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Contents

Assembly Business

Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	1
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Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Meeting	1
North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways	10
North/South Ministerial Council: Languages	15

Committee Business

Regional Library for Northern Ireland	19
---	----

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning.....	24
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	32

Committee Business

Regional Library for Northern Ireland (<i>Continued</i>).....	41
---	----

Private Members' Business

Emergency Services: Day of Recognition	49
--	----

Adjournment

University of Ulster: Magee Expansion	60
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 17 September 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Speaker: Before we move to this morning's business, I wish to make an announcement to the House. I have been notified by the Sinn Féin nominating officer that Ms Sue Ramsey has been replaced as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety by Ms Maeve McLaughlin, with effect from 16 September 2013. Ms McLaughlin has accepted the nomination. I am content that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met, and I therefore confirm that Ms Maeve McLaughlin took up office as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety with effect from yesterday.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Meeting

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Speaker, in compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make a statement on the sixteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary format, which was held in Dublin on Friday 5 July 2013, immediately before the Assembly went into recess. The Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have agreed that we may make this report on their behalf.

Our delegation was led by the First Minister, Peter Robinson MLA, and myself. The following Executive Ministers were also in attendance: Minister Attwood, Minister Farry, Minister Kennedy, Minister Ní Chuilín, Minister O'Dowd, Minister O'Neill, Minister Poots, junior Minister Bell and junior Minister McCann.

The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD. The following Irish Government Ministers were also in attendance: Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Eamon Gilmore, Minister Noonan, Minister Howlin, Minister Bruton, Minister Burton, Minister Deenihan, Minister Rabbitte, Minister Coveney and Minister Fitzgerald.

At our meeting, the Council discussed a broad range of issues facing both jurisdictions. The July meeting came just a few weeks after the very successful G8 summit in Fermanagh. Ministers welcomed the positive impact that the summit made and recognised the need to build on its success. In that context, we looked ahead to the World Police and Fire Games in August, which turned out to be another hugely successful event for us, and to the continuing efforts to promote tourism through the City of Culture and "The Gathering".

The plenary session also provided a valuable opportunity to exchange views on the fiscal challenges that we face. In particular, Ministers discussed the challenges facing the local banking sector and recognised the need to cooperate on bank restructuring and the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA).

The opportunities through cooperation of attracting trade and investment from developing markets for both jurisdictions were also discussed. On the back of our successful trips to China and Brazil, we took the opportunity to acknowledge the role of the Irish embassy network in supporting the Executive during those trade visits.

There was a discussion on the new 'Building a Prosperous and United Community' economic package, and it was agreed that both jurisdictions will cooperate on that. The Council welcomed our Together: Building a United Community strategy, which will complement the new Peace programme.

Ministers also discussed the negative impact of illegal fuel on the transport industry, revenue to the exchequers and the environment.

The position on Narrow Water bridge was also discussed by Ministers.

On EU matters, Ministers noted that Ireland's presidency of the EU had been a great success and that there had been good cooperation between both jurisdictions during the presidency term. The participation of Executive Ministers at presidency-related events and the updates on the presidency, provided at NSMC meetings and by the then Minister of State Creighton to Executive Ministers and MLAs, were welcomed. The Irish Government thanked the Executive for the provision of premises and staff by our office in Brussels and for the provision of seconded staff from the Civil Service.

Ministers noted the implications of the European Council agreement on the multi-annual financial framework, common agriculture policy reform and common fisheries policies, and the impact of transnational EU programmes such as INTERREG and framework programme 7 (FP7), which will become Horizon 2020. They acknowledged the importance of North/South cooperation in accessing EU funds.

The multi-annual financial framework, which has now been agreed by the European Parliament, includes provision for funding of €150 million towards a new Peace programme as part of the new EU budget. Ministers also

noted that the size of the programme, including match-funding requirements, will depend on the outcome of programme planning. The draft operational programme plans are being prepared by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), and finalisation of those will be dependent on agreement on the EU budget and regulations.

Youth unemployment is an issue that impacts on both jurisdictions, and there was a valuable discussion on the actions being taken to tackle it. Ministers noted that the issue is recognised as being of importance across Europe and that various EU-wide initiatives are being implemented to help address youth unemployment levels. Ministers considered the opportunities for collaboration to address this important issue, including through the European Union's new Youth Guarantee and to work with relevant stakeholders to maximise the impact of the Youth Guarantee.

The plenary session provides an opportunity for Ministers to consider the progress report prepared by the NSMC joint secretaries on the work of the North/South bodies and in the other NSMC areas for cooperation.

The following key developments were highlighted in the joint secretaries report. The business planning case for the establishment of a radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin hospital is further advanced, and officials are working together to ensure the effective delivery of the project.

A very successful all-island child protection conference was held in May 2013, attended by over 250 delegates. The conference facilitated practitioners, managers, policymakers and legislators from both jurisdictions to share practice knowledge, research, experience and learning on safeguarding and child protection practice.

The two Agriculture Departments continue to cooperate closely in dealing with the ash dieback outbreak.

Ministers affirmed the intention of the Education Departments to work to broaden and deepen their cooperation on education matters and that the stated intentions of part 2 of the joint study on North/South cooperation in education can be achieved as a result of the proposed high-level engagement at official level.

Charging for carrier bags is now in place across the island of Ireland following our recent introduction of the carrier bag levy in April. Progress continues on the mutual recognition of penalty points with the commitment to have the

necessary primary and secondary legislation in place by 31 December 2014.

InterTradeIreland hosted a very successful Collaborate to Innovate conference on 23 May in the Croke Park conference centre, which was attended by over 220 delegates. The focus of the conference was on the upcoming expected €70 billion R&D and innovation fund Horizon 2020, which will come on stream in 2014.

At March 2013, in the Peace III programme, 214 projects worth €314 million, which is £283 million, had received letters of offer, and, in the INTERREG IVa programme, 78 projects worth €223 million, which is £194 million, had received letters of offer.

The range of consumer and scientific activities undertaken by the Food Safety Promotion Board includes its work on developing an indicator for measuring food poverty and involvement with the Department of the Environment and the Environmental Protection Agency in a joint campaign focusing on customers' understanding of best-before and use-by dates.

The Loughs Agency is involved in prominent engagement with the City of Culture, especially in the important promotional opportunity afforded by the partnership with Tate Britain and the Turner Prize. The two agencies of the Language Body continue to collaborate on governance and promotion issues, including the establishment of a committee to oversee the joint work programme, the current consultation process on the joint equality scheme and funding for 'The Honest Sod', which is a play in Ulster-Scots and Irish that has toured 88 schools and has been seen by over 3,000 pupils.

With regard to the Ulster canal, formal planning applications have been granted by Cavan County Council and Clones Town Council. Fermanagh District Council agreed the recommendation for approval and referred it to the Department of the Environment's Planning Service, which has also approved the application. The joint secretaries report also highlighted that a new suite of websites was rolled out by Tourism Ireland designed to capitalise on the growing importance of the internet in travel and holiday planning and to harness the growth in social media.

Ministers noted that the terms of reference 1 for the St Andrews Agreement review is now largely complete, that senior officials have met and initiated a work programme to take forward terms of reference 2 and 3, and that they will

conclude their work and present a report with proposals to the next NSMC institutional meeting in the autumn.

Ministers also welcomed the progress that has been made through the north-west gateway initiative on a range of initiatives, which have been delivered and planned, that aim to deliver economic and social benefits in the north-west. They noted that the consultation has commenced with key stakeholders in the north-west on the future development of the north-west gateway initiative and that a report on the outcome of that exercise will be brought to a future NSMC institutional meeting. Ministers noted the current position on a North/South consultative forum and agreed to review the issue at a future NSMC plenary. The Council approved a schedule of NSMC meetings proposed by the joint secretariat.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Yesterday, the Agriculture Minister reported on an NSMC meeting in agriculture format, and the DUP's Mr Buchanan summarised it by saying that the statement notes this and welcomes that but tells us absolutely nothing. Given that the Minister's statement also does a lot of noting and welcoming, is Mr Buchanan right in his criticism?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not think that it is my responsibility, when reporting on a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, to comment on other meetings. The Member may have his own view on the content of reports that are given to this Assembly by other Ministers, but it is certainly not my responsibility to make any comment on that.

Mr Moutray: I thank the deputy First Minister for the statement. What further steps can be taken to achieve value for money for Northern Ireland from meetings such as this?

10.45 am

Mr M McGuinness: The first thing that people need to remember is that meetings such as the one that the First Minister, other Ministers and I attended with our counterparts from Dublin would not be happening if they were not of value to the institutions, North and South. It is quite clear that the levels of cooperation across a wide range of ministerial responsibilities are of huge benefit to the institutions. All that happens without compromising anybody's political allegiances; as the Member said, it is

about value for money. There are clear examples of how that has been the case, not least with the work of InterTradelreland, and cooperation on child protection, which, as we all know, has been in the news recently. That is an issue of great concern, and there are circumstances in which people can skip across borders to evade detection and prosecution. It is hugely important that the institutions of government are working closely together.

From a political perspective, the fact that the political institutions, North and South, are working closely together is beneficial for the work in which the customs services and police services, North and South, are involved in detecting people who are engaged in illegal fuel laundering, much of which is seriously detrimental to our environment and our economy and clearly involves criminal activity.

Ever-increasing good work is being done by the police services, North and South, to ensure that those opposed to peace on this island can be neutralised and prevented from carrying out their nefarious deeds.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the development and progress of the all-Ireland child protection conference. However, given recent developments in the news about the serious exploitation of young people in care homes in the North of Ireland, does the joint First Minister agree that this issue needs to be addressed on an all-Ireland basis and to be at the forefront of the North/South Ministerial Council agenda?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the deputy First Minister answers, let us address Ministers and Members by their proper title. I will continue to warn the whole House about this, even when it comes to the naming of Members in the House. Let us address Ministers in the proper manner.

Mr M McGuinness: Child protection is hugely important, as we all know, particularly anybody who has been listening to the horrific reports that we have been hearing over the past 24 hours. I am conscious of the fact that there is an ongoing police investigation into the activities of suspected child abusers. It is hugely important that we, in our meetings on a North/South basis, are involved in ensuring that we are up to speed in providing the required child protection safeguards and mechanisms. The fact that we discuss the issue at the NSMC and that there was an all-island child protection conference, which was held in Dundalk, shows that it is an important area of work. It is

absolutely vital that we cooperate in this area, so the North/South Ministerial Council will continue to monitor closely the agreed work programme with a cross-border steering group on child protection.

