using today's debate is to influence the rural White Paper in order to help our rural communities.

Over half of Northern Ireland's primary schools and one fifth of post-primary schools are situated in rural areas and, in many cases, are the centre of the local village or community. With police stations, pubs, post offices and banks all disappearing and with so many cutbacks and closures throughout rural communities, it is vital that we build on the one centre that is left in our villages: the school. The push to open school facilities to communities is, of course, a great plus, but we cannot rely on that alone. I hope that the Minister will take these points back and influence her colleague the Education Minister.

The motion rightly highlights the rural broadband facilities, rural transport services and home-help social care services as vital parts of our rural communities, and we must build on those, too. The motion also rightly calls on other Executive Departments to contribute to meaningful rural proofing and to ensure that rural communities can be sustained into the future. How often have we called for

Executive Departments to work better together? Let us hope that today will be the start of that happening, especially when it comes down to rural schools.

On attending the South Antrim Community Network annual general meeting and listening to how well so many community groups and local service deliverers pull together in south Antrim, I saw that health was one of the key areas of their work, but there was nothing from the Department of Education. I hope that the Minister will go away today and think how she and her Department can best use education at a local level to help communities and vice versa. Just think: clubs and societies could work together to ensure that absenteeism at schools is minimised or a thing of the past, and I know that some do, or community groups and families could work together to ensure that pupils are better prepared for employment and for employment interviews. Much can be done locally by working together and, in rural areas, that can often be the case.

In the Education Minister's recent statement on the area-planning process and schools in Belfast, he highlighted the fact that we must take into account the communities and other schools around them. Again, I hope that the Minister will use her influence to ensure that the area-planning initiative is halted or severely amended. We should be concentrating on the areas where communities work better together. We should be reworking area planning and building our rural communities around the schools so that we can preserve and improve what is already a fine example of what this country can do and do well.

The Bain report, in 2006, put in place the misapprehension that having 105 pupils or fewer means that a school is too small to be viable. The present misplaced area-planning initiative has meant that we have been told that it is not a numbers game. Let us hope that that is the case. It seems now that the collective academic thinking is that smaller schools are in many ways much better for education than large schools.

If I can choose one example from my constituency, it is Creavery Primary School. A whole rural community thrives through that small, family-oriented school. At the same time, it excels, especially in STEM subjects, winning the gold Primary Science Quality Mark last year.

We know that if we closed the 76 schools that are deemed too small, we would save only 0.9% of the school budget, and we also know

that, in most areas, our predicted school numbers will return to today's levels by 2025. So why are we threatening to close so many schools? It should be the ability to deliver an excellent education, the state of the buildings and, of course, the importance of the school to its community that drive any changes.

The Scottish seem to have a much better approach. May I remind everyone that the House unanimously —

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

Mr Kinahan: — passed our UUP motion on 13 May 2013 to introduce a legislative presumption against closure? Nothing has happened in the nine months since. In Scotland, they have a statutory obligation —

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

Mr Kinahan: Sorry, I had not heard you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We support the motion.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. When I last spoke on a matter relating to rural communities, a Member questioned what authority I had as an MLA for South Belfast to comment on such matters. Frankly, I think that I am entitled to speak on the motion as much as anyone else, given my years of working in communities as a social worker or a community worker, in addition to being a public representative.

It is as devastating for a rural community to lose a school or a post office, or to see a reduction in home help, as it is for a small community in Belfast, and it is only fair that rural dwellers have access to public services and facilities that is equal to that of their fellow citizens in towns and cities.

The progress report on the rural White Paper is encouraging. The rural White Paper action plan aims to improve the well-being of rural communities and contains commitments by all Departments across a wide range of rural issues and challenges. One of the key benefits was that the White Paper helped to bring rural areas to high priority at Executive level, which, I believe, had never been done before. The reports that good progress has been made by Departments in delivering their commitments in the action plan during its first full year of operation since it was launched in June 2012 are pleasing. It is important that all Departments involved will be building on the outputs of last year to improve in the second year.

I am aware that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has proposed looking at how complementary initiatives such as a rural champion and rural proofing could help to deliver benefits more effectively for our rural communities and that she has asked her officials to explore potential options for taking forward that work. Rural proofing can be an overarching tool, but it is important that it does not become a box-ticking exercise, such as the section 75 equality proofing.

It is positive that the next generation broadband project has already invested £2.5 million in rural broadband and that that has led to almost 14,500 rural dwellers and businesses having a connection to broadband. In addition to that funding, that is contributing £5 million to the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project, which is being taken forward by DETI. The UK Government announced a further £250 million of funding in 2013 to support the extension of superfast broadband services into the most challenging areas. I would like to know how that funding will be allocated and what discussions the Minister has had with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to secure a share for our rural communities.

The Alliance Party welcomes the Department's efforts on rural community transport and maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas. However, unless there are adequate public services providing primary education, transport, broadband facilities and social care, people, particularly young men and women, will move out of rural communities, making rural communities unsustainable.

Demographic changes and the ageing population in some rural areas can present challenges to the provision of services where the less concentrated population of rural areas often requires a different approach.

I welcome the fact that the motion mentions home-help social care services. I am aware that, under the tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework, there are schemes aimed at connecting elderly people — for example, the ongoing pilot in west Tyrone. There is also an issue about home helps and people not getting the help and support that they would like.

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

Ms Lo: It is, therefore, important that Departments work together in a joined-up fashion, taking into account the special

circumstances of rural communities, to provide equity of treatment for all our community.

Mr Frew: I broadly support the motion, which includes some important issues that have to be dealt with in a holistic approach.

The rural White Paper that everybody talks about is, indeed, the rural White Paper action plan, and that is quite simply because it is not statutory. You have to have a certain amount of sympathy for the Agriculture Minister about imposing her will on other Departments, and it is up to other Departments to come up to the table with the plate full so that they enhance services to rural communities. However, there is no doubt whatsoever, especially in my mind as someone who represents rural north Antrim, that there are different approaches in many Departments, not least in DARD. Many differences throughout the spectrum of government need to be addressed. Departments need to do things better.

There are a lot of good, important things in the motion, including rural schools, which my colleague Mervyn Storey will talk about later; rural post offices, which are vital; and rural broadband facilities, which again are vital to business in this age when the Internet is so important. It is good that we had the recent announcement of a scheme — I think that it was £24 million overall — to enhance broadband. I think that the Agriculture Minister contributed £5 million to that, so much work has been done on broadband. I remind Members that some areas of Northern Ireland have some of the fastest broadband speeds in the United Kingdom, but speeds are abysmal in other areas. We must make sure that we have a balanced approach across the Province in helping businesses, particularly in rural areas that are struggling for broadband and are drastically in need of it to enhance their business, to help it to grow and to export, which is vital.

The motion also refers to rural transport services, which are also vital. We hear all the time about train services and that the number of people using trains is increasing greatly, and that is to be welcomed and rejoiced about. However, when those people get off a train, they have to struggle to get taxis instead of being able to use a good bus service. In my constituency, people from Broughshane village struggle to get into the town. The station is only three or four miles away from Broughshane village, in the Braid area, yet people struggle to have a decent bus service that connects with the train service. That is a blind spot that needs to be addressed in rural areas.

Home-help social care services are absolutely vital in this day and age to help families that are most vulnerable and most in need. Childcare facilities in the countryside are also important.

One issue that is missing from the motion — I suppose that it could have been amended to include it — is planning, which is a massive issue for anyone representing a rural area. It is hard to get planning permission not only for a bungalow or house for a family member or part-time farm helper but for a business. For someone running a business as, for example, a mechanic or something of that nature, it has proved very difficult to get planning permission in a rural setting. The first question that the planners ask is this: would you not be better placed in a town? Of course, the answer is no because rural communities deserve to have those services on or near their doorstep.

5.45 pm

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned health, but very fleetingly. Does he agree that the Health Minister needs to step up to the plate as far as Transforming Your Care is concerned? The Member mentioned the lack of a bus to take people the three miles from his place in Broughshane to Ballymena. That is a problem, but for an elderly person living in Cushendall, trying to get a bus to take them the 20 miles to Ballymena, with a further 30 miles to the Belfast City Hospital for cancer treatment, the problem is worse. The situation is not helped by some of the reforms that the Minister is pushing through with Transforming Your Care. Does he agree that there is a lot of work to be done on that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: I welcome the Member's contribution. Yes, our bus services need to improve so that vulnerable people and patients can get to hospitals when they need to. Also, he is absolutely right that Transforming Your Care has to be implemented properly. I am glad that I have a Health Minister who is prepared to tackle the situation in the health service rather than simply shouting and crying for more money without tackling the problems. At least, the Minister is tackling those issues.

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

Mr Frew: I could take that point further, but I must mention the local action groups (LAGs). Representatives of the LAGs were very clear

when they came to the Agriculture Committee that they did not want to be drawn into the debate on the pillar 1 transfer.

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

Mr Frew: If the Minister feels the need to supply LAGs with money, give them more than the 5% —

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

Mr Frew: — minimum.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. The majority of issues raised by Members are for other Ministers, but I see only one Minister here.

As an elected representative of a county that is mostly rural and in many ways isolated, I am aware of the challenges facing rural dwellers. As a party, Sinn Féin wants to ensure that our rural communities are not disadvantaged when it comes to key services such as healthcare provision, broadband, transport and education. I acknowledge what the last Member to speak said about broadband. Much work has been done in that area.

The motion recognises:

"the ongoing work on the rural White Paper".

Progress on the paper includes the delivery of a wide range of real and meaningful benefits for rural communities and is to be welcomed. I congratulate the Minister on her lead role in promoting the White Paper. Only recently, she presented the first annual report on the paper. The tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework has made a major difference to the everyday life of people living in rural areas. The Minister for Rural Development secured £16 million from the current Budget to tackle poverty and social isolation, £10 million of which has been spent to date. That is significant funding.

I will focus on my area in Fermanagh. The rural development programme has had a positive outcome for the county. Let me quote the headline of last week's 'The Impartial Reporter':

"Fermanagh farmers received £72m from RDP in last seven years."

The article continued:

"almost £4 million was spent on the rural economy e.g. the enhancement of 12 towns and villages across Fermanagh."

As well as capital projects:

"projects included five multi-use games areas, a 3G pitch at the Bawnacre and a Lough Shore walk in Bellanaleck."

Other positive examples included the MARA programme, which was mentioned by my colleague and aims to improve the health and well-being of rural people. The hidden nature of poverty and isolation can make it difficult to connect with the most vulnerable members of our community. I have spoken to those who oversee the MARA project in the county. To date, the scheme has generated a total of 2,450 referrals, and the follow-up visits show that many people benefit from extra grants and benefits and access to additional transport and services. This is a good example of connecting with local communities.

The assisted rural travel programme, which is a joint initiative by DARD and DRD, is another scheme that has had positive outcomes. Since being funded by DRD, there has been a 52% increase in use of the scheme by elderly people and a 70% increase in its use by people with disabilities. I invite the Minister to see the scheme for herself and visit the offices of Fermanagh Community Transport.

I was told that the scheme has identified and targeted unmet needs and reduced social exclusion of vulnerable people in the county. People who have used the service say that it helped them to maintain their independence and that elderly people in rural areas could access doctors' clinics without using Dial-a-Lift. Adults with learning difficulties use the service to access opportunities that they could not without Fermanagh Community Transport.

The farm family health checks, which are carried out in conjunction with the Health Department, connect elderly people who are isolated in rural areas. This is a pilot scheme to address social isolation for elderly rural dwellers in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. To date, there have been 34,000 interactions with the target group.

As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I know that the borewell scheme connects isolated rural dwellers to the public water system. To date, it has completed work on 27 isolated properties.

There are 1,000 childminder start-ups under the Bright Start programme.

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

Mr Lynch: There are 1,000 social enterprise places. To conclude, the motion calls for the incorporation of key services into the rural White Paper. Those are matters for other Executive Ministers, and I encourage the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to continue her positive work —

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

Mr Lynch: — and seek support from her Executive colleagues to sustain —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call George Robinson.

Mr G Robinson: As a representative of a constituency with a large rural area, I am pleased to put forward some issues that are regularly raised with me and my office. A major recent complaint has been about broadband speed, and I have had positive meetings with my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Foster, about the issue. I welcome the fact that her Department has acted positively, and that has benefited approximately 15,000 rural dwellers to date. However, there is still much work to be done in that field.