As I said in my earlier answer, it is incumbent on all of us to recognise that child abusers, although they may carry out abuse in any of the six counties in the North, can quite easily on occasions skip across the border and live in any of the other 26 counties. It is important that we work together, not only on a North/South basis but on an east-west basis, because it has long been recognised that we are dealing with a global problem. It is important that we continue to work and to closely support one another as Ministers and support the people who are at the sharp end in dealing with the matter: the police services, North and South. It is vital that we protect our children, and I think that all of us accept that it makes sense to do so on an all-island basis.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and for his answers so far. I know that he will join me in saying that the City of Culture has been a fantastic year for our city. It has been tremendous, and the impact for the people of Derry has been fantastic. What work will the Executive do to develop and ensure a positive legacy for the people of our city, especially given the quite worrying recent unemployment figures in Derry?

Mr M McGuinness: I thank the Member for raising the City of Culture issue. It came up during the meeting, and we told the Irish Government that the City of Culture celebrations were well under way and that many excellent events had already been hosted.

Since the plenary meeting, there have been numerous other successful events, but I want specifically to highlight the success of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in August, which was held for the first time in its history in the North. Over eight days, thousands of musicians and visitors packed the streets through playing traditional music. They took over the city with street sessions, fun days, pageants, marching bands, competitions, ceilidh bands, concerts and singing. An assessment of the economic impact of the Fleadh is being undertaken, and it is worth noting that an economic impact assessment of the Cavan Fleadh in 2010 concluded that it generated more than £30 million in direct expenditure in the local economy.

It was a great joy that we attended The Poet and the Piper event in the Millennium Forum with Seamus Heaney and Liam Óg Ó Floinn. Some of us spoke to Seamus after the event, and he was absolutely overjoyed that the city had been designated City of Culture. He was also delighted to have participated in Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. Hearing, two weeks later, that he had passed away brought enormous sadness to all of us. The island of Ireland was effectively in mourning for Ireland's greatest poet. It is important that we recognise his contribution as a Nobel laureate in literature, someone who made an enormous contribution to all of our lives and a very strong supporter of the peace process. He was very much in favour of unionist and nationalist and republican politicians working together. He once used a great phrase that has always stuck in my mind: working "through-otherness". It is important to recognise his important contribution to Irish life.

I was also delighted that at least four loyalist bands participated in Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. At one stage, at one of their contributions, they played 'The Sash' — against advice — and nobody blinked an eyelid. It was a fantastic event and a clear example of how all of us need to work together. I was very pleased to attend a play in honour of a loyalist band. It was not a pipe band, it was a tin whistle band. No, it was a flute band from Newbuildings. Some members of the band participated in the play, and it was an enormous success. It was also an eye-opener for me into a culture that I do not have a lot of knowledge about.

The legacy issue is hugely important. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has a responsibility to take that forward, and I know that work is in progress. It would be a disaster if we ended up on 31 December, when the City of Culture comes to an end, with nothing in place to take forward a programme of culture in the period ahead. I know that the Minister is exercised about that and is very much involved with the local council and other organisations in the city to ensure that there is a legacy. However, this year has been a fabulous success, and those who deserve the most praise are the people of the city who made their own unique contribution. I include everybody in that, those from the east bank and the west bank.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. We are advised that the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council welcomed the publication of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) community relations strategy, Together: Building a United Community. What

is the deputy First Minister's response to Richard Haass's comments that, despite the strategy, the upcoming talks should consider the issue of segregation in our society, particularly in education and housing?

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I had the opportunity to have a very lengthy meeting with Richard Haass in New York last week. I am delighted that he has now arrived and that many of us will meet him over the coming days.

The important thing is that Richard Haass is an independent chair who was agreed by all the parties in the Assembly. That is of huge significance, because he comes at all this with a tremendous experience and knowledge of the situation here that was gained when he was the United States envoy to our situation. Obviously, they are crucially important talks. The issues that are to be resolved in relation to flags, parades and the past are critical elements on which we have failed to gain agreement over the course of recent times. We have seen how that has played out, particularly in relation to the issue of flags and parades, to our detriment in the course of recent times. I wish Richard Haass every success, and I pledge my party's — and I have no doubt that others will pledge their party's — full intention to work closely with him to find solutions to those difficult issues.

The discussions around integrated education and segregated housing estates have been mentioned by Richard Haass. We will see how those discussions are taken forward. Certainly, in our Together: Building a United Community, there is a very determined intention by the First Minister and me to tackle those issues. If we were, as, I expect, we will do in the course of the coming months and years, to make progress on those issues, we would be well on our way to making huge inroads into removing the unacceptable levels of segregation that exist in our society.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Will he elaborate on the north-west gateway initiative? Will any economic and social benefits apply to towns such as Limavady, where so many jobs have been lost over a period of time?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, the north-west gateway initiative is hugely important. As I said earlier in my statement, it is quite clear that it is being taken forward in relation to some hugely important matters, not least the construction of the new radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Area Hospital.

Limavady and other areas in the north-west, including the city of Derry, are black spots, and Coleraine has also been affected. Those are all issues that are of huge concern to our Executive. The decision of the Agriculture Minister to relocate the headquarters of the Department of Agriculture to Ballykelly is a very clear signal of the Executive's intention to try to target some of the unemployment black spots that exist in the north-west. We will continue to take that work forward in a way that delivers for citizens. However, it is incumbent on me to point out that, whenever large companies take decisions, such as some of the decisions that were taken in Limavady, that create unemployment for many people, it can be very dispiriting for any community or area.

The north-west gateway initiative, the radiotherapy unit, the City of Culture, Project Kelvin, cooperation on out-of-hours medical centres, and a consultation exercise currently under way with key stakeholders about the future direction of the initiative is all to try to improve the lives of the people who live in the north-west on both sides of the border, obviously with a key focus on the unemployment black spots that the Member has just mentioned.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. How does his Office intend to deliver on the new European youth guarantee, given that it has had some success in other European countries already in tackling youth unemployment?

Mr M McGuinness: That was a major topic at not just the North/South Ministerial Council but the British-Irish Council (BIC), which the First Minister and I attend regularly. At this meeting, we had a very useful discussion with the Irish Government. Youth unemployment, Europe wide, is a very serious issue. The economic situation over the past number of years has made it really difficult for our young people to enter the labour market.

We understand that youth unemployment in both jurisdictions and right across Europe is at unacceptable levels, and the European Union has effectively now set aside €8 billion in the European budget to tackle the issue. We discussed whether there was potential for us to work together on this. The Irish Government told us that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development would be working with them to develop an action plan to increase youth employment, and they have also invited our Minister Farry to be involved in this, which is a very welcome development. Further

discussions are continuing on the issue, and we agreed that we will consider the topic again at the next plenary meeting. So, there is a huge emphasis, both at the NSMC and at the BIC, with a particular focus on the €8 billion that Europe has set aside to tackle this issue.

11.00 am

Mrs Hale: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Given the agreement on the business case for the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin hospital, can the deputy First Minister give any further insight into any advancement on the delivery of the project?

Mr M McGuinness: At the meeting, we noted the position regarding the construction of the new radiotherapy centre. The business planning process is well advanced, with a stage 2 outline business case having been approved in August 2012. A full business case is being developed by the Western Trust and is expected to be submitted to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) this month before being referred to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for approval. The total approved funding for the project is around £65 million, including a capital contribution from the Irish Government's Department of Health of €19 million. Enabling work on the site commenced in June 2012. The design team for the new building started work in January 2012, and the completion and operational date for the unit remains 2016. Officials from both jurisdictions are continuing to work together to ensure that the project remains on target for completion. A draft memorandum of understanding has been agreed and will be signed by all parties shortly. Work has started on developing a service level agreement, so things are now progressing very well indeed.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. In the Minister's statement, he said that one of the attendees at the meeting was the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore TD. Shortly after the NSMC meeting, he departed on a two-day visit to Washington to lobby on behalf of the undocumented Irish in America, which is a huge issue for very many people in my constituency and in other areas. Does the deputy First Minister agree that the undocumented Irish in America is an important issue that should be raised at a future meeting of the NSMC or at any other suitable forum?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely do agree that it is a critical issue, given that there are countless

examples of a lot of human misery that has been caused because of the inability of people who are regarded as undocumented to travel home for things such as funerals, weddings and baptisms. This House will be aware that this is the subject of major discussion at Capitol Hill. In fact, decisions have been taken by Congress, and the very positive decisions that it has taken on doing something about this now rest with the Senate. We know that President Obama is very proactive and that many senior Republican Senators are also very supportive of doing something about this. So, yes, it is a hugely important issue. When the First Minister and I were in the United States, I was told of a man who has been there for something like 18 years. He is employing 100 people but is one of the undocumented Irish in the United States. This is somebody who making a massive contribution towards the US economy.

We will continue to be focused on the issue, and we wish the Senate well in its deliberations. We do not know how it will turn out, but there is now a big focus on it. It is not only on the plight of people who come from this island. Obviously, the discussions that are taking place on Capitol Hill are much more holistic and much more global, dealing with many other ethnic groups. However, I think that, given the relationship between this island, North and South, and the United States of America, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that people, whatever community they come from, North and South, can be assisted through what is turning out to be a very difficult situation for them, particularly with the inability to come home at critical times in their family lives.

Mr Speaker: I warn Members that questions should be on the statement before the House this morning, just in case other Members might feel that they want to stray into other avenues.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Fanfaidh mé leis an ráiteas. I think I will stick with the statement. During the meeting, both parties or both sides:

"acknowledged the importance of North/South cooperation in accessing EU funds."

That is particularly important for research, innovation and development, for our businesses and for many of our stakeholders. Will the deputy First Minister provide us with information as to what is actually being done to deliver support and information downwards to the wider community, particularly to our small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector?

Frankly, it is not happening at the moment in the way it should.

Mr M McGuinness: I think the Member will be conscious of the fact that, for example, the First Minister and I, on one of our previous visits to Europe, met EU Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn. On foot of that conversation, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn came to Belfast and hosted a very important meeting, to which SMEs were invited. She clearly outlined her intention to try to simplify the process, which would allow SMEs to access European funds. As a result of that, I think there has been a 20% increase in the ability to access funds from Europe.

Obviously, the Member is right that more can be done, and I think that the process of continuing education for SMEs in relation to how they go about that is absolutely essential. That work is continuing, and in all of our discussions when we go to Brussels — we are not the only Ministers who go to Brussels — we are all very engaged. On almost every visit we have had to Brussels we have had the opportunity to meet Máire Geoghegan-Quinn. If the Member thinks that more can be done or has any ideas about how we can increase the level of drawdown from Europe, I would be very glad to meet him and have a discussion about that.