I always reflect on the fact that there should be value for money or a clear societal benefit because of the budgetary restraint that has to be shown as a result of the £4 billion that has been removed from the Northern Ireland block grant, and that comes before the dire financial impact of not implementing welfare reform in Northern Ireland. In some cases, rural dwellers are left with the decision to either heat or eat. The reduction in the block grant means that the services on which rural dwellers in Northern Ireland depend are under severe strain. However, innovative interdepartmental arrangements may well be the way forward in delivering much-needed services.

We must always remember that, in recent times, the closure of rural post offices and, indeed, some schools has caused great inconvenience to many rural dwellers. In tackling isolation, the rural transport scheme and Dial-a-Lift aim to make public transport more accessible for our older people, who are less likely to be drivers. Those over the age of 65 are becoming a greater proportion of the

rural population, so services such as Dial-a-Lift are becoming increasingly invaluable to maintaining the rural lifestyle for our isolated older citizens. Access to public transport is being enhanced by the provision of park-and-ride facilities by Translink, and that is to be welcomed. I welcome that increased provision, the benefits of which can be seen in the growing number of people who are using public transport for personal, leisure or work journeys. That may help to increase economic activity by rural dwellers.

The difficulties for health provision in rural areas are well documented, and the development of a solution is a challenging question. There is a community and self-help spirit that is unique to country areas. There are great benefits from community spirit, but a unique solution must be found to accessing healthcare in rural areas. This, in some instances, could include pharmacy or dental services, which would greatly benefit rural families. I support the motion.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, as my colleagues do. At the outset, I thank the Minister, who has led the way in the decentralisation of government jobs, with the recent news that the DARD fisheries office will relocate to my constituency of South Down. To me and to many people in south Down, this shows what can be done if the rural communities are put first and if everyone is granted the same type of opportunity that people in more urban areas such as Belfast or Derry maybe take for granted.

Like many who responded to the debate today, I was born and reared in a rural area. I am more than aware of the lifestyle that we all lead. I am a member of a rural credit union, a rural GAA club and, indeed, a rural Sinn Féin cumann. To a large extent, my wider family live, work and play in the rural constituency of South Down. Indeed, as a representative for the rural constituency of South Down, my inbox is, to a large extent, dictated by rural issues.

In the past number of weeks and months, the future of the Downe Hospital has been one of the foremost issues. I suppose that one of the big issues with the future of the Downe is equity of access for rural patients to local healthcare. For a constituency that does not have a single inch of carriageway, the proposed trip to Belfast certainly seems a lot further from rural areas of south Down than it does for the consultants who refuse to make the trip from Belfast to south Down. It raises the very precarious situation that, for whatever reason it was let go,

patients are expected to be mobile in rural areas such as south Down but consultants on world-class salaries are not expected to be mobile and travel to rural areas.

As mentioned by other Members, broadband in rural areas is still a huge issue for many, and we work on that constantly. Inadvertent roaming charges in south Down is another huge issue. Rural isolation, especially among some in the elderly community, plays a big part.

I want to touch on the future of rural schools and the sustainability of schools in rural areas, which is a very emotive issue for many Members. Perhaps more in rural areas than anywhere else, even the mention of area planning around rural schools is a very emotive issue. A lot of stock is put in the bricks and mortar of our schools, perhaps more so in rural areas because they hold the genealogy of rural communities as much as anything else. It is not productive to get sidetracked by this. We must remember that education is a public service and that the most important thing is the education being delivered to the child who is sitting at the desk. We must not get sidetracked by a fascination with bricks and mortar. We must do what is right for the child who is sitting at the desk.

It is important to say that, as the Minister outlined, the finances are there for every single rural school to stay open, if that is to be the case. As I said, the decision is not in the bricks and mortar; it is in the delivery of education. If the delivery of a world-class education system cannot be guaranteed by the sustainability of a rural school, that is what we have to look at, and that is what it is important. The worst thing that anyone could suggest is to stick with the status quo. If there is one sure, fast way to increase the number of people heading for the ports and emigration, it is to stick with the status quo and do nothing. Moreover, we have seen hundreds of millions of pounds invested in the local schools estate in recent years, so we must ensure that we are sustaining investment in our resources in the best possible way.

This has fed into the discussion around area planning and has been touched on by Mr Kinahan. Area planning is the mechanism that enables the outworking of the sustainable schools policy. Indeed, a range of factors is involved in looking at the sustainability of our schools. Crucially for some of our rural communities, we see that particular needs are being met through a lower enrolment threshold, accessibility criteria and community links criteria.

One of the most important developments that has happened is the insistence from the Minister that it is not a numbers game. It does not come down to finances; it is not a numbers game. It is whatever is in the best educational interests of our children. As public representatives for rural areas who are interested in the sustainability of rural areas, the best educational interests of our children should be the best interests of ourselves.

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

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh míle maith agat.

6.00 pm

Mr Dallat: I thank my colleague Joe Byrne for putting forward the motion. As a rural dweller, it is an opportunity for me to take part in the debate, not to lament the things that are wrong and do nothing about them but to seize the opportunity to suggest how we can preserve and build our rural communities.

I was very privileged to have taught in a rural school and, although it is 16 years since I left it, for better or for worse — maybe worse — I miss those rural children desperately. It was an awful sacrifice to make to get into politics.

It is interesting that St Paul's College, where I worked, is one of the top secondary schools in Northern Ireland. It does not have the minimum 500 pupils, like many other rural schools, and I just hope that the current criteria is reviewed and that we do not destroy a critical element of rural life. Primary schools are also worse off.

The rural community has its ups and downs, and earlier today, we heard about KPL and the unemployment of 202 workers. As I travelled day and daily to Stormont, I saw those men — I presume there were women as well — travelling the length and breadth of Ireland on the motorways from 6.00 am maintaining and developing our utilities. What a loss.

Last Saturday, I was involved in or, perhaps, coerced into a rural litter pick. It was an opportunity for me to renew my links with people who absolutely appreciate the wonders of the rural community and who unselfishly went out and gathered up the litter of those who have yet to appreciate the rural community and just how special it is.

Members who have taken part in the debate have identified the things that could be improved: broadband; the retention and

development of the post office; and rural transport. I suggest that those things must not be seen in isolation; they are part of a whole picture.

The potential for rural tourism has not been mentioned here today, but my rural colleagues from whatever parties will appreciate that the scope for the development of rural tourism is unlimited. There is a fascination with the history of the rural community, which provides many people with hours of enjoyment. I am not having a go at urban dwellers, but let us face it, some of the most famous people in the world have come from rural communities. Recently, we mourned the death of Seamus Heaney, whose works were steeped in the rural community around Bellaghy. There were others who were not literary people. John Boyd Dunlop, who, I am sure, everyone remembers, invented the pneumatic tyre, and Harry Ferguson totally transformed agriculture. They were all rural people. There are many others, and I apologise to them for not having their names at hand.

Perhaps I am taking stock, and perhaps this motion is an opportunity to do that. We need to stop and stare occasionally to appreciate what we have and to ponder how we can make it survive and build upon it.

Rural proofing has been mentioned for the past 16 years that I have been here, and we have had some hot debates about it. It is time now to take rural proofing seriously.

My own town of Kilrea is undergoing one of the regeneration schemes mentioned earlier. That will transform the town but, remember, our rural towns, villages and hamlets are not just about buildings; they are about people and businesses.

Holistically, we need to have a plan that ensures that we do not make the mistakes of other parts of the world where rural communities have ceased to exist. Yes, of course, farmers have cows and farmers live in the rural community, and they are my friends —

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

Mr Dallat: — but there are other people in the rural community who are needed to ensure that those rural communities survive.

Mrs Dobson: I am sort of wondering how you follow that. It was very good. I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion tonight,

but I fear that its wording will just give the Minister the opportunity to stand up for 10 minutes, claim all is well, take credit for what is going to plan and simply ignore everything that is not.

I wonder what she will say on rural schools, for instance. The viability audit showed that rural schools were far more likely to be identified as evidencing stress. Where is the rural proofing from Sinn Féin? They are subsequently coming under serious threat from the deeply flawed area planning process. I have said before in the House that, the longer that uncertainty lingers, we will end up with self-fulfilling prophecies. That is just one example from one of the Minister's colleagues. I wonder what concerns she has raised with the Education Minister. None, I suspect.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I want to make my points. Rural proofing, as mentioned in the motion, would indeed go some way towards providing meaningful protection for our rural communities — communities that want the Executive to stand up for them, not stand idly by as their services are reduced and removed.

To be parochial for a moment: I am fighting alongside my party colleagues for improved GP services in Waringstown and Donaghcloney. We are also raising concerns about proposed changes to the local post office. I am sure that many Members will recount similar concerns from rural villages and communities across Northern Ireland. Again, I ask this: what is rural proofing?

In the build-up to the rural White Paper, people could rightly have been forgiven for believing that it was going to be an all-encompassing, target-driven strategy to deliver for our rural communities, but, like so much else from DARD, what transpired was far below the standard and imagination that so many had anticipated. In short, it let rural communities down.

The White Paper should have been an opportunity for the Executive's Departments to collectively work together to address the key issues and challenges facing rural communities. It should have bound Departments to delivering minimum standards. It should have identified problems and found solutions, but, in the end, the action plan felt like a midway policy document in development.

Essentially, it was a broad-brush list of aspirations, most of which were dependent on

other factors coming together. Of the 90 proposed actions, 22 were merely commitments to continue doing something. Surely, rural communities should expect more from Executive Ministers than promises not to cancel something. Should they not have expected robust support and action to retain and improve services? Although, as we know, even when an action plan is put forward, Executive Ministers can find —

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I am nearly finished — can find ways to avoid backing it. Really, Minister, is this what you call delivering for rural communities? The whole action plan is undermined by its lack of measurable, time-bound targets. I would like to know which Minister, if any, the Agriculture Minister believes is not living up to their obligations under the action plan.

Another example of how the plan had little influence was during the recent inquiry into comprehensive transport delivery structures by the Regional Development Committee. It wrongly suggested moving much of the transport network from public to private providers. Large parts of the Ulsterbus network are unprofitable and, therefore, Translink currently uses profits from well-used routes to cross-subsidise unprofitable routes, many of which are in rural areas. If Translink's operations were to be broken up, unprofitable routes in rural areas would certainly disappear. Yet, what did the Minister's party do? It supported the Committee report. I will give her some time now to alter any reference she may have planned to make to the importance of rural transport or to take out any reference to it.

There is some positive work being done under the action plan, and I do not doubt that the Minister will go to great lengths to inform us of it, but she should not claim credit for initiatives that were already happening or were likely to have happened even without the action plan.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: I am finished.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): At its meeting on 27 January 2014, the Committee for Education noted the DARD rural White Paper action plan. Several actions against the Department of Education arose from that action plan, including the delivery of the revised curriculum through the entitlement framework and support for the

extended schools programme in rural areas. The Department of Education has also produced guidance on the community use of schools, which was presented to the Education Committee recently. Some of it, I have to say, is worthwhile and beneficial. It needs to be progressed further.

The key part of the rural White Paper action plan is of course area planning. The Department of Education has committed through that particular process to engage with stakeholders to explore innovative and creative solutions for the delivery of education in rural areas. I will stop at "innovative and creative solutions". Earlier, a Member opposite wondered why all the burden was being placed on the Agriculture Minister. All the burden is not being placed on the Agriculture Minister: the Education Minister plays a vital role in whether there are rural communities.

Members will be surprised to know that I am not a regular reader of the 'Irish News'. However, I am sure that Members are well aware of a six-page supplement that appeared the week before last in the 'Irish News'. I await a response from either the Agriculture Minister or the Education Minister on the serious issues that were raised in that very good piece of journalism. It highlighted particular issues in the rural community.

As the House is aware, we have had a post-primary area-planning consultation. We await the Department's response on the primary schools' consultation, which closed in June 2013. While the Committee awaits a departmental response that is scheduled for April, we received interesting information from a briefing from the University of Ulster and the shared-education programme at Queen's University. Those organisations argued that the area-planning consultation had been tokenistic and that there had been little room for creative solutions to rural educational problems.

Before time runs away, I want to come to a particular issue that was raised. It sends out a very wrong signal as a result of the debate this evening when the Member for South Down Mr Hazzard referred to area planning in the context that we must not be sidetracked by bricks and mortar and that it is not a numbers game. Members, when the common funding formula is announced in the House, I want you to remember those words; I want you to write those words down and remind Mr Hazzard that we are not to get sidetracked by bricks and mortar and that it is not a numbers game.