Mr Cree: I also thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. He referred to the negative impact of illegal fuel on the transport industry. Will he expand on that and advise the House on whether there are any new initiatives planned to bring people guilty of that criminal activity to justice?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that we have seen, in recent months, a determined effort being made by the police services and the customs services, North and South, to target those criminals who are involved in illegal fuel laundering, particularly in border areas. I support that 100%. I think it is hugely important that that very damaging practice is brought to an end, not least because of the very destructive environmental difficulties that it presents for local communities, for animals and for society as a whole. So, I think that the evidence of an increased effort being made is now clearly there and that all of us should support that.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I note that the Minister referred to the Ulster canal and the planning applications with Cavan County Council, Clones

Town Council and Fermanagh District Council. Was there any discussion in relation to the entire scheme and the considerable good work that has been done by Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council in relation to that project, which could be a very exciting tourism opportunity for Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely agree with the Member. It is a vital project, not least for our tourism. All you have to do is look at the amount of tourism traffic from places such as Carrick-on-Shannon to Limerick to understand the importance of canals to the local community.

At the meeting, we noted that work continues to progress on the restoration of the Ulster canal, and all the necessary planning permissions to restore the section of the canal to Lough Erne have been received. This inland waterway is a vital part in the jigsaw of the long-term restoration of the all-Ireland inland waterway network as a sustainable leisure asset. It is envisaged that the development of the canal will help to stimulate regeneration and assist in tackling poverty and social exclusion, particularly in isolated rural communities, with opportunities for employment and community engagement around water-based leisure and tourist activities. An interagency group has been established to explore possible funding options to advance the project. The fact that Lisburn and Belfast councils have taken an interest is a clear indicator that people increasingly accept the enormous value that a fully developed canal scheme would provide to local communities, for all the reasons that I outlined. I absolutely agree with the Member.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement. Paragraphs 17 and 18 are timely. I welcome the fact that terms of reference 2 and 3 of the St Andrews Agreement are to be examined in the review of the North/South bodies.

With the north-west gateway initiative, does the deputy First Minister support the move to try to have a cross-border development at Lifford Bridge, called the riverine project, within the overall three rivers project?

Mr M McGuinness: I am aware that that issue has been the subject of much recent discussion. Indeed, some of my colleagues, not least Pat Doherty, the MP for the area, have been proactive. Obviously, there is SEUPB involvement in the scheme. Given that other matters are under examination, there is an

expectation in the Strabane area that if such projects experience difficulties and do not come to fruition, the SEUPB would look favourably at the riverine project. It is undoubtedly an important project for the Donegal/Tyrone area. We await the outcome of other deliberations to find out whether this project can be pursued in the immediate future.

Mr I McCrea: The deputy First Minister referred to progress being made on the mutual recognition of penalty points and that it was hoped that the necessary primary and secondary legislation would be in place by December 2014. Will the deputy First Minister assure the House that that is a realistic target, that there will be no slippage and that if there is any possibility of the date being brought forward, that will happen?

Mr M McGuinness: The target would not be in the statement if we did not think that it was realistic. It is important that we recognise that we need consistency in how we deal with those issues. Progress continues to be made on the mutual recognition of penalty points across the island. There is no doubt that that will contribute significantly to making our roads much safer. It will complement and strengthen the benefits already achieved through the introduction of the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications in 2010. I agree with the Member that it is important to keep to the timeline, and I fully expect that that will be the case.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the deputy First Minister for his statement and his answers so far. I draw his attention to the discussion on the Narrow Water bridge. There was quite a bit of discussion at Question Time yesterday, when the Finance Minister said that he was committed to giving £12 million and no more to the project. Will the deputy First Minister detail what he and the Executive are doing to ensure that that important economic project becomes a reality?

Mr M McGuinness: At the meeting, we discussed the current situation of the Narrow Water bridge project. Unfortunately, since that meeting, it transpired that the project promoters, Louth County Council and the East Border Region, were unable to proceed with the project because of increased costs following formal tendering for the project. However, the East Border Region subsequently accepted the INTERREG IVa funding offer of €15 million on 20 August 2013. The project partners are working to secure the shortfall and have identified a number of potential funding

streams. SEUPB is working closely with the project to ensure that firm proposals are brought forward for scrutiny as soon as possible. Just recently, when I met the Taoiseach in County Down at the funeral of Mary McAleese's father, I raised the issue with him. As a result of that conversation, I am encouraged that we might hear something positive from him about the matter in the not-too-distant future.

11.15 am

I am huge fan of bridge-building, not just in the political sense but in the context of how new structures can enhance the lives of people in different communities. All we have to do is look at the huge success of the Peace Bridge in my city. In just over two years, something like two million people have walked across it. So I have no doubt that the construction of this bridge would have a very positive effect on people in the communities that will benefit from it. I am hopeful that there will be a future resolution to the project. This morning, I read in the Hansard report what the Finance Minister said here yesterday, and I think that he, too, is looking to see what contribution will be made, not just by the Irish Government but by other interested parties.

Mr Dallat: There was particular reference to unemployment among our young people. What cross-border initiatives are in place to tackle this serious problem that afflicts both North and South?

Mr M McGuinness: In my answers earlier, I clearly indicated that a huge effort was being made to take advantage of whatever schemes can be put in place to deal with the issue. We look not least to funding that may come from Europe. Both North and South, we are proactively engaged in trying to ensure that some of that money comes in our direction. The fact that our Minister Farry has been invited by the Irish Government to participate in some of those discussions allows us and him, as the Minister responsible, to focus on what is a very serious problem in our community. So I expect positive initiatives to flow from that, and I think that we need to give them a little time, given that the European budget was only recently cleared.

Mr Allister: I note, in the joint secretaries' progress report to the plenary, the reference to 214 projects under Peace III having received letters of offer. One such letter of offer related to the now abandoned Peace project at the Maze. Following the First Minister's welcome

U-turn on that divisive proposal, what ideas does the Department have about where that £18 million might now be usefully spent?

Mr M McGuinness: This issue has been the subject of considerable media and political interest in recent times. It is obvious that the question is being asked not just in the context of gaining information on whether that funding will be used and for what subject but in the context of trying to create more division. I am not prepared to play that game. We have to recognise that there is a serious problem and that the construction of the peace-building and conflict resolution centre was a commitment in the Programme for Government, and I will just leave it at that.

Mr McNarry: I am still smiling at the deputy First Minister's reference to "tin whistle bands". I suppose what you do not know will not do you any harm. I will just leave it at that and ask my question.

The deputy First Minister referred to 250 people sharing knowledge on child protection. In light of the news that has hit and shocked the population of Northern Ireland, I ask him this: was the PSNI investigation, which was going on at the time of that conference, discussed at the meeting? Was the PSNI investigation itself made part of the shared knowledge that he refers to?

Mr M McGuinness: I was not at the meeting, so I do not know. The information in relation to the PSNI investigation —

Mr McNarry: Did you not ask?

Mr M McGuinness: You asked about the PSNI investigation, and I am just about to address that.

It is an ongoing investigation. I heard a member of the PSNI give a very extensive interview on Stephen Nolan's radio programme this morning in relation to their handling of what is a very complex and difficult matter to deal with. I have no doubt whatsoever that they, in conjunction with the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, are very exercised about what you quite rightly identify as the shocking news that has reached us in recent days about the levels of child abuse and, specifically, the characters who are suspected of being involved.

What we need to do at this stage is use all our comments to encourage families and those people with information and knowledge to give

that information to the Police Service so that those responsible can be brought before the courts. That has to be the big effort at this time. It is not about trying to undermine the PSNI or in any way question the approach that they have adopted to what is a very difficult matter given the complexities that surround such a scenario and the differences that might exist in the different cases that they are dealing with. That has to be the approach. All of us have to appeal to the community that if people have information, that information should be forwarded to the PSNI as a matter of urgency so that the people responsible for these heinous acts can be brought before the courts.

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding the North/South Ministerial Council inland waterways meeting, which was held in Armagh on 19 June 2013. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a progress report from Mr John Martin, chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on the work of Waterways Ireland, which includes the following significant achievements: the provision of 368 metres of additional moorings; the assessment of applications for the 2013 sponsorship programme, with the successful applicants informed and the programme commenced; the keeping open of 99.8% of waterways during the month of April; and the publication of 'A Taste of the Waterways 2013' and 'What's On 2013'.

A presentation on Waterways Ireland's new website was made by Mr Éanna Rowe, head of marketing and communications. The presentation highlighted the benefits of the newly developed website, the first in Ireland to be hosted on a SharePoint platform, and how it can be used to promote the waterways as a major tourist attraction in its own right and as a valuable recreational and educational resource. The website enables users, individuals and businesses to do business online with the introduction of online forms and payments for services.

The Council approved the Waterways Ireland business plan for 2012 and recommended the budget provision of €31.15 million. It also noted progress on the development of the 2013 business plan and budget. Following approval by sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers, the plan will be brought forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting. The Council noted that the Waterways Ireland annual report and draft accounts for 2012 have been submitted to the Comptrollers and Auditors General and, following certification, they will be laid before

the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas.

The Council received a progress report on the restoration work for the Upper Lough Erne to Clones section of the Ulster canal. It was noted that Cavan County Council, Clones Town Council and Monaghan County Council have granted planning permission, and Fermanagh District Council has agreed the recommendation for approval. The project has now been approved by the Department of the Environment's Planning Service. Ministers noted that the interagency group on the Ulster canal, set up to explore funding options for advancing the Ulster canal project, held its second meeting on 16 May 2013, and sponsor Departments agreed to examine the potential social benefits and leveraged funding opportunities in that context.

The Council noted the assessment of options presented by sponsor Departments for a board for Waterways Ireland and the conclusions that the existing governance arrangements should be strengthened and that there is no requirement for the appointment of a board at this time. Ministers noted that sponsor Departments will bring forward an update on governance arrangements to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council consented to a number of property disposals, all of which were in the South of Ireland.

Ministers thanked John Martin for deferring his retirement to assist with the recruitment of his replacement and wished him well for the future. Ministers appointed Dawn Livingstone as chief executive of Waterways Ireland with effect from 29 July 2013.

The Council agreed to meet again in inland waterways sectoral format on 20 November 2013.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):

Can the Minister detail any discussions that she has had with the tourism Minister about the tourist potential of our waterways? Can she be more specific about the areas where the governance of Waterways Ireland needs to be strengthened? Why was it felt, at this stage, that there was no requirement for the appointment of a board?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will try to answer the Member's three questions. I have had no discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, although I plan to. They will be

brought forward after the next interagency meeting on the Ulster canal, because that is about tourism. I believe that the report that Éanna Rowe delivered to Waterways Ireland will be shared with other Departments.