I repeat what I said when I was accused of telling untruths: if the common funding formula policy, as put out by the Education Minister, is implemented, 76% of primary schools in the maintained sector — not the controlled or the Irish-medium sector — in the constituencies of the Members opposite who come from the west of the Province, the majority of which are rural primary schools, are set to lose money. Here is the other issue: what is the Department of Education's definition of "rural". It is anything outside the 30-mile limit of the two cities of Londonderry and Belfast. That includes the majority of schools in Northern Ireland.

What I want the Members opposite to realise is that this is not a sectarian debate; it is not about trying to match one sector against the other. It is about ensuring that rural communities do not have the heart ripped out of them as a result of a policy.

6.15 pm

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

Mr Storey: I ask the Agriculture Minister to ensure that, at the heart of the discussions that she has with the Education Minister, there is a discussion about the continued viability of rural schools, which are at the heart of our rural community. I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer for raising the rural issues mentioned in the motion. I was very interested to hear all Members' contributions.

As the Minister with responsibility for rural development in the North, I am very aware of the challenges facing rural dwellers. I want to ensure that our rural communities are not disadvantaged when it comes to accessing key services such as healthcare provision, high-quality broadband, education and transport services. People living in urban areas take those services for granted. However, if you live in a rural area, you will be very aware of the difficulties faced in accessing services and the impact that that can have not only on the community infrastructure as a whole but on the physical and mental health of people, particularly the vulnerable.

Access to services is a key theme of the rural White Paper action plan. In developing the action plan, I worked closely with my Executive colleagues to ensure that the commitments

made would deliver tangible benefits for rural dwellers across a broad range of issues, including access to services. The rural White Paper action plan continues to be an important initiative for the Executive, and it is one of the key building blocks included in the Programme for Government. It is intended to be a framework for an integrated approach to addressing the challenges that face rural dwellers.

When I launched the action plan in June 2012, it was the first initiative in the North to focus solely on rural areas. I am pleased that it contains commitments from all 12 Departments. In January 2014, I published the first annual progress report on the implementation of the rural White Paper action plan. The report outlines the progress made by Departments in implementing their commitments during the first year of the plan's operation. I am pleased that good progress has been made by Departments in delivering on their actions during this period. Through working together effectively, Departments have delivered a good range of real and meaningful benefits to our rural communities.

Many examples were highlighted throughout today's debate. The farm families health checks programme, for example, which is jointly operated between DARD and the Public Health Agency (PHA), provides a detailed health check and a signposting service to various physical and mental health services and is available at a number of farmers' markets on a rota basis. In addition, my Department's maximising access in rural areas project, which is also operated in conjunction with the PHA, has to date resulted in over 25,000 referrals to various grants, benefits and services.

When I published the annual progress report, I made it clear that my vision for the rural White Paper action plan is that it is very much a living document that will continue to respond to the needs of our rural communities. In the foreword to the report, I said that I intended to revisit the action plan during 2014. I wish to advise Members that I will shortly call on all my Executive colleagues to identify new and challenging actions for inclusion in a refreshed rural White Paper action plan. I am committed to taking that forward.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I will let you in in a wee second. I am committed to taking that forward. I therefore welcome the opportunity to debate this important matter today, and I call on other Ministers to contribute meaningfully towards

sustaining our rural communities. I will ask them all to identify new actions for inclusion in the refreshed rural White Paper action plan. We will look for actions that will help to ensure better service provision for rural communities across the whole range of key services, such as health, broadband and transport.

The initiative is about the Executive as a whole living up to their collective responsibilities for rural communities and about individual Ministers ensuring that they provide equitable access to services for all citizens, regardless of where they live. I will give way now.

Mr Byrne: Minister, I appreciate your indulgence. As chairperson of the interdepartmental committee on rural policy, does the Minister agree that she is in a pivotal and unique position to encourage and, indeed, force other Ministers to address the rural-proofing issue? If there is no cooperation, will she consider putting the entire rural-proofing exercise on some sort of statutory basis?

Mrs O'Neill: As I clearly said, the fact that we have a rural White Paper action plan shows that there is Executive commitment across the board. The fact that we have actions from each of the 12 Departments again shows that there is a commitment. I will take my role seriously in coordinating that and making sure that people live up to their promises and that the document does not include work that is already ongoing in Departments. It has to be creative and unique and to look at rural challenges and how we can address them collectively.

The motion calls for a number of specific key services to be incorporated in the rural White Paper action plan. Those specific services are matters for my ministerial colleagues: the Minister of Education on rural schools; DETI on rural broadband; DRD on rural transport services; and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on home help and social care services.

I welcome the motion's reference to rural proofing, which is complementary to the rural White Paper action plan. It is a key policy tool for ensuring that rural needs and circumstances are routinely considered as an integral part of the policymaking process. Although I have lead responsibility for rural proofing policy, all Departments have signed up to undertake rural proofing of all their major policies. As individual Ministers, we all have a responsibility to seek to ensure that rural proofing is undertaken in an effective way in our Department.

I recognise that Departments will need to continue to work to ensure that rural proofing is undertaken both routinely and effectively. DARD will continue to support that work by providing guidance and training for officials involved in policymaking. I recognise that there is further scope to improve the effectiveness of rural proofing. Therefore, I am exploring potential opportunities for strengthening rural proofing across government, which will help to deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers, and those will include the possibility of legislating to make rural proofing mandatory for all public bodies. Officials are exploring that.

I turn to the key points that were raised, and they are all issues that we are all very mindful of in rural communities. I commend Members for, by and large, not falling into the trap of being defensive of the Departments that have a member of their party as Minister. I commend them for being able to recognise what is good and the ongoing work in rural communities, and also for being able to stand up and say where there have been areas of improvement, particularly all the issues that we have made great progress on but still have a good way to go. Unfortunately, however, some Members fell into the trap.

Since 2008, the Executive have invested £45 million in broadband, and my Department has invested £5 million of that in rural broadband. So we have made significant progress, but we have a way to go, and that is what we need to work and concentrate on. As a rural dweller, I know how frustrating it is to hear conversations about fast speeds and people getting improved speeds when you cannot get a connection that is worthwhile having, so we have a way to go. The £5 million that I targeted at broadband is on the basis of areas of deprivation, and that is how we will roll that out. I look forward to that.

The Executive recently launched the Bright Start programme. We are looking at 1,000 new social enterprise places for affordable childcare and 1,000 new childminder start-up programmes. That is all very positive work that we can build on in the time ahead.

On rural healthcare, people recognise that there are challenges in rural communities, not least because of the isolated nature of where people live. Somebody picked up on the fact that we need to look at unique solutions to unique rural problems, so we need to look more at those in the time ahead.

Post offices are a reserved matter. That said, I have engaged with them and will continue to do that, because we need to maintain vital financial

services for people in rural communities, whether post offices, credit unions or any of those services. I can clearly put on record the fact that I remain committed to assisting in any way that I can to help to make those sustainable.

Mrs Dobson had issues with the work being done on rural transport. Perhaps she should take that up with her ministerial colleague. Collectively, we have done very positive work, and I know that it is welcomed in rural communities, particularly the assisted rural travel scheme and the rural transport fund, which, quite frankly, has helped people to get to hospital appointments and other services. Although she might want to dismiss that as not being a very valid service, I think that it is a great service and look forward to working with the Minister for Regional Development to try to build on it.

The rural schools issue has been well covered. On many occasions, John O'Dowd has gone on public record talking about the need for rural schools, how it is not a numbers game and how he wants sustainable rural schools. However, a quality education for all our children has to be at the core of that, and I do not think that anybody in the House would disagree with that. That should be at the core and the premise for moving forward.

As I said, lots of good work is going on across all Departments. Can we build on that? Absolutely. Can we look at new initiatives? Absolutely, and I look forward to doing so.

I do not want the rural action plan to be a document that sits on a shelf and goes nowhere or that has a list of great actions for which Departments will simply tick a box. It has to be a real, living document. It has to be something that people will see benefit their everyday services.

I hope that that gives a flavour of the type of work that is going on. I absolutely welcome the fact that we have had this discussion, and I support the motion, because I firmly believe that rural matters are the business of every Department. Although I am happy to take the lead in driving, pushing and encouraging other Departments, rural dwellers' needs are reflected in every other Department in the Executive. The fact that we have the rural White Paper action plan in place shows that there is a willingness in the Executive to protect rural communities and make them sustainable. Collectively, we can be very effective.

Mr Rogers: The debate has provided a useful insight into the key services that are required to sustain and support our rural communities in the future. It is clear from all the Members who spoke that other Executive Departments must contribute to ensuring that services vital to rural areas, including schools, post offices, broadband etc are protected for the years ahead. Rural proofing should ensure fair and equitable treatment for rural communities, and any policy must not indirectly negatively impact on our rural dwellers and communities.

I will look at health. The main thrust of Transforming Your Care is to ensure greater care in the community. People have a desire to stay close to their home and to access healthcare services locally. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust had obviously not heard of rural proofing when it decided to drastically reduce A&E services at Downpatrick hospital, which caters for a large rural community.

There has been a lot of emphasis on the Royal Victoria Hospital recently, but what about healthcare in rural areas? At the weekend, we heard of a threat to the fracture clinic at Daisy Hill Hospital. In the Mourne, we have a state-of-the-art health centre that provides accident services between 8.30 am and 5.30 pm yet has extremely limited out-of-hours services.

We talk about ambulance services. The father of a friend of mine who lives outside Castlewellan took a stroke last Thursday night. It was over an hour before any type of ambulance could arrive. That man was lucky enough to have his two sons in the house, who were able to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR); otherwise, where would he be today? Residential care is another major concern. The Southern Trust has failed to invest in Slieve Roe House in Kilkeel, which has limited admissions. We strongly need that resource.

Farming is central to the survival of our rural communities, and fishing is a major economic driver in south Down. Our beef farmers are losing money every day. They are being held to ransom by meat plants, with poor prices week after week. Our fishermen cannot get out to fish because of limited quotas and the weather. How, then, will we deliver an agrifood strategy if we have not got those people, who are key to our economic recovery and the maintenance of our rural economy?

Many Members spoke about rural community transport being an essential service to all our rural dwellers. I will give you one little example

of what happens when you cannot access rural transport. I know a person who has to take a taxi to go for cancer treatment in Belfast. That costs £90.

The SDLP recognises the status of many rural schools at the heart of our local community. It is our intention to help such schools remain viable, and we point to pilot federation schemes, which involve two or more primary schools working together under a single board of governors and principal. As other Members mentioned, the core assumptions about area-based planning are not evidence-based. Minister, I know that it is not your portfolio, but it is that of your party colleague.

I will make four points. First, no one in primary education believes that you need the magic number of 105 pupils for a rural primary school to be viable. However, the longer that your colleague holds to that, the more stress that he creates for primary schools.

Secondly, I do not accept the financial argument for closing rural schools, as 80% of the cost of education is attached to the pupil, irrespective of the school attended. Thirdly, the assumption that only larger schools can deliver a quality education is deeply flawed. My colleague Mr Dallat talked about a figure of 500 pupils, but the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) seems to have a figure of 1,000. Research from the University of Ulster suggests that there is little correlation between the size of a school and educational attainment.

Fourthly, the Department assumes that composite classes have a negative effect, but international research does not indicate any significant ill effects. In fact, some studies show that composite classes can have a positive effect on peer interaction.

I frequently ask why we do not have a small schools policy. Our sustainable schools policy does not help smaller schools.

Our rural schools are the heart of our rural communities. They are more than bricks and mortar. I was at a school on Friday with American visitors. The school was built in 1898, but it is not just about the bricks and mortar. It is the foundation of the education that has been delivered there over many years that is so important. The foundations of that community started there, and that is why it is so important to rural communities. That is the reason why couples settle in rural areas. Schools develop that sense of community when not only the children but the parents and the extended family come together. Many country

groups use the school buildings for other events. It is the meeting place that helps to build a community. Similarly, sporting clubs and rural schools complement one another.

6.30 pm

There are opportunities for shared and integrated education. Such schools can be a vital lifeline for pupils and their families. The SDLP believes that it is perfectly possible for schools to provide quality education without meeting the enrolment threshold if they engage with other neighbouring schools. There are many excellent examples of schools across the region working in a collaborative way. However, we can and must do more to encourage all forms of shared education. In turn, that will help to inject life into struggling schools and sustain our rural communities.