There is no board at this time because Waterways Ireland was one of the bodies that did not need legislation to set up a board. However, I think it incumbent on all Ministers, particularly in the absence of a board, to look at governance arrangements, and where they can be improved, they should be. That does not indicate that there is any particular problem. Given the fact that we have to make reports to both Houses, we need to assure Members and, indeed, the public that we do this as a matter of course. It is not like a desktop exercise but a real one with constant updates, and I think it is to be welcomed.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar maidin. What is the position with the business plan and budgets for 2013? Will they go beyond the efficiency targets that were set out in previous agreements?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The business plans are progressing well. I think that I have picked the Member up right. The concern has been expressed, particularly about waterways and languages, which we come to next, that, because of the financial situation, the Dublin Government have pressed for additional efficiency savings that have been agreed beyond that. I assure the Member that I am aware of the situation with my Irish counterparts. I have consistently said, and will continue to do so, that I am totally reluctant to go beyond what we agreed initially on funding for inland waterways and, indeed, the Irish language and Ulster Scots, and that remains the case.

11.30 am

Mrs McKeivitt: I acknowledge the fact that a lot of work has been done to help promote the waterways, with the publication of 'What's On 2013' and the newly developed Waterways Ireland website. What plans does the Minister's Department have to help promote and use that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assume, but I think it might be obvious, that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment would certainly get some value out of the presentation that we received from Mr Éanna Rowe. Apart from the fact that it is a first ever on this island, it reaches out to

people, particularly small microbusinesses around the waterways, who very clearly feel that, in the past, they have not had opportunities to capitalise on tourism potential around waterways. We are looking particularly at how we, within Waterways Ireland, can bring that valuable tool forward and, more than that, try to share it with county councils and councils along the waterways, because if people do not know it is there and do not know how to access it and maximise the potential, it is a wasted opportunity. If the Committee does not have a copy of the report, I am happy to furnish it with a copy, and if the Committee wishes to have Éanna make a presentation, I am sure that the Committee will arrange that.

Ms Lo: I am very pleased to hear that the various local councils have given planning permission for the restoration work for the Upper Lough Erne to Clones section of the Ulster canal. Will the Minister outline what is mentioned in the progress report? What progress has been made so far?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The progress report was primarily around the planning applications and outstanding concerns that the Environment Agency had about some of the wildlife and flora and fauna, particularly around Upper Lough Erne and Clones. Thankfully, they have been settled, and that is progress. As well as that, the interagency group, which has been set up to look at how funding for the Ulster canal can be maximised and developed, received a report on that. There has been a realisation that although the Irish Government made a commitment to fund the capital works, they are not in a position to fund it all at once, so we are starting to look at ways in which we could do it in stages. However, that is in the very, very early stages.

I think that progress in looking to see what options there are and taking a can-do attitude is progress worth noting. I am sure that the Member and other Members will be looking forward to future statements to see how the progress has been delivered and what it looks like.

Mr Irwin: The chief executive, Mr John Martin, reported on significant achievements. One of those achievements was that 99.8% of waterways remained open during the month of April. Has the Minister any figures to compare that with other months of the year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have them offhand, but I can certainly give them to the Member. If he looks back over previous statements that were

made to the House, he will see that the percentages are very, very high. The waterways have been kept open. As far as I remember, the percentages are well in the nineties, but I am happy to get the Member precise figures.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin agus as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her statement this morning and for her answers up to now. Can the Minister outline the events sponsored by Waterways Ireland in 2013 and what benefits, if any, they may have for the local economy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. Waterways Ireland, with other bodies and agencies, has provided sponsorship for 105 events. They include the likes of Waterways Ireland Riverfest, water sports events on the lower Bann and the Lady of the Erne. The events are in County Fermanagh, in particular. The annual sponsorship is approximately £200,000, but I think the key to the question is what impact it might have on the local economy. It is estimated that, in 2012, 1.1 million people attended, accruing £85 million for the local economy. That excludes the Tall Ships.

There are many opportunities to be had from water-based tourism and, certainly, from holding events and festivals on the waterways. Not only does it lift people's mood and spirit but it adds to the local economy. For many people, particularly in rural areas, this is probably one of the very few, if only, opportunities that they have to do that.

Mr Hilditch: With each statement, there usually come a number of property sales. What was the rationale behind those sales, and who benefits from them?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no figures relating to any such benefit. Property disposals are sometimes done through leases, so they are referred to as property disposals.

There were eight such disposals and, as I said in, all the properties were in the South of Ireland. Councils such as Longford County Council and Dublin City Council, which maintains the Royal canal towpath, are responsible for extending existing licences, which are referred to as property disposals.

When I first came across that term, it made me think of swathes of property being sold off, but that is not the case; it is just a term. The fact

that local councils have been given the responsibility for the extension of leases shows not only that what was there previously worked but that there is confidence in the councils to deliver for the future.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. She may have gone some way to answering this question following Ms Lo's question, but were the section of the Ulster canal between Lough Erne and Clones to be started, how long would it take to complete?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. To make progress on the restoration of the Ulster canal we need to look at an up-to-date business plan. I know that economists in DCAL have been involved in that. At one stage, hundreds of millions of pounds were cited as the cost of full completion through the different stages, so that has to be costed.

There are options that we can look at. The Member will appreciate that, at this stage, I am reluctant to go into options because the business plan has not been completed. Part of that will involve looking at the options that we can afford, and, if they are done in stages, what they will cost. I am not too sure how long that will take, but I hope to have a report after the November sectoral meeting. A huge amount of work is involved, and the Member will appreciate that it is worth taking the time to get it right.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a cuid freagraí. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire: an nglacfadh sí le cuireadh ó Chumann Uiscebhealaí Intíre na hÉireann, craobh an Iúir agus Phort an Dúnáin teacht chuig Iúir Chinn Trá agus féachaint ar an deisiúchán a rinne an cumann ar chanáil an Iúir?

I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she accept an invitation to come to Newry to view the work that the Portadown and Newry branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland has done on the Newry canal?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his invite. I agreed to visit Newry canal at the request of the MP for the area, Conor Murphy. The request for the meeting came in during the summer, and I was conscious that the Member had extended the invitation previously. I wanted to wait until we were back here, and I am happy to go down. I hope to have that visit

arranged for the middle or the end of October. I will keep in contact with the Member, and he will be made aware of all the details of that visit.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement to the House. I welcome the progress that has been made with Cavan County Council, Monaghan County Council and Fermanagh District Council on Upper Lough Erne. Will the Minister advise the House what progress is being made by Waterways Ireland across Northern Ireland, particularly on the Ulster canal, to show some benefit from the taxes put into that North/South body? Have approaches been made to Europe for funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. I will take the second question first. Yes, I met Pat Colgan from the SEUPB, not just to raise the issue of the Ulster canal but to attempt to get a better result for arts and sports from European funding. I have met many groups that have done fantastic work throughout the years but still have difficulty accessing European funds. I certainly discussed the Ulster canal and inland waterways with him.

I am totally satisfied that Waterways Ireland is not, in its work on waterways in the North, including the Ulster canal and other canals, fixated on one part of the country at the detriment of the other. To be frank, if I thought that that was the case, regardless of where you and I come from politically, I would not allow that to happen.

Trying to restore the Ulster canal is a big challenge — it is a huge challenge. As well as the interagency group that we have set up, Ministers are looking for other opportunities individually. On that basis, I met Pat Colgan. I will meet him again and, where possible, with others. That may include the Heritage Lottery Fund and others. We will see whether anything can be done to start looking at ways of beginning the restoration.

The restoration will, undoubtedly, bring huge opportunities for local employment and apprenticeships. The end result will be not just the opening up of a waterway, which, in itself, is very important. It will also help with the promotion of tourism, angling and all the rest that goes with it, which will help the local economy.

Mr McGimpsey: I begin by commending Waterways Ireland for the work that it has done under John Martin as chief executive. I trust

that the new chief executive will carry on in that tradition.

As we discussed, the Ulster canal is a huge capital project, but just because it is a huge capital project does not mean that we will walk away from it in any way. The project target and dream of connecting Belfast and Dublin by inland waterways is of huge value, not least in terms of the tourist product. The way to do this is by doing small bits at a time — it would cost over £100 million to do it all at once.

On public perception, you have sections between Belfast and Lisburn and Lisburn and Lough Neagh. Would that not be another way of exciting the public imagination?

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

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have waited a long time, so I thought that I should get my money's worth.

That would be an important way forward. What progress has been made on the stretches from Belfast to Lisburn and Lisburn to Lough Neagh?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his statement. There has been some progress.

The Member is right, and I accept his sentiments about John Martin. I am sure that John Martin will read Hansard and be grateful for those sentiments. He has done excellent work. As I said in the statement, John stayed on until we had gone through the recruitment process for the new chief executive, which is a big ask when someone has plans and a lot of demanding daughters. I am sure that John will be delighted to read those comments.

The Member is correct: the work to take the Ulster canal from the Lagan to Lisburn, on to Lough Neagh and then opening it up further will cost hundreds of millions of pounds. We need to start to look at what the different stages and phases will cost. Belfast City Council has done excellent work on the Lagan canal, but a huge amount of money is needed.

I have asked for a recent update because, sometimes, business cases have figures that were OK seven or eight years ago, but there is a different market now — the figures may go up, but the market is more competitive. We need to look at all that and make decisions about what we can do and when we do it. I am certainly not taking the approach that we do not have the money to do it all at once. I am

looking at what we have and what we can do. I will then get agreement on that and move ahead.

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. With your permission and in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Language Body meetings that were held in Armagh on 19 June and 10 July 2013.

11.45 am

The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by lead Minister Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs, and Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The meeting on 19 June dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies. Foras na Gaeilge's review of core funding was discussed, and it was agreed that a further meeting of the NSMC Language Body would be held as soon as possible, but not later than September, in order to bring the process to a conclusion.

The Council noted progress reports from the chairpersons and the chief executive officers of both agencies, which included the following achievements: with regard to the Ulster-Scots Agency, the provision of support in the education system, including 16 after-school clubs in the primary sector and two educational fairs in the post-primary sector in addition to advancement of the Ulster-Scots flagship programme for primary schools; the promotion of Ulster-Scots culture through delivery of three talks at the agency's interpretative centre and seven seminars to raise awareness of agency-funded programmes for festivals and summer schools, in addition to support for a heritage event for over 400 people at the Presbyterian General Assembly held in Derry for the first time; the provision of community support, including funding for six Ulster-Scots community showcase events and funding for 195 groups for music and dance tuition; and sponsorship of a plaque for James Bryce, a prominent Ulster Scot of Edwardian times, which was unveiled in May 2013 on the 175th anniversary of his birth as part of the

partnership programme with the Ulster History Circle.

With regard to Foras na Gaeilge, an evaluation of the summer camps scheme has been completed and funding was to be provided for in excess of 50 camps catering for over 2,000 young people during July and August 2013; the Irish language officers scheme in the North, which aims to improve the status of the Irish language at local level and build on Líofoa 2015 by providing the public with a range of bilingual services, has been advertised for the period July 2013 to March 2016; a promotional campaign is under way throughout the public sector, North and South, in regard to the helpline Freagra, which provides an Irish language translation service to the public sector; and a conference on minority languages in the arts, Voces in Artes, was organised in May 2013 as part of Ireland's EU presidency.

The Council also noted the ongoing collaboration between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge in regard to governance issues and promotion of the work of the language body, including the establishment of a committee to oversee a joint work programme, the current consultation process on the joint equality scheme, and funding for 'The Honest Sod', a play in Ulster Scots and Irish, which has toured to 88 schools and has been seen by over 3,000 pupils.

Ministers noted that the sponsor Departments are working with both agencies to finalise the 2013 business plans and budgets and, following approval by Finance Ministers, will bring them forward for approval as soon as possible to a future NSMC language meeting.

The Council noted that the 2010 consolidated language body annual report and accounts were certified by the Comptrollers and Auditors General on 10 June 2013 and were to be laid in the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly in July 2013. Ministers further noted that it is envisaged by the Comptrollers and Auditors General that the 2011 language body annual report and accounts will be certified in autumn 2013, and that field audits will commence in September 2013 in regard to the 2012 annual report and accounts. The Council also acknowledged the ongoing cooperation with the independent offices of the Comptrollers and Auditors General in both jurisdictions, as a result of which 10 sets of annual reports and accounts for the language body have been published in the period 2005-2012.

Ministers noted the work being undertaken by the Ulster-Scots Agency to progress the

Discover Ulster Scots initiative. This will create a coherent branding capable of being applied to tourist products and experiences that are relevant to Ulster-Scots heritage and a single web-based access point where visitors will be able to find out about places to go and things to do that reflect Ulster-Scots heritage.

An NSMC language meeting to further discuss Foras na Gaeilge core funding proposals was arranged for 10 July 2013. At that meeting, Ministers approved new funding arrangements to replace the existing core funding model, comprising the following key elements. The delivery by six lead organisations, operating on an all-island basis, of the following strategic priorities: Irish-medium education; Irish language in English-medium education; language-centred community and economic development; language use; language planning; and youth networks. The establishment by Foras na Gaeilge of an all-island partnership forum to ensure a collaborative approach by the six lead organisations; the establishment by Foras na Gaeilge of an all-island language development forum that is representative of local language interests funded by Foras na Gaeilge at community level; the development of a community radio scheme to provide funding for Irish language community radio in both jurisdictions; and future funding to be provided for An tÁisaonad, as appropriate, in the context of Foras na Gaeilge's statutory function in regard to supporting Irish-medium education and the teaching of Irish.

The Council also directed Foras na Gaeilge to proceed with the implementation of the new funding arrangements with effect from 1 July 2014, subject to approval by Finance Departments, and agreed to extend the core funding arrangements to 30 June 2014, when the new funding arrangements will take effect.

The Council agreed that its next language body meeting will take place on 20 November 2013.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I understand that the 2012 business plans and budget for the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge were not approved until March 2013. Furthermore, we are now in September, with no approval for the business plan and budget for this year. When does the Minister expect those to be signed off? I also note that the language bodies are coming to the end of their current corporate plan. When does she anticipate those new plans being approved?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I anticipate those new plans being approved as soon as possible. I imagine that, if they are not, we can confirm that they will be done at the next meeting, which is on 20 November. As the Member is aware, there has been a considerable backlog over the years of not just the reports and accounts but the business plans. I am content with the work being done by senior officials from both jurisdictions with both agencies to ensure not only that they are brought up to date but that we are made aware of difficulties and issues well in advance and that remedial work to bring those up to where they need to be is done as early as possible rather than being left to the last minute — I am not saying that that is the case, but that sometimes appears to be the perception. I am happy that the work is in a much better place than where it was but we still have a bit more to do.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an dara ráiteas a thug sí dúinn ar maidin. I know that this issue has been brought up previously, but can the Minister tell the House what specifically is causing the delay in publishing the North/South Language Body annual reports and accounts?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The delays go back to 2000-01 when the chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency refused to sign off. That caused a knock-on delay throughout the years. In fact, because all the accounts are done in chronological order, we are always trying to catch up. In that respect, the chairs and chief executives of both language bodies find themselves in the unenviable position of always working on the back foot. However, we are hoping, as I said to the Chair of the Committee, that the business plans will be brought forward and approved at the next meeting, which is on 20 November.

Just to repeat — it was mentioned during the previous statement — I am very conscious of the situation that Ministers Deenihan and McGinley are in with their budgets, but I have been and still am totally reluctant to go beyond what we agreed the efficiency savings should be.

Mrs McKeivitt: Does the Minister agree that it would be more appropriate for the Department of Education to fund the Áisaonad at St Mary's University College? Will she pursue that issue with the Minister of Education?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That issue has been raised previously. There have been discussions with Ministers on who should fund not so much An

tÁisaonad but, certainly, different aspects. The decision has been made. I welcome the Member's concern that funding for what would seem to be a purely educational matter is coming out of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) budget, which, as the Member has always said, is the smallest Executive budget. However, until discussions have been progressed and it is agreed by both education Departments, it is a matter for the language body to bring forward future funding for An tÁisaonad. I also think that it is incumbent on An tÁisaonad and, indeed, St Mary's to look for whatever shortfalls of funding they have from other bodies and agencies as well. There seems to be a pattern of just asking and expecting DCAL to fund the shortfall. The work that they do is very important, but they need to look at long-term funding support for that work.

Mr McGimpsey: I note that Foras na Gaeilge, under its Irish language officers' scheme, is advertising for the period from 2013 to 2016. That is within the new remit of this Assembly; however, it is outside the remit of the Budget. As I understand it, the Budget still stops at 2015. Can the Minister remind us how many officers we are talking about and at what annual cost?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have the figures for the number of officers who have been recruited through that latest round of funding. I will certainly write to the Member. I am happy to provide him with that and also to clarify the position with regard to what happens between 2015 and 2016, which is outside of this mandate.

Ms Lo: I welcome the many different programmes that are provided by the Ulster-Scots Agency. How is the effectiveness of those activities monitored and evaluated?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think that the Member was in the House when the deputy First Minister made his statement and referred to 'The Honest Sod', which is a play in Ulster Scots and the Irish language that has been seen by 3,000 pupils from 88 schools. The feedback and evaluation was that it was very worthwhile and raised awareness and mutual respect for diversity. That is one obvious example of monitoring and evaluation. It is important that we look at the work of both agencies, not only what they do separately but what they do together. Certainly, in building a shared and better future, work that we can do across language and cultural heritage is good for everybody. You do not need to go through a whole pile of questions on

an evaluation form to know that it is good, it works and that more people from other Departments and bodies should do more of the same.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement. In the emerging strategy, is there any aspiration on the part of the Minister to seek a greater degree of parity between the two parts or sides of the language body? For instance, £2.7 million is spent on Ulster Scots compared with £15 million that is spent on Foras na Gaeilge, plus other money. Given the year-on-year reductions, it is believed that reductions are felt more strongly in the Ulster-Scots community.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not believe that has been the case with regard to reductions and the Ulster-Scots community. The Member is aware that money has gone through the ministerial advisory group for the academy. Money has been spent there. Those budgets were based on the need at the time. They have been and will be reviewed constantly. It is about delivering to the point of need, which is about equality, rather than parity. It is not, "If you get fifty, I get fifty, just because." That is not a good use of public money. I am not suggesting that the Member is saying that. However, I am conscious of that issue.

I am actually happier this year than I was, perhaps, a year or so ago about work, particularly by the Ulster-Scots Agency, and the efforts that it has made to try to bring cohesion between all the networks and groups in the Ulster-Scots community, first of all, to ensure that money is spent well and that there is an outcome, rather than just a process, and, more than that, to make the case constantly and provide evidence for future funding. In my view, that is what was missing previously. Therefore, with regard to parity, I am glad to see greater sharing of better practice between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, which will help the agency in future. Parity for the sake of it in funding is something that we should not, and never will, do simply for the sake of spending public money.

12.00 noon

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas agus as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers so far. What are the new all-Ireland structures that Foras na Gaeilge is proposing as part of the new arrangements?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. Two particular structures are new. One is an all-Ireland partnership forum, which is really about ensuring a collaborative approach, particularly on the six themes that I outlined, by the six leading organisations, albeit that there is collaboration among all the groups that exist at the minute. That is really important for sharing, better networking and to ensure a better product not only for people who use or learn the Irish language but for future language development. I am sure that the Member will agree that that is a welcome step.

The second structure is an all-Ireland language development forum, which is crucial because it will look at how, across this island, we develop the language and make sure that it is being taught. The standards and materials that we use to teach the language are very important, but we are also trying to look at parts of the island where there are no services at all for the Irish language and to see, through that forum, how that need can be met.

Those are examples of two new forums that have been developed as a result of the work of the NSMC. I, like everyone else, look forward to seeing how they will roll out, but I know that there has been a gap and that a lot of people in the sector from one end of the island to the other have welcomed this initiative.

Mr Humphrey: While I am on my feet, I want to take the opportunity on behalf of my party to once again congratulate the Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band on becoming grade-one world champions in Glasgow.

Minister, I have spoken to members of the Ulster-Scots Agency board over the past few days. The Minister indicated in her answer to my colleague the Chairperson of the Committee that she intends to cut budgets. Those cuts will have a devastating blow for the Ulster-Scots Agency, given that it gets its funding only from the Department here in Northern Ireland. There is a huge disparity in funding. Foras na Gaeilge received €15 million, compared with funding of £2.7 million from our Government for the Ulster-Scots Agency. Those cuts will be devastating. Will the Minister explain why there is such a huge disparity in funding between the two bodies? Will the Minister not work, as my colleague from East Antrim has urged, for parity in funding to deliver equality here in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is factually incorrect. I did not say to anyone that I was agreeing to cuts. In fact, I said in my previous sectoral statement, and repeated to Cahal Ó

hOisín and others, that I do not want to go beyond what has been agreed in efficiency savings.

Mr Humphrey: You did not say that you had agreed.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I did say that I agreed. You can check the Hansard report, and then you can come back and apologise. I did say that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will ensure that I will not go beyond what was agreed. As for parity, is the Member actually suggesting — I think that this needs to be nailed — that I provide additional money when need has not been demonstrated and given that moneys were returned in the past because they could not be spent, even on identified need? If the Member is seriously suggesting that we provide moneys solely for the sake of parity, I will end up in front of the Member behind me at the Public Accounts Committee if that funding could have been spent on something else. Do I want to make sure that Ulster Scots gets the money that it deserves? Absolutely. I think that things are going in the right direction. I think, with the consolidation of services in a network and, hopefully, through the academy, there will be a better return for the Ulster-Scots community. However, arguing for parity just for its own sake is politically naive and wrong.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Táimid thar a bheith gnóthach anseo inniu ag cur ceisteanna agus ag díospóireacht. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an méid a dúirt sí go dtí seo. Ó thaobh na samhla nua maoinithe de, an aontaíonn an tAire leis na daoine sin a chreideann go ndéanfaidh an tsamhail nua maoinithe damáiste as cuimse d'eagraíochtaí Gaeilge agus d'infreastruchtúr na Gaeilge anseo sa Tuaisceart?