A number of Members touched on broadband provision in rural areas, and I recognise the significant improvements there have been in recent years. Businesses in those black spots need to be prioritised and given greater grant assistance towards satellite broadband. For example, an SME in my constituency tendered for a contract using the Internet. He put it in at 2.00 pm and it had not arrived at 5.00 pm. So, he missed the deadline for the tender. Communication services provide consumers with access to vital political, educational, cultural and economic resources. They provide businesses with the opportunity to increase efficiency, develop new services and reach new markets. At the heart of such a service is the widespread availability of broadband.

Many Members talked about rural post offices. Although they may not be the most profitable, they provide a vital service for those who live in remote areas. Indeed, they are at the heart of the economic and social life of such communities. There is a need to modernise many of them. We must revitalise rural post offices. Given the spate of bank closures, rural people are more dependent on post offices than ever.

I will now go to Members' contributions. There were many valuable contributions that made the case for protecting key services in rural areas. My colleague Joe Byrne saw the White Paper as an important first step but went on to highlight the patchy implementation. He highlighted some excellent cross-departmental initiatives but said that the closure culture in rural areas continues. He was disappointed with the poor broadband and how it inhibits SME development and said that, as well as

green boxes and blue boxes, we have too many black spots.

The importance of home helps was also highlighted. Mr Buchanan said that those services need full support across the Executive. He said that it is important to recognise their social and economic contribution to our society and that a little more flexibility is perhaps required to keep our rural services running. He also highlighted meals on wheels as being very important.

Mr McMullan said that what urban people take for granted is a major challenge for rural people. That is a very good point. Examples included getting to the hospital, transport, and so on. He also highlighted the importance of the MARA project.

Mr Kinahan spoke from an education perspective on the rural White Paper and called it a loose strategic document. He said that schools are about the only service left in rural areas and highlighted the need for Departments to work more closely to deliver for rural communities.

I welcome Ms Lo speaking on rural issues. She said that it is only fair that rural dwellers have equal access to services and that the rural White Paper brought rural issues to a higher priority at the Executive. However, the challenge is keeping those issues there. She emphasised the point that rural proofing must not just be a box-ticking exercise.

Mr Frew had sympathy for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development as the action plan needs cross-departmental support. He said that although some areas here have broadband on a par with that in England it is abysmal in other areas. He said that planning is a massive concern for rural areas. It is, and getting planning permission is also a massive problem for farmers.

Mr Lynch recognised the challenges of living in a rural constituency but acknowledged that, although this is Department-led, it needs cross-departmental action. He also highlighted the benefits of MARA and rural community transport.

Mr Robinson warned of the need to ensure that it would be value for money. He highlighted projects such as Dial-a-Lift and rural transport, and he spoke of how they help to combat rural isolation. He also said that there needs to be a unique solution to healthcare in rural areas.

Mr Hazzard commented on the decentralisation of fishery jobs to south Down. He also talked about the future of the Downe Hospital. Equity of healthcare provision is a major issue as is the issue of roaming charges. He said that education must do what is right for the child, but you can do what is right in small schools as well.

Mr Dallat spoke about how we can preserve our rural communities. We do not need 500 pupils in a school for it to be a good school.

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

Mr Rogers: He also spoke about the loss of KPL.

Mrs Dobson talked about the broad-brush approach, but it was probably a broad brush with no bristles as it had little detail.

Mr Storey spoke about area planning, and as a frequent —

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

Mr Rogers: — reader of 'The Irish News', he acknowledged a good piece of journalism.

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

Mr Rogers: The Minister was very aware of the pressures also.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the ongoing work on the rural White Paper; calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to incorporate key services that are important to rural communities, including rural schools, rural post offices, rural broadband facilities, rural transport services and home-help social care services; and calls on other Executive Departments to contribute meaningful rural proofing to ensure that rural communities can be sustained into the future.

Climate Change: Impact on Flooding

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

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the recent incidents of serious flooding; expresses its gratitude to the emergency services, public workers and volunteers who worked hard to minimise the impact of the flooding; believes that the seriousness of future flooding is likely to increase as a direct result of climate change; calls on the Executive to reduce Northern Ireland's environmental footprint and, consequently, its contribution to climate change; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to initiate a holistic overhaul of flood mitigation policies, including a cross-departmental approach to emergency planning, placing a single agency in charge of coordinating relief, an audit of the effectiveness of current flood defences so that investment can be targeted effectively, improvement of the flood warning system and a single funding stream for flood defences and coastal erosion.

I speak on behalf of the Alliance Party. The recent incidents of serious flooding have been of great concern to all. I am sure that Members would like to record our gratitude to those from the emergency services and those public service workers and volunteers who have tirelessly rallied together and have done all that they can to minimise the risk of flooding.

Since my election to the Assembly in 2007, I have witnessed many incidents of flooding in my constituency of South Belfast, including in Stranmillis, Knockbreda and Finaghy. Last December, I met the Minister for Regional Development about proposed flood alleviation work in Orchardville, where local residents fear further flooding amidst their difficulties in getting house insurance. It is a position that no one should have been put into.

The Alliance Party believes that the seriousness of future flooding is likely to increase as a direct result of climate change. I

hope that the debate is informed by science. Some politicians want to ignore and deny climate change because it is convenient for them to do so. The fact is that the disruption to our climate is happening. When we look, for example, at the winters over the past 50 years

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No. I am sorry, I do not have time. I need to get through this.

The records for winters over the past 50 years show that change in climate is indisputable. The argument is about whether climate change is man-made, and there is very strong evidence to suggest that it is. A changing climate is a serious issue that has dramatic social, economic and environmental implications for all of society. To deny that is irresponsible and mistaken.

As we know, flooding is a natural phenomenon that cannot be entirely eliminated. However, while there are mitigating measures that we can take and, indeed, are taking, it is time to start thinking smart and long term. According to experts, the major factors that determine flood size, apart from the intensity and duration of rainfall events, are antecedent soil moisture conditions, the removal of forested land and green space, river channel alteration and land drainage practices. Future climate change projections suggest an increase in overall winter precipitation and the intensity and duration of extreme rainfall events. Projected rising global temperatures will be accompanied by a rise in sea level. As every piece of evidence suggests that we will face more extreme weather, we really need to ensure that our approach is as strategic and coherent as possible.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Although I will be supporting Steven Agnew's amendment calling for a climate change Bill, I believe that there is currently no appetite for it among the DUP and Sinn Féin, which is really frustrating.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No, I am sorry. I need to get through my speech.

We are required to contribute to a range of climate change targets. Although climate change is a global issue, it requires action on a number of levels. At the highest level, the

Kyoto protocol secured commitments from 37 major industrialised countries and the European Union to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The Climate Change Act 2008, which the Executive agreed should extend to here, established a legislative framework to enable the UK to reduce its 1990 levels of GHG emissions by 80% by 2050 and 34% by 2022. The Executive, in their Programme for Government, set a new target for us of a 35% reduction by 2025.

There is a significant body of research into understanding the impacts of climate change on urban hydrology. It suggests that a long and intense winter rainfall will result in increased output of surface run-off, groundwater flow, and river and marine outfalls. Even in summer, surface run-off is expected to increase as a result of climate change. With that in mind, there is not just a need to mitigate climate change by reducing GHG emissions but the ability to adapt to the impacts of climate change must be a priority for government and society.

The recently published Northern Ireland climate change adaptation programme and, in 2012, a climate change risk assessment for Northern Ireland stated that flooding was one of the most significant and urgent climate change risks facing Northern Ireland. To achieve effective mitigation and adaptation to flooding, we need a collaborative approach to awareness-raising and upskilling in flood management. The inter-sectoral network Climate NI is already taking action by documenting flooding impacts, raising awareness across sectors and supporting stakeholder action by promoting best practice in upskilling.

Several NGOs are calling for a cross-departmental, overarching land strategy, which I support. We need a strategy in order to optimise the use of land in Northern Ireland and to facilitate a more joined-up approach to how our precious land resource appears, functions and is used. We need to ensure that all land use-related policies contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation. A strategic approach to land use would ensure that land that is highly suitable for water catchment management, flood management or carbon storage is duly recognised in decision-making.

The Alliance Party supports the call for a sustainable flood risk management approach to planning and delivering measures to reduce flood risk. This approach focuses on managing the sources and pathways of flood waters. It targets all forms of flooding, be it river, coastal, sewerage or groundwater, and includes options to adopt natural or artificial defences. It is

important also to mention natural flood management to implement environmentally positive features that retain and divert water away from areas that are prone to flooding. For example, water catchment interventions could include wetlands, drain blocking and logjams etc .

6.45 pm

Northern Ireland needs to be brought into line with the rest of the UK on sustainable storm-water management. Although that is stated as a government intention, it should be made as strong as possible to ensure that PPS 15 acts a driver for the implementation of a sustainable urban drainage system in Northern Ireland. Although that will certainly be driven by the forthcoming Floods Bill, that is not scheduled to begin until the next mandate of the Assembly.

We urge OFMDFM to take a cross-departmental approach to emergency planning, placing a single agency in charge of coordinating relief to reduce confusion for residents. We would like to see an urgent audit of the effectiveness of flood defences so that investment can be properly targeted, with a centralised funding stream for flood defences and coastal erosion. We also need to consider how we can improve the flood warning system to give the emergency services and residents adequate time to prepare for any prevention measures.

The motion sets out improvements that should be made to flooding mitigation policies. Many of those were recommended in the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) report, which was published in December 2012. That represents important progress, but we remain concerned that, without overarching civil contingencies legislation, such progress will have a limited impact on overall emergency planning. I would be interested to know what OFMDFM plans to do about that.

Mr Agnew: I beg to move the following amendment: After the second "climate change" insert

", including the introduction of, and support for, a Northern Ireland climate change bill".

I am proposing the amendment on behalf of the Green Party NI. I support the motion regardless of whether it is amended.

Climate change is happening, and our communities are experiencing the

consequences of it. Freak weather events have become commonplace. In response to floods in June 2007, a local MLA stated:

"in the past eight years, it is about the eighth time that I have heard - from various Ministers, not just from the current Minister - that those are one in every 100 or 150 years events. It seems that we have had 1,000 years of disaster all wrapped up in the past eight years."

Those were not the words of some sandal-wearing green; they were the words of Sammy Wilson. He highlighted a problem that we face, whatever your view on climate change: we are facing increased extreme weather, and we need to take action.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I have to.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that the reason that I gave at that time for the flooding was not that we were experiencing global warming but that we were building on places that we previously had not built on and that we had far more urbanisation, which meant we had hard run-off surfaces that channelled water into one point very quickly? Therefore much of what he is describing is due to the physical characteristics that change as a result of development rather than man-made global warming.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am glad that he supports sustainable land planning, and I will welcome progressive responses in future planning debates.

Since 2000, the UK has experienced the five wettest and the seven warmest years in recorded history. Weather and climate are two separate things, but it is clear that there is a trend towards climate change. Mr Wilson may not share my view, but there seems to be an acceptance that the climate is changing. I accept, however, that, in politics, there is still a debate about why it is changing. I take my views from the scientific community, particularly the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which represents 120 governments and includes the World Meteorological Organization, and the 97% of scientific papers that point to the fact that climate change is human-induced.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will give way one more time because we could be at this all day.

Mr Wilson: Since the Member takes his views from scientists, does he take his view from the scientist who says:

"to capture the public's imagination ... we have to offer up scary scenarios ... Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest."

That is one of the leading climate change scientists. Is that whom he takes his advice from?

Mr Agnew: The Member has not told me who the scientist is, so I will have to reserve judgement.

The fact is that there is no single climate body nationally that opposes the view that climate change is caused by human activity. There are individual scientists who do. Before I went on a TV debate, I was told that I would be on with a professor and thought, Oh, how am I going to debate with a professor? However, when I looked him up on Wikipedia, it turned out that he was a professor of sociology. I have a lot of respect for sociologists, but that does not necessarily make them experts on climate change, nor, I admit, does being a politician.

In 1990, the scientific community established that climate change is caused by human activity. Indeed, the first scientific paper showing a causal link between carbon and climate was published in 1896, so I really think that it is time that we moved on from this debate. To be honest, it is a debate that I am bored with. Debating is getting us nowhere. We need to move on to action and implementation of some of the action plans that we have created.

Virtually every action that we need to take to mitigate climate change has economic, social and environmental benefits. Even if you do not accept my analysis or that of the IPCC, there are good reasons to take many of the mitigation actions required. The CBI, for example, estimates the UK green economy to be worth £122 billion a year. It is growing despite the recession. Fossil fuels are running out, and their price is continually rising —

Mr Wilson: It is falling.

Mr Agnew: I do not know what evidence Mr Wilson uses. However, as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and

Investment, I have been tracking energy prices, and they are certainly on the rise, particularly gas, which sets our electricity prices in Northern Ireland. To stabilise energy prices — there is a general commitment to try to do that — we need to grow our indigenous energy industry. For me, that means clean, green renewable energy.

Our over-reliance on cars has led to expanding waistlines. I often say that trying to tackle the problem of traffic congestion by building more roads is like opening your belt a notch to tackle obesity. We need to move to a more sustainable, healthier lifestyle not only because of climate change but because our society needs to. We need to exercise more. We need more sustainable transport options.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Sorry, I am going to continue. Your colleague took all my time for giving way.

We need to put these actions in place regardless of your view on climate change. The impacts of climate change are being experienced globally as well as locally. I have heard numerous stories from aid agencies working in some of the poorest countries in the world of how whole communities, particularly farming communities, are having to uproot and move because of changing weather patterns and, indeed, the shifting of seasons.

The recent flooding in Northern Ireland has finally woken us up to the reality that we need to protect our communities from the impacts of climate change. Recently, the Environment Minister proudly launched Northern Ireland's first climate change adaptation plan. Although he has been in post for only a short period, we have had the warnings of climate change for decades. We should be embarrassed that we are starting to look strategically at this issue only now. Had we listened to the warnings of the green lobby in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we could have prevented much of the flooding that our communities have faced. Human action has caused climate change, but political inaction is responsible for the flooding that our communities have suffered.

My amendment calls for legislation so that we can take measures to mitigate climate change and adaptation measures that will protect us against the climate change that is already happening. Why should we have legislation? I point to the words of the chief executive of the Committee on Climate Change, David Kennedy:

"In considering whether legislation would be helpful in the Northern Ireland context, the key factors are whether there is currently any political uncertainty around current and future commitment to building a low carbon economy, and whether there is scope for better integration across government in developing and implementing a carbon strategy. To the extent that there are uncertainties, and there is scope for better integration, then legislation in Northern Ireland would help to signal political commitment and improve the investment climate, and would therefore complement the UK Act in providing a basis for action."

It is clear that we have had a lack of integration and that there is political uncertainty. I think that certainty and clear direction could help us, not just to tackle the causes of climate change and adapt against it but to give certainty to our business community, which needs to know whether it should continue to invest, as it has done, in the ever-growing green economy.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way on the point about legislation?

Mr Agnew: I have only one minute left.

We need to coordinate our efforts. We have had warnings from Lord Stern, a former vice-president of the World Bank and economist; the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF); and the International Energy Agency. All expressed their concerns about the impact on the economy of climate change. It is no longer down to, as Mr Wilson once put it, the sandal-wearing, muesli-munching, 'Guardian' reading environmentalists —

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

Mr Agnew: — although there is nothing wrong with being any of those things. All agree that we need to act now for the benefit of our economy, our society and the common good. We need a climate Act.

Mrs Cameron: I am content to support the overall intention of the motion. That intention is not, I hope, to try to control the weather but to ensure that we as an Assembly do all that we can to support environmental awareness; to ensure that our defence and emergency planning is robust and effective; and to recognise the need for that planning to be subject to review in order to ensure that lessons are learned.

I am not an expert on climate change, of course, and I look at endless reports and conflicting advice with uncertainty. However, I hope that that does not mean that I do not care or that I am not willing to learn more. Put simply, although not convinced of the merits of many examples of environmentally green projects, I am reasonably sure that the overall weather trends that we are experiencing are not unrelated to a legacy of failing to protect our environment. Whatever the science, it is better for us to do something than nothing. Climate change, whether man-made or not, is happening and has been for a very long period. I think that acting in a precautionary way and in as responsible way as is physically possible is the common-sense approach.

Of course, it is well and good for government to have strategies, as we know, but how do they impact on the wider community and landscapes? I think that, by and large, we care about our environment, and that should be encouraged and developed. For all the instances of rogue dumping and chemical spills into our rivers, there are great numbers of people who care passionately about our environment.

Our children are the future, and will, hopefully, look after the planet, possibly better than we are doing. I was very encouraged by a recent visit to Fairview Primary School in my constituency of South Antrim, which has an ongoing project that successfully educates children about waste management. The outworkings of that project, and the hard work and enthusiasm of children and teachers, means that zero waste is sent to landfill. We have much to learn from such projects, and I would hope that that type of project can be lauded as an example of best practice.

The apparent effects of climate change are there to be seen, particularly in recent months. We have seen coastlines battered by strong winds and high tides, and whole communities have been devastated as a result of high rainfall. It is anticipated that, by the 2050s, our summers will be significantly warmer and dryer, with winter rainfall increasing by 9%. We must work together now to ensure that the effects of climate change are monitored and managed.

7.00 pm

Given the controversy around the Environment Agency's handling of the crisis in southern England, we must realise that this is not an issue for just the Department of the Environment or individual groups and agencies. Flooding affects every aspect of life as we know

it. We are, I believe, only at the start of an education process on flooding and how we can best defend ourselves against it. Every year, there is new information and technology that allows us to predict when flooding is likely to occur or that tells us ways to defend against it. We need to ensure that we are in a position to respond as quickly as possible to new developments.

I also believe that it is not an issue for just the statutory agencies. Through community planning, we will have a real opportunity to come together in partnership with the third sector to educate and deliver for people in our community. Statutory agencies are often seen as being large and unresponsive, while community and voluntary organisations are often seen as being the heart of the community and in a stronger position to deliver aid. However, we must ensure that the community feels as though it is an equal partner and not merely a vehicle to deliver savings to the statutory agencies.

I add my appreciation to those volunteers and workers who, over the past number of months, have worked extremely hard to help those at risk of flooding or who have been flooded.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. She hit on a word that resonates with me, and that is "volunteers". Does she agree that we already have in place a UK climate change Act and that introducing a Northern Ireland climate change Bill could well choke the economy and crush agriculture, remembering that Northern Ireland feeds the UK? It would be unfair to put a climate change Bill on Northern Ireland only, when we have perfectly good legislation in the form of the UK Climate Change Act 2008.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree wholeheartedly with him. It is one of the reasons that I oppose the amendment.

In summing up, I want to speak for a few more seconds about those who have been affected so badly by the flooding in England. It is appropriate for us to remember that the mainland is still dealing with significant flooding and problems. We should remember all those who are facing 2014 with a flooded property or a devastated business. The least that we can do is learn from their misfortune. I hope that we can. I support the motion and oppose the amendment.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am glad to speak on the motion. I am fortunate to live in the Mid Ulster constituency, where flooding has not caused the damage and devastation seen in other areas. However, the heavy rainfall has led to the saturation of fields and overflowing drains. That has caused problems on roads and pavements at a level not previously experienced.

Although we hope that the severe snowstorms of last year and the flooding that has been seen recently do not become the norm, we can be in no doubt that our weather is changing. If, as predicted, the rainfall that we have seen over the past few years is set to increase, we have to put in place the necessary measures to deal with it. Preparation is vital. We cannot control the weather, but we can ensure that we have the defence and response mechanisms in place to deal with it.

I am glad to see that work is already under way with the recently announced climate change adaptation programme. The Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture are working together on Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15, because planning in particular needs to be looked at. We need to move the focus from visual impact to potential flooding impact. The siting of dwellings at the bottom of hills is only building problems for the future, as is the overdevelopment of urban settlements.

A fresh look is needed for our drainage systems and waterways. Designated rivers can be maintained by DARD, but many are in private ownership, and the resources are not always there to do the necessary dredging to keep the water flowing. Thought needs to be given to possible grant-aided schemes to overcome the problem. Forward thinking across all Departments now will go a long way to preventing emergency situations in the future, and the Executive have a crucial role to play in creating a joined-up and coordinated approach.

In closing my short contribution, I commend the emergency response teams, the community organisations and the many individuals for their prompt reaction during the recent flooding that filled our TV screens. Crisis situations bring out the best in society, but it is important that we do not take the goodwill of others for granted. We need to be organised and resourced to respond when life and property are in danger from our increasingly unpredictable weather. I believe that this is best done by better cross-departmental cooperation, as opposed to

creating another quango, so I support, in broad principle, the motion and the amendment.

Mr A Maginness: First of all, the SDLP acknowledges the suffering and the hardship that recent flooding episodes brought to many communities and households in Northern Ireland, in Ireland and indeed in Britain. It is illustrative of the fact that there is something occurring which is quite radical in terms of climate change, weather change or whatever you want to call it. Whether it is man-made or whether it is a natural phenomenon is irrelevant to those whose homes are flooded and whose businesses have been devastated. We should be responsible in our response to it. I accept the scientific consensus that this is a result of man's intervention and man's mismanagement of the natural environment.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes indeed.

Mr Allister: Does the Member then think that a few hundred years ago when the Thames regularly froze over, that was because of the 4x4s up and down the Mall? What was the cause for that, in the days before there were CO2 emissions from factories and mines and everything else? Is it not time to face the reality: that man trying to hold his puny little hand up against the continual changes that happen with the sun, which are cyclical, is just a loss of a grip on reality?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr A Maginness: I am quite surprised that Mr Allister would reject the evidence which has been presented. I respect Mr Allister as being a distinguished lawyer, and I would think that his assessment should be based on evidence. It is clear that the evidence, according to the scientists, is that man's intervention and mismanagement has caused —

Mr Allister: And the Thames?

Mr A Maginness: In relation to the Thames freezing over, I cannot give an explanation. However, what is clear is that there has been a disruption. There has been unseasonal weather. There have been extremes, and that has been persistent and consistent in the past decade or two. We have to face up to the reality that we have to respond to that. Whether it is man-made or a natural

phenomenon is irrelevant in this debate, because we have to respond to it.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No. I have heard everything that you — I mean, you are just a flat-earther. It is as simple as that. Your colleagues, and even you — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Allow the Member to continue. Order.

Mr A Maginness: No, I think we have heard enough. In fact, consult your colleague Jim Wells. He will probably tell you the right way of things.

Northern Ireland has experienced flood events more commonly in recent years. That is fact. Serious local flood incidents have been experienced every year since 2007, and the frequency of such events is likely to further increase in the future. Flooding is, and will remain, a natural phenomenon that cannot be entirely prevented, no matter how effective legislation or collective actions are. That is a fact, but we have to respond to it.

Under the stewardship of the Minister of the Environment, the Department has sought to promote safe and sustainable developments that take full and proper account of flood risk. That is being carried out by applying the policies contained in Planning Policy Statement 15, 'Planning and Flood Risk', through the Department's development plan and the development management functions. The overall aim of PPS 15 is to prevent future development that may be at risk from flooding or that may increase the risk of flooding elsewhere.

The current Minister has outlined steps to tackle our changing climate as recently as January of this year, with the publication of Northern Ireland's first ever climate change adaptation programme. It contains a cross-departmental response to potential risks and opportunities from changing climate. The risk assessment that has been made identified flooding as one of the priority climate change risks facing Northern Ireland. Many of us, as individuals and as part of the wider community, have felt the severe and harsh consequences of these events.

The Northern Ireland climate change adaptation programme provides an integrated government response to the challenge of climate change and presents the first steps in ensuring that

Northern Ireland is better prepared for the impacts of our changing climate.

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

Mr A Maginness: In closing, I invite support for this motion. It is a timely motion —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr A Maginness: — and one to which we must contribute.

Mr Nesbitt: I support the motion but not the amendment. The motion states that we should give thanks to:

"the emergency services, public workers and volunteers who worked hard to minimise the impact of the flooding".

Absolutely, Mr Speaker. The Ards peninsula was badly hit. I saw the damage to the new promenade in Portavogie. Huge boulders had been lifted through the fencing and across the path. Many of the coastal roads are badly damaged and have rocks and detritus strewn across them. North of Ballywalter, at a large section of the Whitechurch Road, half the road was washed away into the sea. The workers worked tirelessly in all conditions and absolutely deserve our thanks.

I am particularly interested in one area of the motion, and that is the call:

"on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to initiate a holistic overhaul of flood mitigation policies, including a cross-departmental approach to emergency planning, placing a single agency in charge of coordinating relief".