It is a busy day for culture, arts and leisure. I thank the Minister for her answers. Does she agree with those who say that the new core funding model that is proposed by Foras na Gaeilge will lead to the demise of several important Irish language organisations in the North and will damage the infrastructure of the language here?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Ní aontaím go hiomlán leat. I do not agree with that sentiment at all. In fact, I think that the new core funding arrangements should enhance, develop and protect the long-

term development of the language. I am sure that the Member and others who have raised this before, as, indeed, he has, will agree with me that it is vital that we look at the needs of the sector and, in doing that, at who will deliver the services. I often talk to groups that say that not funding their work will result in the demise of the whole sector. I question that and then look for the evidence, but it is not there.

I want to make sure that groups that currently receive funding through Foras na Gaeilge have opportunities to become one of those lead groups. There is absolutely nothing to say that that cannot happen, but what will not happen on my watch is the continued funding of salaries and very little money going into the development of the language on the ground. Language officers are being well developed and well looked after, but language recipients need to have a bit more support, and the core funding arrangements provide just that. We need to build on that and look at the work of other Departments to ensure the long-term development of the language, not the long-term development and security of some language development officers.

Committee Business

Regional Library for Northern Ireland

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

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the economic, cultural, social and educational benefits that a regional library for Northern Ireland would provide; and urges the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to engage with Executive colleagues and other partners to pursue Belfast central library's redevelopment plan to create a regional library as part of the overall Library Square project.

Today's motion is not the first time that library provision has been debated in the Assembly. Libraries have been and will remain a key area of focus for the Committee. That is unsurprising given that libraries are the focal point of a community. They offer a shared community space, help to stimulate learning and contribute to social cohesion. Increasingly, they offer a multipurpose space where a wide range of community activities can take place. The Committee saw an excellent example of that kind of facility when it held a meeting at the library in Lisburn. While the Committee met in one room, all sorts of other activities were happening throughout the building, including mother and toddler groups, people using the internet, classes and, of course, people coming to borrow books.

Today's motion is about recognising the economic, social and educational benefits that a regional library for Northern Ireland could provide. The Committee, at its meeting at Belfast central library, heard from officials about how a redeveloped Belfast central library would provide a fit-for-purpose setting to display its many resources, collections and artefacts, giving it the status of a regional library and providing a fitting flagship building for the Library Square redevelopment. Anyone who has visited that library could not fail to be saddened by the limitations placed on service provision by a building that has long since ceased to be fit for purpose.

When Belfast central library opened in 1888 — indeed, it is its 125th anniversary this year— it was considered to be leading the way in city libraries. The building is beautiful, with a host of late Victorian features and characteristics. However, this architectural gem is now blighted by the ravages of time and the addition of ugly extensions to the rear. It is no longer at the cutting edge of library provision.

The Committee was fortunate, during its recent study visit to Liverpool, to have a tour of the redeveloped central library on the day that it was due to open to the public. Following a £50 million renovation, that library now has space to show its collections, provide learning environments and lecture theatres, display its rare books and do all the other things that a modern library does. It is an extraordinary building that makes a clear statement about Liverpool's pride in itself and the facilities that it wants to provide for its people.

Members will have seen in the media the recent unveiling of Birmingham's redeveloped central library. Some £200 million was spent on providing the largest library in Europe. The Liverpool and Birmingham libraries that I have mentioned are part of wider city regeneration projects, and I suggest that nothing illustrates a people-centred regeneration of a city more than putting a modern, fit-for-purpose library at its heart.

If Members are not convinced by the examples of Liverpool and Birmingham, I also point to Dublin's plans for its central library. The Committee is aware of Dublin's plans for a cultural quarter at Parnell Square, which will involve the development of a new and innovative Dublin city library. Edinburgh has similar plans.

The investment strategy for Northern Ireland recognises the benefits of Belfast central library as a regional library for Northern Ireland, with a commitment to consider investment during 2016-2021. However, the time is right now to invest in the redevelopment of Belfast central library. Indeed, it is an essential development to facilitate a number of Programme for Government priorities and other related strategies. Currently, the Belfast central library receives approximately 400,000 visits a year and provides a highly valued service for not only the local community but Belfast and the wider population of Northern Ireland. The Belfast Streets Ahead project, with a proposed new University of Ulster campus at York Street, together with the granting of planning permission for the Royal Exchange development, has provided a unique

opportunity for the regeneration of Belfast central library. Therefore, it seems inconceivable that that library should remain in its current form without significant investment while the surrounding area is transformed into a communications and learning hub.

Libraries NI's proposal is to develop a purpose-designed world-class centre for knowledge, information, culture and heritage that will contribute to all aspects of the Programme for Government. It will benefit all the people of Northern Ireland as a regional hub, and it is hoped that it will become a destination for people from outside Northern Ireland and will complement other cultural facilities in the city. A regional library would bring economic benefits to the region. There is the potential to support the creative industries through the extensive collection of resources, including the historical and fine books that are often a source of inspiration to people working in the sector. The library houses the most extensive collection of freely available business resources in Northern Ireland, including market research, company and financial data, British Standards, copyrights, trademarks and patents, and provides information and support for students, those involved in business start-up and established businesses.

Members will be aware of the Library Square development, linked to the Department for Social Development's north-west quarter regeneration framework, which sees the redevelopment of Belfast central library as a catalyst for the regeneration of that part of Belfast. Of course, the added benefit of the redevelopment of the library is the resulting construction jobs and many skilled apprenticeships.

I also want to outline a number of important social benefits that would flow from the library's redevelopment. The library is already recognised as a shared space, and redevelopment provides an opportunity to contribute significantly to the Together: Building a United Community strategy, which outlines a vision for a united community based on equality of opportunity and the desirability of good relations and reconciliation, where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together. The library has a significant collection of unique materials relating to our cultural heritage, both local and national. The people of Belfast and, indeed, Northern Ireland deserve a special place where they can explore all the things that unite us culturally and that illustrate and celebrate our differences. It is important for our communities that there is a

shared space where they can explore each other's cultural identity and come together to experience a shared identity.

The project provides a number of other educational benefits, including learning programmes using new technologies that the current building cannot support. Redevelopment of the library would also allow work to support people who are unemployed by helping them to gain the skills necessary to improve their employability. Important work with children could also be undertaken, particularly on the development of a love of reading.

Currently, Northern Ireland has no legal deposit library. That means that there is no library where there is a legal requirement for works published by Ulster authors to be held. Such a facility would allow current, past and future works to be held, and that would allow 18th- and 19th-century works, including those recording the famine, to be held in one place. An added bonus would be that the library would become a hub for the Ulster diaspora, where they could go to find out more about culture and literary heritage. Furthermore, it could help to create and consolidate international links with countries where those who have left these shores and contribute to our literary legacy are now settled. Belfast central library would be the perfect location for such a collection.

12.15 pm

The Committee is aware that Libraries NI will submit a business case to DCAL at the end of October seeking financial support for its vision of a regional library for Northern Ireland. The Committee urges the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to engage with Executive colleagues and other partners to pursue Belfast central library's redevelopment plan as part of the overall Library Square project, and to look favourably on Libraries NI's business case for the redevelopment of Belfast central library and all the benefits that would accrue from it.

I ask Members to support the vision of something better for our people. Surely they deserve the same sort of facilities that the people of Liverpool and Birmingham can now enjoy and that the people of Edinburgh and Dublin are looking forward to. A regional library in Belfast would make a clear statement that we see information, communication and education as key to the improvement of our community's situation and that we are proud of and wish to display the products of our rich cultural heritage, both shared and separate.

I thank all Members who will contribute to today's debate and encourage them to support the motion. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Ó hOisín: Beidh mé ag labhairt inniu i bhfabhar an mholta seo. I support the motion and am glad that it has come before the House. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure visited the central library for a meeting in June and, indeed, the Chair of the Committee and me had a more extensive visit previously. I was quite shocked by the condition of the library, particularly that of the two newer buildings that were built in the 1960s and the 1980s. I was shocked by the conditions in which some of the great resources that are contained within central library are stored. To describe the two buildings that were added on as carbuncles might be an appropriate analogy because they certainly do not sit well with the original 19th-century building, which outlived its use a long time ago. I believe that those buildings have also outlived their usage.

In a previous life, I was a researcher and spent much of my time in dusty vaults looking up records. It always surprises me how they survive down through the years as they have, given the conditions in which they were held through damp, fire, floods, the Troubles, and all the rest of it. We have a unique collection of materials in Belfast central library. We have one of the greatest fine book collections, but access to that is limited to the general public because of the conditions in the library. The FJ Bigger collection is hugely culturally important, and the patents collection is the only one of its kind in Ireland and traces much of the industrial heritage and development in this part of Ireland.

We have a unique opportunity here in the development of the Library Quarter. We have to look at the way other quarters developed, including the Gaeltacht Quarter, based around An Chultúrlann; Cathedral Quarter around St Anne's and Writer's Square; and indeed the Titanic Quarter and the iconic building there. I believe that this is an opportunity to bring regeneration to a very neglected part of the city but also to serve the wider region. This is a wonderful opportunity to advance that.

The current library is probably less than a quarter of the size of what would be required, and that is something we should look at. The proposals that have been brought forward include resources such as a business library, as the Chair mentioned, as well as a dedicated children's library, community meeting spaces, learning centres and a totally inclusive centre of culture. The old adage of "build it and they will

come" can apply to libraries, and I have seen that in my constituency and in my own town where the new library was opened two and a half years ago and where the attendance and borrowing figures mushroomed. The figure of 400,000 people currently using Belfast central library could be increased. Indeed, the very low number of loans at the moment could be increased. There is also a chance to increase the wider value to the public realm. The Chair touched on the proximity of the York Street campus, but it will be part of the general improvement and regeneration of that entire area. It is a wonderful opportunity to go for that and deliver a project here that, in real terms — we compared it with Dublin, Birmingham and other places — is a really good investment for the future.

The current library, which was built in 1888, has served the people of Belfast and the wider region very well. Let us hope that we have the vision now to establish a building that will see us through the next 125 years to the 250th anniversary. I support the motion.

Mrs McKeivitt: I support the motion. I am pleased to add my comments to it, as protecting and enhancing our library services is one of my top priorities. I begin by commending the work of the Committee Clerk, Mr Peter Hall, and all the staff in preparation for today's debate. It is greatly appreciated by all the Committee members.