That is the key part of the motion.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has had an interest in these matters for quite some time. Indeed, on 1 May 2013, it received a briefing from the British Red Cross. Its representatives gave us their assessment of our current civil contingency arrangements and concluded that there is a deficit in those arrangements, which was down to an absence of any legislative structure around civil contingency planning. Interestingly, they welcomed the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) report, especially to the extent that it recommended giving powers and leadership to local government. Yet, as I understand it, only one

of the 26 councils has a resilience group, and that is Belfast City Council.

Interestingly, the Red Cross representatives said that they were confident that statutory partners in Northern Ireland showed "a strong appetite" for a statutory framework to bring us into line with Great Britain, which has had a statutory framework for nine years since 2005. Here, only the police, the coastguard and telecoms operators have any statutory duty; whereas, that should really take in all category 1 responders. The police, the Fire and Rescue Service, emergency medical services, local authorities, health trusts, the coastguard and the Environment Agency should all have duties of assessing risk, maintaining business continuity plans, a plan for communicating with the public and a duty to share information and cooperate in the face of civil contingencies.

7.15 pm

On 2 May, the day after we received that briefing, we wrote to the Department requesting a briefing from officials on civil contingency planning in Northern Ireland. Four calendar months later, on 2 September, the Department finally responded. It stated that:

"following the June 2012 flooding the Executive commissioned the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) to carry out a thorough review ... and to make recommendations. These recommendations are currently under consideration by Departments."

So, officials would not update the Committee until that matter had been fully considered. We waited until 12 September and I wrote to the Department to seek a briefing from officials on current arrangements and the options emanating from the PEDU report. It wrote back on 2 December, seven calendar months after our first letter, to say that:

"Work arising from the PEDU recommendation directed towards OFMDFM, namely that consideration should be given to proposals for formalising the role of local government in civil contingency matters including consideration of establishing civil contingency preparedness groups outside Belfast, remains under consideration by the Department. Further information on these matters can be provided once consideration by Ministers is complete. I hope this is helpful in the interim."

On 5 December, the Committee wrote to the Department about the above correspondence, seeking further details on when the Department expected to complete its consideration of the PEDU report's recommendations. To date, there has been no response. Welcome to the world of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

I will finish by commending my colleague the Minister for Regional Development, who took a very bold and courageous step of leadership by offering to become the lead Department for flooding. It would have required the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to transfer Rivers Agency, but Minister O'Neill has not matched Danny Kennedy's brave leadership in doing what is right for Northern Ireland, nor has she agreed to his proposal that the Army —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — which has been used to inspect coastal areas in England and Wales, be invited to do the same job for Northern Ireland. I say that we could do a lot better.

Mr Weir: In the spirit of the bravery about which the previous contributor spoke, I will make an admission that, I suspect, may incur a certain level of wrath from somebody to my right. I believe that climate change is happening and that, on balance, the evidence shows that it may also be the case that a large element of that is man-made. However, the question is about how far that takes us.

I support the motion, but not the amendment, because we need to focus on some of the practical actions that can be taken. The most superfluous part of the motion is the part that deals with climate change. It:

"calls on the Executive to reduce Northern Ireland's environmental footprint and, consequently, its contribution to climate change".

Executive commitments on this issue have already been made; indeed, the motion is asking for things that are already happening in that regard. However, even if those are brought about or even, to be perfectly honest, if we were to follow the route of the proposer of the amendment who, I suspect, would prefer a world, from an industrial point of view, in which we all went back to being cave dwellers and, consequently, would be in a position in which there was not pollution of the atmosphere —

[Interruption.] — I see that I have obviously incurred the ire of my colleague to my right, so I will be happy to give way to him for the moment.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that that part of the motion carries grave consequences because, as a result, we are already paying through the nose for electricity because we go down the route of the dearest electricity possible through renewable energy; we are putting our agricultural industry in jeopardy because there is no greater producer of greenhouse gases than cows, which are used to produce milk and beef; and we are inhibiting the ability of people to travel by motor car etc because one of the measures that would be used to reduce the environmental footprint, as it is called in the motion, is to make fuel dearer and discourage people from travelling?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added onto his time.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his intervention, not least because I have recovered about an extra 10 seconds after he finished.

My point is that the Executive have already made commitments to it, so from that point of view, that element does not take us much further forward. Even if we were to meet all these requirements, the reality is that the impact of all this on the issue of global climate change and whether it stops people from being flooded will be minuscule at best.

We need to concentrate our activities on the practical measures. I also agreed with the Member when he acknowledged that there had been changes in weather conditions and in climate conditions and also in some of the attitudes that we have taken at times over the past 10 or 20 years on planning decisions and development issues. Some of those have not been helpful, and I know that from my constituency.

I reject Mr Agnew's proposal for a climate change Bill. As has been indicated, we are already part of a wider United Kingdom scheme, and I think that we are in a position to adapt to what is there and, indeed, to provide practical measures.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Sorry, I have given way once already. I want to complete my remarks.

The reality is that there is a misconception at times about legislation. On some occasions, legislation can be the solution, but, when we have a problem, the misconception is that the natural panacea to every problem that we have is legislation. It seems that the suggestion for a climate change Bill is equivalent to winning the golden ticket to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory in that it will provide an answer to all of our ills. The reality is that a climate change Bill would act as a straitjacket to our industry and to our farming community and would potentially be very damaging to Northern Ireland. The flexibility that we have to take action, rather than being straitjacketed by legislation, is much the better way forward.

The hard work of volunteers has been mentioned, and, in many ways, we all held our breath during the recent storms. Some areas of Northern Ireland were worse affected than others. There was a high level of anticipation in east Belfast, and down the Ards peninsula and into parts of south Down there were grave anxieties. Indeed, in some places in my constituency such as Holywood, Groomsport or Donaghadee, there was overflow of coastal walls. We did not have the same impact that other parts of the UK had. I take issue with what the proposer of the motion said about following the rest of the UK on flooding issues. The reality is that what has happened there has been a disaster because they failed to take some of the practical measures.

The motion mentions placing a single agency in charge of coordinating relief, having better emergency planning and having an audit of the effectiveness of flood defences. On that last issue in particular, we have to see whether, with the recent storms, we had good flood defences that prevented the worst from happening in Northern Ireland or whether we simply got fortunate that it was not worse. I think that an urgent audit of that by the DOE or others is important. It also mentions focusing on having a single funding stream for flood defences and coastal erosion. Similarly, it seems sensible to take a coordinated approach.

Concentrating on those practical measures will actually stop the water coming over the wall and stop the flooding of someone's house. Those are the things that we need to concentrate on rather than the things that, at best, we may well be committed to but which will only make a small element of difference. That is why I support the motion, but I do not support the zealotry behind the amendment. It is zealotry from a party —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: — that, a few weeks ago, was telling us that anyone who disagreed with the notion of climate change should be sacked from government. That is the kind of Stalinism behind the amendment, and that is why we need to reject it.

Mr McMullan: This debate is timely in the sense that I represent an area that has suffered badly from flooding and storms. Last March, the area had the snow and its subsequent fallout, which led to flooding. Recently, we had the storms. In the village of Carnlough, the sea wall burst and, at one stage, the village was closed for safety reasons. The whole main road was flooded. My own village of Cushendall suffered badly, as did Glenariff. I take this opportunity to give thanks to all the emergency services. Without them, things would have been a lot worse, as we would have had bigger insurance bills etc.

We have to face up to the fact that the level of water is rising. We have been skirting around this for a number of years. For example, farmers in Magilligan have lost up to 60 acres of ground because of the rise in water, resulting in erosion. That has an effect on the agriculture industry, because the loss of ground results in the loss of single farm payments. That is the fact.

We have 650 kilometres of coastline, some 26 kilometres of which belong to the Rivers Agency, 29 kilometres of which belong to NI Railways, and we do not know the exact number of kilometres that DRD owns. That includes coastal walls that have roads running beside them, such as the Antrim coast road. We need to look at those kinds of things. The bigger picture about climate change is for another level. We have to look today to see what we are doing.

The Minister is here today, and it is nice to see him. I am sure that he will talk about his climate change adaptation programme. We need to sit down and look at what we have here. In England, for example, they have the Bellwin scheme. I am not saying that there is a problem with money, but one problem here is that we might have all the agencies that are responsible for flooding, and so on, but does each Department have the funding to deal with flooding?

Mr Kinahan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: Go ahead.

Mr Kinahan: I wonder whether the Member is aware that, apparently, two years ago, we turned down an offer from the Met Office for an extended weather reporting service. We do not, therefore, have all the armoury that we need to deal with matters.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. The weather people were charging for that service. They were not giving us that service.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: Go ahead. Do not be long.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that some of the Met Office advice might not be all that useful? The very person who said just last week that this is all due to climate change predicted in November that we were going to have the driest winter that we have had for a long time. So the Met Office's advice is not all that good.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for that. I will get back to where we are today. We need to get together, and I ask the Minister to do that because I think that this has to be driven by the Minister and the Department.

The Departments are doing their own thing as far as flooding is concerned. The law states that the PSNI and the coastguard do not have a responsibility. What is wrong here is that we are looking at the bigger picture too much and not looking at the smaller one. Smaller villages, such as the ones that I represent, are devastated, year on year. It is not a one-off thing. Insurance companies are no longer insuring houses or businesses. It is costing us money. We have payment schemes of £1,000 for those who are victims of floods. That money could be better spent if we were to come up with a project that would involve house adaptations, such as the ones that we see in other places, to keep water out instead of keeping throwing £1,000 out. We are putting our finger in the hole of the dam and not sorting the problem out.

We need to do it at this level. If there is an argument between the eco-warriors at a higher level, so be it. I am not disproving that; I have my own theories. We talk about electric motor cars, and so on, but you would have to stick one hell of a long cable on the back of an

aeroplane wherever it would be flying to. *[Laughter.]* I ask the Minister to get all the agencies together and form them into one group so that, when a flood or any emergency such as that happens again, there is one body to lead on the entire thing. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Douglas: I support the motion. I thank Ms Lo and —

Mr McCarthy: Me.

Mr Douglas: — Mr McCarthy. Ten days ago, in my role as chairman of Assembly Community Connect, I visited the Northern Ireland Environment Link. I went there with an open mind, and I found it to be more than helpful and very informative. It even helped me to prepare for tonight, so I encourage other Members to go along to that project on the Castlereagh Road.

7.30 pm

The motion starts off:

"That this Assembly notes the recent incidents of serious flooding; expresses its gratitude to the emergency services, public workers and volunteers who worked hard to minimise the impact of the flooding".

I send my heartfelt thanks to all of the emergency services, particularly the PSNI, which coordinated the response, certainly in east Belfast. Some people accused the PSNI of overreaction, but I was there with a number of other councillors and MLAs at the very minute when the tidal surge came up through the manholes. In one sense, we averted a major catastrophe in east Belfast. I also pay tribute to the great community effort of local residents and community groups. It was encouraging to see all political parties working together in east Belfast to try to help the local residents.

I also concur with Mr Maginness, who offered his sympathy to people across Northern Ireland, throughout the rest of the UK, particularly in England, and, indeed, those in the Republic of Ireland who have suffered tremendously and tragically over the past number of weeks.

Although climate change is a global issue, it requires action at a number of local levels. I want to concentrate on the flooding aspect because all the other issues that I was going to raise have been addressed. The motion also calls:

"on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to initiate a holistic overhaul of flood mitigation policies, including a cross-departmental approach to emergency planning".

I want to offer a unique east Belfast solution — a green solution for flooding. I want to talk about my colleague Sammy Wilson, who supported us when he was Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Douglas: Go ahead.

Mr McMullan: Is the Member telling us that east Belfast is going green?

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

Mr Douglas: As we all know, green is one of the top colours in the Orange Order, but we will not go there.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is getting to the point, hopefully without too many interruptions. *[Laughter.]* That point is that what we need is a strong force for good that will bring in everybody involved in emergency planning, including Roads Service, the Rivers Agency and NI Water so that one hand knows what the other hand is doing. The onus for enforcement must be put on the Environment Minister because, in my area, Broughshane village is under threat of flooding because of an unauthorised land bank.

Mr Speaker: The Member should not use an intervention to make a statement.

Mr Frew: He should address that.

Mr Douglas: I thank my colleagues for those two interventions. I certainly agree with my colleague that, as Mr Weir said earlier, we are looking for solutions. I want to offer a solution from a project in east Belfast, which has involved people from across Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland, and, indeed, from across the United Kingdom and beyond.

That green solution is the Knock river in east Belfast, an excellent example of a green solution to tackling flooding in my East Belfast constituency. One of three Living Landmark projects in the UK, the £35 million Connswater Community Greenway east Belfast flood alleviation scheme project has been developed

by the East Belfast Partnership and is funded by the Big Lottery, Belfast City Council, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency. It is a good example of a multi-agency approach and people coming together to support local initiatives and local solutions to local problems.

The Knock river, which previously flowed along the edge of Orangefield Park, adjacent to many properties affected by flooding in the past, is in the process of transformation. Work to divert the Knock river along a new channel took place on Tuesday 20 January, and a major part of the river was diverted through the heart of the park as a key component of the flood alleviation element of an integrated project under way in the area. Work on the park began in May 2013 with 40,000 tons of soil being moved to create a new river channel and naturalised flood plain.

As I said earlier, that is a great example of local people coming together with a major initiative to tackle flood alleviation. As far as I am concerned, those are the sorts of solutions that we need.

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

Mr Douglas: I rest my case. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I call Karen McKeivitt. I must say to the Member that we are almost out of time. I will allow her two minutes.

Mrs McKeivitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me two minutes. I have to say that I am disappointed, because I am probably the only MLA who has stood in flood water in south Down almost every day since Christmas, lifting sandbags etc. I wanted to get that bit in.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important global issue and to discuss the steps that we can take in Northern Ireland to prepare for the effects of climate change and develop an action plan to tackle flooding.

Former president of Ireland Mary Robinson describes climate change as the biggest human rights issue of our time. Do you know what? She is right. Over the past 100 years, the average climate temperature has warmed by around one degree. As a direct consequence, our weather has been more intense and irregular.

As the most challenging social, environmental and economic issue that faces modern society, it is up to us as legislators and citizens of the world to confront climate change head-on and plan for the future. That is exactly what the Minister of the Environment, Mark H Durkan, has done, having published the first Northern Ireland climate change adaptation programme and called for Departments to climate-change-proof their policies. He has placed climate change at the heart of all decision-making.

The adaptation programme serves to educate everyone in the North on the impacts that climate change will bring and how we can minimise them. If global warming continues, flooding could become the greatest single climate change concern for our society, potentially threatening businesses, secured mortgages, tourist assets, building heritage, electricity supply, infrastructure and transport.

That is a real wake-up call to many and will hopefully shake society into action. Climate change may be a global issue, but all individuals have a responsibility to lower their carbon footprint and take preventative and defensive flooding measures to protect their home, business and community. We have already witnessed the effects of global warming, having experienced unpredictable and intense rain and flooding. Locally, my constituency of South Down has seen unprecedented flooding levels over recent times.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring her remarks to a close.

Mrs McKeivitt: I am on record as praising the response of the emergency services, particularly the silver command run from Ardmore police station. I feel that it has led the way in how that can be done. I found the approach of the multi-agency task force to be very well coordinated, organised and effective. That said, there is always room for improvement.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.

Mrs McKeivitt: We should strive to improve our flood warnings, responses and defences. The SDLP is open to having those discussions.

Mr Speaker: Minister, you have 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): I thank Anna Lo and Kieran McCarthy for tabling this timely motion on

climate change and its impact on flooding, and Steven Agnew for his amendment to the motion, which proposes the introduction of, and support for, a Northern Ireland climate change Bill. I am also grateful to all Members for their contributions on this very important issue.

Although the motion calls on the Executive collectively to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon footprint and contribution to climate change, and explicitly OFMDFM with regard to flood mitigation, I am here as Environment Minister, with lead responsibility on climate change policy, to address the debate.

Like other Members, I express my sympathy to all who have been affected by flooding. In recent years, we have seen the devastating effects that flooding has had on our local communities. It has had major consequences for our businesses and infrastructure. Above all, though, it has been particularly distressing for families whose home has been flooded, perhaps more than once in recent years, and who, every time that it rains, live with the fear that it may be flooded again.

I am also extremely grateful to, and put on record my appreciation of, the emergency services, public workers and volunteers who have worked tirelessly to protect life and property and to minimise the impact of flooding. The importance of their work has been apparent during the recent emergency operations to address the risks and effects of heavy rain, gale-force winds and high tidal surges.

The recent flooding events throughout the island of Ireland and in England clearly and vividly demonstrate the reality of extreme weather events and the devastation they bring.

Recent scientific reports continue to provide overwhelming evidence that climate change is happening and will continue in the decades and centuries to come. The latest UK climate projections indicate that we are likely to experience warmer but wetter winters, coupled with increased frequency of extreme weather occurrences, such as heavy rain and flooding. That conclusion is not new, but it reinforces the need for urgent action to drastically reduce global greenhouse gas emissions in order to minimise future climate change. At the same time, it highlights the need to adapt to the climate changes that are now unavoidable.

Regardless of differences of opinion about the cause of climate change — we heard a couple today — I think that all of us can now at least accept that it exists and that the need to do

something about it exists as well. All Departments bear a collective responsibility in achieving the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35%, based on 1990 levels, by 2025.

In May 2010, the Executive approved a proposal to establish a cross-departmental working group on greenhouse gas emissions to be chaired by the Minister of the Environment. That group, made up of senior officials from all Departments, was tasked with developing a greenhouse gas emissions reduction action plan. The plan was published in February 2011, along with a commitment to provide the Executive with an annual report on progress. The latest progress report was made available to the Executive last May. Using the latest figures available, the current projections indicate that, by 2025, we will have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 28% on 1990 levels. We must and can do more if we are to achieve the 35% target set out in our Programme for Government.

I want to make Northern Ireland a leader in carbon reduction, and I am fully committed to ensuring that we play a full part in minimising our greenhouse gas emissions. Although I believe that the introduction of a Northern Ireland climate change Bill would help in that regard by providing a focus and certainty on the way forward, I am not convinced that I have the necessary support to do so at this time. In fact, I am fairly convinced that I do not. That is why I have engaged with a number of different sectors to explore a range of ways in which we can secure a lower-carbon approach to their economic activities.

If we are to agree successful approaches to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and growing a sustainable, productive low-carbon economy here in Northern Ireland, it must be based on partnership working across and between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. Through the success of partnership working, we can convince those who are unconvinced of the merits of a climate change Bill that it could be the best way forward.

I appreciate that there are concerns about how we tackle the issue and at what cost. I therefore want to make sure that we move forward in a way that is right for the environment, for society and for the economy. I want us to work together in a way in which we will begin to make the transition towards a more resource-efficient, sustainable society. In doing so, we will open up opportunities for private

sector growth in productive and innovative firms — firms that will be competitive in the expanding global markets for green products.

I have already said that we need to adapt to the unavoidable climate change that is happening now and which will continue in the future. We, therefore, need to put in place the necessary measures to ensure that our society as a whole can cope with the impacts and exploit the opportunities of our changing climate. By adapting our economic, social and natural systems in response to climate changes, we will help to protect against the potential negative impacts of climate change.

My Department has overall responsibility for climate change policy and is taking the lead in helping to ensure that we are best placed to adapt to future climate change.

The climate change risk assessment for Northern Ireland identified flooding as potentially one of the most significant and urgent risks for this region. Last month, we produced the first Northern Ireland climate change adaptation programme. This cross-departmental adaptation programme addressed the risks outlined in the climate change risk assessment for Northern Ireland. It sets out the strategic direction and objectives in preparing the North for the effects of climate change over the next five years. All Departments have contributed to the identification of actions and activities that need to be undertaken to address the challenge from flooding now and in the future. Those actions and activities, which all Departments have committed to, will ensure that the impact of flooding on people, property, infrastructure and the environment will be reduced through awareness, avoidance, alleviation and assistance. It is our vision to produce a resilient Northern Ireland that will make timely and well-informed decisions that are responsive to the key risks and opportunities presented by climate change.

7.45 pm

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has instigated a range of innovative measures to ensure that the agency reacts positively to the threat of climate change, particularly with reference to flood risk and diffuse pollution. A cross-departmental storm water management group has been established to drive forward recommendations published in the agency's strategy document. The fundamental aim of the group is to examine a range of approaches to storm water management to assist in the

development of more integrated and sustainable systems.

Planning plays an important role in managing and controlling future development in areas where there may be a risk from flooding or where a development may increase the risk of flooding elsewhere. The susceptibility of land to flooding is a material consideration in determining planning applications and informs the preparation of development plans, as set out in the Department's policy on planning and flood risk, which was published in June 2006.

Last October, I published the revised draft Planning Policy Statement 15, which provides guidance on development on floodplains. The revised guidance takes account of emerging information relating to flood risk and climate change and experience in the implementation of flood risk policy. The document is being finalised and will take account of the responses to the public consultation and the views of relevant Departments and agencies.

Mr Frew raised a particular enforcement issue about a land bank in Broughshane. I would be happy to meet the Member to discuss that enforcement problem further with him, but I am curious to know how long the problem has existed.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Frew: I will not bog you down with the specific case, though we will talk about that. The onus must be placed on you, Minister, with regard to the consultation that your agencies have around planning and how planning attests that. In most cases, you will get a scant or a flippant response from Rivers Agency about whether something is being built on a floodplain, but it does not tell you what is going to affect it half a mile downstream.

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that it is short interventions, not statements to the Minister.

Mr Durkan: I cannot imagine the Department of the Environment ever giving a flippant response. *[Laughter.]* We have a scheme to compensate households for flood damage. It is a scheme of financial assistance to councils in which emergency funds are made available to cover council costs incurred when responding to the needs of householders across Northern Ireland in the event of any flooding following rainfall and tidal surge.

Flooding cannot entirely be prevented, no matter what government does. Neither I nor any of my ministerial colleagues are going to stand like King Canute and attempt to prevent flooding. However, we can seek to limit the worst of its devastating impacts by being more prepared, by enhancing the ability of society and individuals to manage the risks and by raising overall awareness of flood risk. In that way, we will help to reduce the risk of future flood events and improve our ability to manage and recover from any events that do occur.

My Department is working with DEFRA and the adaptation subcommittee of the climate change committee on the second UK climate change risk assessment. It is only through ensuring that the UK risk assessment contains practical Northern Ireland information that all our stakeholders will have the necessary information to adequately address upcoming climate change risks, such as flooding.

I am fully committed to ensuring that we address the risk from flooding and meet the challenge from climate change. I concur with the proposal that we need a holistic, cross-departmental approach to flooding and that we need to reduce our carbon footprint and consequently our contribution to climate change. My Department cannot deliver this goal alone. My Executive colleagues need to contribute to a shared objective, whereby joined-up government actions and responses can successfully meet the challenges that we have, and will continue to encounter, from flooding and climate change.

Mr McMullan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: I cannot really. I am not going to get any time added on, I am afraid.

I therefore support the sentiment of the motion. Although a lot of what it calls for already exists, the situation is certainly not beyond improvement. I accept that a change of focus will be needed. We should look to use the potential of natural catchments to help plan ahead and adapt for improved water retention through storage to effect a reduction of peak flows to deliver a lower future flood risk.

The predictive models that Departments have can be utilised to assess how much needs to be done to protect vulnerable communities from predicted flood events. Effective emergency responses require certainty about roles and responses, and I believe that we need a joined-up response to all emergencies. This works best, as the motion suggests, with a single agency in charge. I am not going to say which

agency I think that might be, but I commend the PSNI for how it took charge of recent events, particularly here in Belfast.

I thank those who tabled the motion and all Members who have contributed today. I commend the motion.

Mr Agnew: I follow others in commending the emergency services, public sector workers and volunteers who helped communities and householders faced with the considerable damage caused by the flooding. The next time that we get one of these ridiculous discussions in which the public sector is lambasted for being a drain on resources while the private sector is said to be the only beneficial part of our society, I ask Members to remember the work that the public sector does when we face such emergencies and to defend public sector workers in future.

As I said in moving the amendment, human action has caused climate change but human inaction has certainly led to the extent of the flooding that we have seen. We have had a failure to plan, and, as I pointed out earlier, we now have Northern Ireland's first climate adaptation plan. I welcome that it is here. I regret that it has taken so long to get here.

We have had a failure to enforce planning, and that is one of the few areas where Mr Wilson and I agreed. Land planning is absolutely key to managing flood risks. We need to enforce the likes of PPS 15, however it transpires in the new single strategic planning policy statement. We need to do planning better. Councils in particular will need to take cognisance of that when they get planning powers.