I am delighted that we are discussing the potential creation of a regional library. You may remember that in 2011 and 2012 in this Chamber, we united together and resisted a proposal to greatly reduce the opening hours of libraries. By doing so, we protected the valuable services they provide. I hope that today we can unite together to support Belfast central library's redevelopment plan to create a regional library as part of the overall Library Square project.

Libraries provide the public with a space for learning, socialising and engaging. Their purpose has been re-imagined to meet modern needs. They are no longer for only quiet reading and borrowing of books; today's libraries are centres of learning that offer many services to the community. An article in the 'The Guardian' by Ken Worpole tells us that the so-called glamming up of libraries is a worldwide trend in response to a revived global enthusiasm for libraries. That enthusiasm certainly seems to be present in Birmingham, as 10,300 visitors came to the opening of the new library on the first day. It is thought that that popular libraries culture has come about as

more and more people are engaging in higher forms of education and need study space and access to internet facilities. Libraries are also transforming themselves as community hubs, where people gather to meet friends, view art pieces in a gallery space, listen to storytelling sessions, meet authors or join book clubs. Dare I say that there is a new generation of people who today consider libraries as a cool place to be.

In the digital era, where people communicate through Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, WhatsApp and Snapchat, to name but a few of the modern apps, providing a space for social engagement has never been so important. To combine social engagement with learning opportunities is just icing on the cake. Here in Northern Ireland, we have another reason to value knowledge and educational sources that can be gained and accessed through public libraries. Access to educational resources to develop knowledge on a particular topic gives the public an opportunity to fight any cause that they may have through the words of democratic means rather than violence. Sixteen-year-old Taliban victim Malala Yousafzai opened Birmingham's new and vibrant library with a strong message: pens and books are the greatest weapon against terrorism.

As a champion for libraries, I felt that it was important to spend some time during the summer recess visiting libraries in my constituency of South Down along with Libraries NI chief executive, Irene Knox, to see at first hand the wonderful services that they provide to the community. I am looking forward to the opening of the new modernised library in Kilkeel, which will be open to the public in early 2014. I also visited libraries in Omagh and Fintona with my SDLP colleague Joe Byrne. I found both libraries to be excellent, but Omagh library was a very special experience indeed, as I had the opportunity to view resources that tell the story of the Omagh bomb and remember the victims who lost their lives on that tragic day. I encourage anyone who has not been to make time to visit Omagh library to view its wonderful archive.

I agree with the Committee that a regional library in Belfast would complement the services provided by other libraries across the region.

That is why I urge the Minister to engage with her Executive colleagues and ensure that Belfast central library's redevelopment plan for a regional library is considered and developed.

Mr McGimpsey: I have absolutely no problem with the motion as far as the redevelopment of Belfast central library is concerned. It fits in very well with the proposed development at Library Square and the University of Ulster development. Major moneys are to be invested in the area, together with the Royal Exchange and on the back of the Metropolitan Arts Centre. A business case has been produced. The current building is long past its time for development. It is not fit for purpose, and it gives us an opportunity for a modern, state-of-the-art library for Belfast that is fitting for the image of our city and merges the old with the new as far as library services are concerned, bringing in things such as a children's library, a business library, a creative lab facility, increased IT and a community meeting space. There will also be a cafe and retail outlets, which will bring together what we understand to be a modern central regional library such as we have seen in other parts of the UK and in proposals for Dublin. I commend all of that as an important step.

We talk about:

"A flexible and responsive library service which provides a dynamic focal point in the community and assists people to fulfil their potential".

That is the strapline, as I understand it, for Libraries NI, the body that oversees our libraries. This, however, to my mind, sits in stark contrast to what happened three years ago in Belfast, when eight libraries were shut. Those libraries were in exactly those communities that needed them most. Carnegie talked about libraries being:

"instruments for the elevation of the masses of the people".

They were seen as providing access to learning and advancement for people who had limited opportunities for education and self-improvement. Those libraries were in places among communities that had limited opportunities for education and self-improvement, including Sandy Row, Oldpark, Andersonstown and the Braniel. That is what happened in Belfast. There was another proposal to close a further nine libraries outside Belfast, and I have commended the Minister for her actions at that point, because she stepped in and stopped those libraries being closed. That was important, and it was the right thing to do.

If we are looking forward to library provision, it cannot simply be about a grand regional library

in Royal Avenue, Belfast, much as we need that, at a cost of over £30 million. I believe that the Department and the Minister need to direct the attention of Libraries NI back to those communities that have lost out. Communities think that libraries are important, but they do not go to them very often. They do not necessarily use them, so the issue is access. You cannot compare a library in a community such as Sandy Row or Andersonstown that is open six or seven days a week with a van that parks on waste ground for a few hours one day a week. You do not get the sort of use that you require.

I have no problem with the proposal, but there is now an opportunity for the Minister to intervene again with the Department and the libraries service to look again at the communities that have lost out and have had their library services taken away from them. It gives us an opportunity, therefore, to re-engage with those communities to give them access again to learning and advancement. Those people have limited opportunities for education and self-improvement. The libraries service was designed to provide that for those communities, and here is an opportunity for us.

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

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will begin with topical questions, which will last for up to 15 minutes, and we will then move on to deal with those that appear on the list of questions for oral answer.

University of Ulster: Performance

1. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what strategy he has in place and what work he is doing with the University of Ulster given its drop in the past six years from 54 to 88 in 'The Guardian' league table. (AQT 61/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I thank the Member for his question. I stress that one should not put too much stock in league tables. A host of league tables in which universities are ranked are used around the world, and that is one of many. In each, different weightings are given to aspects of university life. Some, for example, place a much heavier reliance on research; others place more reliance on areas such as student satisfaction.

We have a higher education strategy in place in Northern Ireland, and we are working with the universities across a broad range of issues. As an Executive, we are investing heavily in the higher education sector and appreciate its importance to the Northern Ireland economy. I am very proud to say that Northern Ireland has three world-class universities that are really making their presence felt and are critical to our future economic potential.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. I agree with him that we have world-class universities, but, in light of the apparent decline, can you advise why the external review mechanism, which would have identified issues of concern at a much earlier stage, was removed, having been in existence since the inception of the university? Is it not now time that it was replaced?

Dr Farry: What I can say to the Member is that there is an ongoing dialogue between my Department, whether at ministerial or official

level, and the universities. Those exchanges range from the accounting officer's engagement with the university on the use of public money to how we can achieve our mutual objectives. An indication of that is that I wrote to the vice chancellors over the summer to emphasise again the priorities that the Executive and Assembly have and expect of the higher education sector. The universities have acknowledged that and are working towards those plans. I believe that we have strength, and, again, I urge the Member not to put too much stock in an individual league table because the different measurements that people use as a means of ranking universities do not always stack up with reality.

Education Maintenance Allowance

2. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the recent changes to the education maintenance allowance have had an impact on the number of young people staying in further education post 16. (AQT 62/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. The changes to the EMA were jointly agreed between my Department and the Department of Education and then endorsed by the Executive. They seek to better target the available resources at helping individuals from the lowest-income households to remain in education. Northern Ireland's very strong track record of having young people stay on in education is better than that in other parts of these islands, and we can be proud of that. If anything, the evidence of recent years is that the trend has been consolidated and more young people stay on. We see that in, for example, the number of applications to sit GCSEs or A levels. This is the first year of the changes, and we will see what the impact on the ground is. We were clear that there would be a reduction in the number of young people receiving EMA, but, in exchange, we are concentrating the resource on where it will make the biggest difference. We sought to address the dead weight that was in the system previously while preserving the core of the scheme.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he satisfied with the level of financial advice available to students aged 16 to 19 at our post-primary and higher education institutions?

Dr Farry: The Member is right to identify this as an issue that we need to be conscious of. It is

more than simply an issue of how those young people engage with secondary, further or higher education. We need to encourage our young people in the best use of resources. Equally, there is an issue of ensuring that everyone is fully aware of the support that is available to them and can access that. Our various institutions will work with young people to give them that advice. We are always happy to learn lessons as to how that could be done better.

Students: Cross-border Mobility

3. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what he is doing to tackle the cross-border mobility problems experienced by students, which have an educational and economic impact. (AQT 63/11-15)

The Minister will be aware from recent media articles of some of the issues and problems around cross-border student mobility.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his interest in this. It is fair to say that the level of student flows on the island of Ireland, whether we are talking about North to South or South to North, is below its potential and is currently at a level below the more recent historical trend. So, there is certainly scope for improvement in that regard. Officials in my Department are working with their counterparts in the Department of Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland to address those issues. The Member will be aware that the CBI and IBEC published a significant report on the matter in 2011 with, I think, 10 or 12 recommendations, a number of which are directly relevant to my Department and others to the institutions. We are working through those issues. One key issue is the recognition of the A*. I know that the Member's colleague the Minister of Education is leading on that issue. There are then issues around careers advice and making sure that young people are aware of the options that are available to them in the different jurisdictions. We recently improved the financial support for students, particularly from Northern Ireland, who wish to study in the Republic of Ireland. While we have moved to replace the payment of the registration fee with a tuition fee loan to cover that, we have a much more generous maintenance support allowance that actually allows young people to survive while doing their degree course. So, the changes are in place. What we now need to do is encourage young people to consider all the options available to them. We are not there to advocate particular courses of action but to ensure that there is a

level playing field and people have the full information available.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he discussed the matter with his counterpart in the Dublin Government, the Education and Skills Minister, Ruairí Quinn? What are his views on the matter?

Dr Farry: I have discussed the matter on a number of occasions with my counterpart, Ruairí Quinn. I know that John O'Dowd has had similar discussions. In the past number of months, I have appeared before the Good Friday Agreement Committee in the Oireachtas. We had a very healthy exchange around higher education issues that also touched on some aspects of research. It is worth highlighting, given that the Member has given me the opportunity, that there is the potential to significantly improve the degree of collaboration on a North/South basis with respect to research in higher and further education settings. In particular, as we look to maximise the drawdown from competitive European Union funds, that type of collaboration is key to making the most of the available opportunities.

Students: Registered Blind/Deaf

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to address the number of students who are registered blind or with a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses, which fell from 360 in 2007-08 to only 85 in 2011-12, and the number of students who are registered deaf or with a serious hearing impairment, which fell from 250 to 100 in the same period. (AQT 64/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. We are aware of those figures. I stress to the Member and the House that the further education system and higher education system are open to people irrespective of any disability or impairment that they may have, whether that is a sight or hearing issue or, indeed, a learning disability. I will highlight one particular intervention that we have made in recent weeks: the additional support fund, which is available in the further education system to provide support to young people who need assistance, has seen its budget increase by about 33%, from £1.5 million to £2 million. Hopefully, that will begin to make a difference. Ultimately, this is about encouraging people to apply to further education and to understand that assistance is available for them and there is no reason why they should be discouraged in

any way from developing their own potential to its maximum.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his response. The extra £500,000 funding in the additional support fund is most welcome for potential students who have a disability. However, does the Minister believe that the allocation of funding before an audit is carried out to establish gaps in disability provision in further education is the best way forward?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. He touches on a wider issue. He will be aware that we have had discussions on the issue in the Chamber and in Committee. Indeed, the Committee plans to conduct an inquiry into the issue of post-19 special educational needs.