We need a climate Act because we need a message to be sent from the top of our government stating that we are committed to acting to mitigate climate change and to adapt to the impacts that we already face.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will.

Mr Allister: Since the Green Party is proposing a climate Act, will he tell us whether it would include the Green Party's proposition that no one should hold public office in government who is not a signed-up member to the dogma, nay the religion, of man-made climate change? Would his climate Act include that particular provision?

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

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention because it gives me the opportunity to put on record that, as is often the case, the words of my Green Party colleague in England have been twisted by the media. It is clear that her intention was to point out that Ministers and their advisers need to act in accordance with the law in working in line with the climate Act. It certainly will not have any clauses that state that people should be sacked, but, if it comes into force, it will state that civil servants will have to do their job as they will be required to by law. Indeed, many of our laws require people to carry out their job professionally regardless of their own opinions.

Mr D McIlveen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will not give way again; I have very little time.

We need a clear and coordinated approach, and, if we get that message from the top of government, we can mitigate some of the debate that we have heard today and send a clear signal to business and to wider society about the direction of travel. Mr Weir said that he believes that we need to take action on climate change and that it is caused by human activity, but he then confused his message by going on to say that our impact was minimal and that he opposed the Bill because many of the actions that might be contained in it could be detrimental. So it was a mixed message. He believes that we should do something, but, when asked to commit to the actions that we need to take, he recoiled.

I want to allay the fears of Mr Frew, who, along with others, highlighted the concerns of the farming community. We accept — by "we", I mean the Green Party, Northern Ireland Environment Link, Friends of the Earth and other stakeholders whom I engage with on climate change — that Northern Ireland is highly dependent on the agriculture industry and that it will be more difficult to mitigate some of the impacts of climate change on agriculture. That is precisely why we need a Northern Ireland-specific climate Act that recognises the challenges that we face in this part of the world. If he engages with those stakeholders, I hope that he will be pleasantly surprised to find that cognisance will be taken of the needs of the farming community.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I have only a minute left when the Member asks me to give way.

I ask him to engage with those stakeholders. As I said, the needs of the farming community will not be ignored by the environmental lobby or by the Green Party.

I want to tackle a couple of points briefly. It was argued that tackling climate change and reducing carbon emissions will somehow take us back to caves, as Mr Weir put it. Renewable energy is the most innovative technology around; I can barely keep up to speed with all the emerging technologies. Fossil fuels are the old technology: the clue is in the name. It is a dead industry.

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

Mr Agnew: The fossils are running out. As Lord Stern has pointed out time and time again, we need to act now for the good of our economy, the good of our people and for the common good. We need a climate Act, and we need it now.

Mr McCarthy: At the outset, I must say how disappointed and, indeed, angry I am that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister or, indeed, the junior Ministers did not have the decency, courage or backbone to respond to this extremely important debate. Our motion calls on the First Minister or the deputy First Minister to carry out major works and possibly life-saving work. Can we assume from their unwillingness to be here to support the Assembly that they are not all that interested in the topic? I sincerely hope not. I very much welcome the presence of Mark Durkan, our Minister of the Environment. What we are about cannot simply be the responsibility of the Department of the Environment alone. This is a multi-party issue that should have been addressed by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However, Mr Durkan is quite capable of seeing it through, provided that he gets sufficient funds from the Department.

Whether you accept climate change or not, our earth is experiencing change and we must act now. You can see it in huge areas across the water and, indeed, in the South of this island. Something is undoubtedly happening, and we must act now.

8.00 pm

I wish to thank everyone in the Chamber who has spoken so positively to this extremely important motion. We are all very fortunate to live in such a truly magnificent environment in Northern Ireland. We have lush green fields, beautiful mountains, lakes, rivers and valleys, all of which are surrounded by water. We all want that to be preserved for generations to come. We have enjoyed those features for a very long time and, it would be fair to say, with the minimum of maintenance or investment. We recognise those organisations that have kept an eye on things over the years, but now is the time to draw up a plan to secure the future of our wonderful environment for the generations coming behind through land drainage, by securing sea defences and road and rail provision along the coast and halting coastal erosion. Doing that will help to preserve our excellent agriculture industry and the huge tourist potential and ensure the safety of many homes and businesses, particularly around our coastline.

The events of the past month have been a wake-up call for us in Northern Ireland. We simply cannot ignore the warnings and wait until disaster strikes. As a recent 'Belfast Telegraph' article suggested, we must build defences and build them now.

In my coastal constituency of Strangford, there have been many cases of coastal undermining. Those have been spoken about, and my colleague Mike Nesbitt referred to the erosion in Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert and the Portaferry Road coming out of Newtownards. Many other homes and businesses have been flooded because of blocked drains, flooded rivers and the breaching of sea defences. In one case in a small village called Lisbane outside Kircubbin, homes, a garage and a very popular pub and eatery were flooded, and the garage and pub were closed for a week. Karen McKeivitt mentioned that she had stood in her welly boots. I also stood in my welly boots at that location when the seawater from Strangford lough was coming in through those people's doors. An ancient church and graveyard were also destroyed simply because the sea wall that surrounded those buildings was breached by the huge swell in Strangford lough. Other homes suffered a similar fate — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McCarthy: — throughout the constituency. Other constituencies around the coast have also suffered, and Oliver McMullan in particular spoke about his experience.

After a visit to Lisbane, senior officials from the Rivers Agency committed to carry out a preliminary investigation to ascertain the cost-benefit of upgrading that wall to adhere to future sea levels. A decision for works will then be considered. I appeal to the Executive to invest now at that location to ensure that there is no repetition and to preserve lives, homes and businesses. Surely government has a duty to save lives and property.

In answer to my recent question for oral answer, the deputy First Minister acknowledged that there is a problem. At an earlier Question Time on 13 January, the First Minister said on the Floor, among other things:

"I think we need to look at some more permanent answers to those questions. To me, sandbags are very much of the last century." — [Official Report, Vol 90, No 5, p24, col 2].

There is also the issue of whether walls need to be fortified. In the case of Lisbane, the answer is most definitely yes. I plead with the First Minister and deputy First Minister to back up their words with strong action and to put their money where their mouths are. Mr Durkan will obviously need that as time goes on.

I heard officials from the National Trust recently call for action around our coastline. As I understand it, groups such as the Northern Ireland Coastal and Marine Forum and others are in place to tackle flooding. Anna Lo mentioned others in her contribution. We also have an integrated coastal zone management strategy for Northern Ireland under the auspices of the DOE.

In a document published under the title, 'Hydrographical Conditions', concerns are raised that existing arrangements for Northern Ireland are "piecemeal", which was said earlier. It states:

"Responsibility for coastal defences is split between Government Departments".

It details how DARD is responsible for sea defences and DRD for protecting coastal roads and railways, with the DOE having a poorly defined role. It appears, according to the document, that there are:

"no plans for Northern Ireland that permit a strategic approach to shoreline management."

That must be remedied as early as possible. I am grateful to Mr Durkan for his commitment to tackling that work and I welcome all of his speech. Nobody could argue with it, not even Sammy Wilson.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr McCarthy: In the few minutes that I have left, I want to respond to a few Members' comments. Karen McKeivitt, you were not the only one who stood in wellies; I stood in wellies at Lisbane church. I want to pay tribute to Sammy Douglas and his contribution. This is what it is all about — community effort. That is the shared future we all want. Sammy Douglas acknowledged that, and more power to him and his community for that.

Oliver McMullan mentioned, among other things, funding to do the deal. That is what it is all about. We need finance. Mark Durkan will need finance to build a sea wall around the Lisbane community.

Peter Weir said that there should be an audit of flood defences. I agree with that. That should be done and, hopefully, will be done.

Mike Nesbitt criticised and complained about the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — I am not surprised by that — and their dilatory response, even to his Committee. No response: that gives you a feel for the attitude taken at the highest level — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCarthy: Alban Maginness talked about planning and PPS 15. No one can deny that planning permission ought not to be granted for building in flood risk areas, but it has been in the past. I have seen people building almost on the edge of lakes etc — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr McCarthy: Ian Milne said that preparation and early work was essential. I absolutely agree with that.

Pam Cameron spoke about the younger generation. She had visited her local school and was encouraged to see young people being taught about the environment. That is very much to be welcomed.

I very much agree with what Steven Agnew is trying to do, but I think that he himself acknowledged, as did the Minister, that the

support may not be there for an Act at this time. However, that does not mean to say that the idea should be discarded, and I hope that it will be discussed at some future stage.

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

Mr McCarthy: This has been a useful, even vital, discussion and debate. I think that we have the support of every Member and party, and I welcome that.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 45; Noes 33.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Agnew and Mr A Maginness

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kinahan, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the recent incidents of serious flooding; expresses its gratitude to the emergency services, public workers and volunteers who worked hard to minimise the impact of the flooding; believes that the seriousness of future flooding is likely to increase as a direct result of climate change; calls on the Executive to reduce Northern Ireland's environmental footprint and, consequently, its contribution to climate change, including the introduction of, and support for, a Northern Ireland climate change Bill; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to initiate a holistic overhaul of flood mitigation policies, including a cross-departmental approach to emergency planning, placing a single agency in charge of coordinating relief, an audit of the effectiveness of current flood defences so that investment can be targeted effectively, improvement of the flood warning system and a single funding stream for flood defences and coastal erosion.

Adjourned at 8.19 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

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

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

PAEDIATRIC CONGENITAL CARDIAC SERVICES PLANNING

Published at 11.00 am on Monday 24 February 2014

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Further to my oral statement to the Assembly on 9 December 2013 this written statement is to provide the Assembly with an update on the current position concerning paediatric congenital cardiac services (PCCS) in Northern Ireland.

In my previous statement I informed the Assembly that Minister James Reilly TD, Minister of Health in the Republic of Ireland, and I have appointed a team of three international clinicians to carry out an independent assessment of current and future needs for cardiology and cardiac surgery for congenital heart disease in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In addition to the two experts named in my oral statement, the final member of the team has now been appointed to provide expertise in anaesthetics. The assessment team will therefore comprise:

- Dr John Mayer, Chair in Cardiovascular Studies at the Children's Hospital, Boston (to chair the team);
- Dr Adrian Moran, Consultant Cardiologist from the Maine Medical Centre, USA, and fellow of the American Academy of Paediatrics and the American College of Cardiology;
- Dr John Sinclair, Consultant Paediatric Cardiac Anaesthetist and Intensivist at Yorkhill Children's Hospital, Glasgow.

The assessment team will describe the existing hospital services in both jurisdictions, outline options for service configuration and governance arrangements and report to both Ministers, jointly, recommending the most appropriate model that would meet the population health needs and other requirements of both jurisdictions.

I am pleased to inform the Assembly that the Assessment is underway and the team of experts is planning to visit Northern Ireland in the weeks ahead to meet with commissioners, the clinicians who deliver services and representatives of the families whose children avail of this service.

I also advised the Assembly that in the interim, pending the completion of the assessment in June 2014, health service management and clinicians in the Republic of Ireland would continue to work with their colleagues in Belfast to provide support to the services in Northern Ireland. The detailed arrangements for this support have been finalised and the first surgical session provided by surgeons from Dublin took place in Belfast on 17 February. Arrangements are also in place to ensure that those children whose procedure is considered to be more complex will continue to be transferred to centres in England for surgery. This is and will remain in line with risk management arrangements currently in place. An important point in all of this is that each and every case will be given individual consideration, and the most appropriate location for the procedure to be carried out will be determined on the basis of clinical judgement. Arrangements for children in Northern Ireland who require emergency surgery have now been formalised in a service level agreement between the Health and Social Care Board and Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Dublin.

I would like to record my thanks to Minister Reilly and the clinicians from Our Lady's Children's Hospital for their efforts in working with Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland to secure these short-term arrangements.

I also advised the Assembly that in order to ensure that the service in Belfast is as robust as possible children's heart surgery would transfer from the Royal Victoria Hospital to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. While it would be ideal for children undergoing cardiac surgery to have their operation in a paediatric setting, this particular matter is complex and requires careful consideration of the potential consequences on other paediatric services and the implications for staffing. The Belfast Trust is therefore carrying out a risk assessment of the proposed relocation and a decision will be taken shortly on the way forward in regard to this proposal.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate to the Assembly that while I have been assured that the current PCCS service in the Belfast Trust is

safe and will continue to be safe, it is, nonetheless, a fragile service, and we should not underestimate the challenges that low volumes of patients present in sustaining such services.



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