In response to representations that I have received, we have conducted an audit of the availability of courses across the FE sector to see where there are gaps so that we can challenge those. Obviously, resources are fixed, and, while we can maybe add some additional resources, there is a limit to how far we can extend provision, but I want to see that we have, as far as possible, a uniformity of provision across Northern Ireland. The audit that we have now completed and that will hopefully pass on to the Committee in the very near future will enable us to proceed with that work.

We are looking closely at the issue over the next number of months. We are looking in particular at what happens regarding disability employment to ensure that we have the support available, so there is a review of the disability employment service offer. There is also the wider issue about what we do with young people, which cuts across Departments. I am happy to lead on my own aspects and the aspects that interface with other Departments, and I have no doubt that my colleagues in the Executive feel likewise.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Mr Paul Givan is not in his place, I call Mr Samuel Gardiner.

University of Ulster: Creche Facilities

6. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he agrees that the lack of creche facilities at the University of Ulster at Magee will limit study options for parents. (AQT 66/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and understand the concern that he has expressed. It has been shared by a large number of other MLAs, but I need to stress to Members that this is a matter for the University of Ulster to take forward. While the Department funds the universities to a large extent and sets the high-level policy direction, they are autonomous bodies. They are not NDPBs as such or arm's-length bodies; they are autonomous from the Department, and it is for them to set their own policies. My understanding is that there was limited demand for those facilities and that can be met through other means, but it is something that, no doubt, Members will wish to keep under review and to push the university on as well.

The other aspect that we will be concerned about relates to any funds that have been allocated, whether recently or in the past. If it is appropriate, we will seek to claw those back if they are no longer being used for the purpose for which they were originally allocated.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his response. How is the Minister working alongside the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the childcare strategy takes account of parents who are studying in further or higher education?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Again, it touches on a much wider issue relating to childcare. He rightly identifies that OFMDFM takes the lead on a childcare strategy, and I understand that it is at a very advanced stage in that process. My Department is keen to collaborate with it on that, and we have a distinct role to ensure that we are upskilling the workforce in that regard.

I also highlight the fact that we have a commitment to widening participation in further education and higher education. That includes ensuring that people from a range of backgrounds can access the choice of courses that are available, and childcare is obviously a dimension to that.

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

2.15 pm

Apprenticeships: North Down

1. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to

increase the number of apprenticeships in local businesses in North Down. (AQO 4560/11-15)

Dr Farry: There are currently 337 individuals on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme in the North Down local government district, and that ranks North Down ninth of the 26 local government areas in respect of apprenticeship numbers. I encourage all businesses in Northern Ireland to consider employing a young person and have them participate in the ApprenticeshipsNI programme.

An apprenticeship provides a unique combination of work and on- and off-the-job training, all of which is relevant to business needs. It is a cost-effective way for a business to grow a loyal and productive workforce supported by my Department, which funds the off-the-job training through a network of training providers including the six further education colleges.

It is the business that creates the employment required for an apprenticeship. To raise awareness of ApprenticeshipsNI among businesses, my Department conducted an advertising campaign earlier this year, with another burst in July ahead of the main recruitment period. That campaign focuses on the benefits of employing an apprentice.

In Northern Ireland, there are almost 9,000 apprentices on the programme, and that represents about 11 apprentices per 1,000 workers. That is well below other developed economies in Europe. Switzerland, for example, has four times the equivalent number of apprentices in its workforce. That is one of the reasons why I launched the major review of our policies on apprenticeships and youth training in February. Key aspects of that review include how to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to engage with apprenticeships; how to expand apprenticeships into other sectors, such as the professions; and the role of higher apprenticeships. The outworkings of the review, which will report through a series of high-level strategic statements in the autumn, are expected to result in future policy proposals that will culminate in more businesses offering apprenticeship opportunities across Northern Ireland, including North Down.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he recognise the value of apprenticeships in developing skills and knowledge in young people? Does he recognise apprenticeships as a credible alternative to going to university?

Dr Farry: Absolutely, and I dare say that we could use the Member to help us to sell this model of training. It is important to recognise that, at times, apprenticeships can be a very efficient way of training because there is a much closer match between supply and demand. They are good for companies, in that they will secure workers who are trained in the particular needs of that business, and for the young people, who will know that they have skills that are bankable in a very competitive job market and, therefore, have a better chance of holding down and sustaining a job.

The Member is also right to highlight the opportunity for higher-level apprenticeships. We need to get away from the notion of some sort of hierarchy, with an apprenticeship seen as a secondary option and something that you do if you do not do so well in your A levels or cannot get into university. We have to have parity of esteem — if I can use that phrase — between apprenticeships and higher education. People must be able to make informed choices based on good careers advice about what best suits their area.

It is interesting to note that some companies now offer parallel routes that reach more or less the same destination. Some companies take people at A level and train them up, and others take graduates and do a little bit of training. Both approaches essentially reach the same point. There are a lot of interesting experiments going on out there. We are keen to reinforce that apprenticeships — in particular, higher-level apprenticeships — are a plausible alternative to traditional higher education. By the same token, we do not rule out apprentices and will encourage them to seek to get a higher-level qualification as part of their training.

Mr Cree: According to DEL's statistical bulletin, the number of ApprenticeshipsNI starts fell in the years 2010, 2011 and 2012. Minister, do you agree that, if you are serious about apprenticeships, you really have to address that decline?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for pointing that out. The fact is that not enough apprenticeships are offered in Northern Ireland. That is an absolute fact, and it is one of the main reasons why we have launched this major review. I would dare to suggest that the particular figures that he mentioned are a product of the economic cycle at some of the more difficult times of the economic downturn.

I stress that an apprenticeship is a job and is dependent on employers coming forward and offering places. One of the things that we will

seek to do with the review is to make it easier for employers to hire apprentices. The Member will know that we have a predominance of SMEs in our economy, and, at times, SMEs, in particular, are nervous about the perceived risks of taking on an apprentice.

We want to see what type of models we can put in place, whether some sort of financial incentive or a means by which we can spread or manage the risk, to enable more SMEs to engage with that type of training, which will be beneficial to companies.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer, and the whole House applauds him for his efforts to break down the difference between academic and vocational education. If I am correct, I picked the Minister up as saying that there are four times as many apprentices in Switzerland. Bearing in mind the high unemployment rate among 16- to 25-year-olds, has the Minister sufficient funds to offer places on apprenticeships, and, if not, is it his intention to make a bid in the October monitoring round?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and his comments on the context. It is worth noting that those countries in Europe that have the strongest footprint of vocational apprenticeship training, such as the Germanic countries, also have the lowest levels of unemployment, including youth unemployment; I am sure that that is no coincidence. There are lessons to be learned. It strays into the notion of having a much more efficient means of matching supply and demand in the economy.

The Member is also right to stress the need for additional resources as we move to expand our apprenticeship offering further. The pressure will come in two areas. First, if we move to higher-level apprenticeships, training may be more expensive than the current offer. Secondly, we may see an increased demand for the number of apprenticeships to be funded. One source of funding is the European social fund, and we are consulting on the new programme for 2014 onwards. Within that, we sought to highlight the potential for the increased funding of apprenticeships. There may be circumstances in which we need to look for more, whether from reallocations in my Department or elsewhere in the block grant. We will keep that under review.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the update on his work on apprenticeships. What creative modes of delivery is he exploring to improve the apprenticeship offering, such as consortium delivery?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. This goes back to my earlier point about how we can best encourage SMEs to engage in the process. Realistically, there will not be a situation in which every company in Northern Ireland is offering apprenticeships. I will return to Mr Dallat's point. Even in Switzerland, perhaps only some 30% of companies offer apprenticeships, and there is a skewing towards bigger companies, but there is, nonetheless, greater participation from small and medium-sized enterprises than in Northern Ireland.

Part of the difficulty is that companies may see taking on an additional pair of hands and paying the wage as too much of a risk. They may see, or be concerned about, a distraction with training, or they may be uncertain as to what they can offer when the apprenticeship finishes. A number of different models are available for us to look at on how we can spread and manage the risk. One such model could be an interim body that is the employing agency for apprentices, rather the company employing them directly. Those issues are all under consideration at present, and we still have to make a final judgement as to what is most suitable for Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

ICT Skills

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the recent initiatives to address skills issues in the information and communication technology sector. (AQO 4561/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Information and communication technology (ICT) is a priority sector for my Department. In June 2012, I published an action plan to address the specific skill issues in the sector. That plan, agreed by the ICT working group, which includes representation from employers, colleges, universities and other Departments, is a living document and continues to be adapted to meet the changing needs of employers. Progress has been significant and has coincided with an increase of over 24% in applications to IT-related degrees at our local universities.

New initiatives continue to be taken forward. In the past month, I have announced new pilot academies in data analytics and cloud technology, which will offer training and work

placement opportunities to 34 participants. A second cohort of the successful public-private ICT apprenticeship scheme is in motion, with around 50 places available; and a further cohort of over 100 students has enrolled on MSc courses for non-IT graduates in our local universities. Furthermore, this month, a new software and systems development A level was introduced in Northern Ireland.

Those developments build on the high level of existing activity that is being delivered as part of the ICT action plan. That includes a third cohort of 32 participants in the Software Testers Academy, who commenced training this month; a higher level apprenticeship in ICT, which is being piloted at South West College; and the wider review of apprenticeships, which will be of direct relevance to the ICT sector.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his very positive response. I am sure the Assembly will welcome the recent initiatives that he has taken. However, we cannot rest on our laurels. What are the next steps to make further progress on this issue?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his comments and question. I will highlight a number of points. First, we have launched a number of pilot academies, which I have no doubt will be very successful. They are in cutting-edge areas such as data analytics and cloud technology. We will want to mainstream those in due course and, indeed, expand them where appropriate.

I have touched on the review of apprenticeships. I think that that offers new opportunities, on a much bigger scale, for the ICT sector. We can also look to the forthcoming review of careers services, because, in many ways, those represent the foundation stone on which much of our economy is built, and we need to see what more we can do to encourage young people to consider careers in this flourishing sector in Northern Ireland.

Finally, the Member will note that we have seen a very significant increase in the number of applications to universities, which we welcome. There comes a point, however, when physical capacity and staffing issues come into play. We are in discussions with the universities to see what more we can do to take their offerings to the next level.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the availability of ICT schemes and courses. Does he accept that, in some hard-to-reach communities, it is about more than merely

making those classes and courses available? It is about proactively seeking out people who will need qualifications to make themselves available in the job market? What is he doing to promote that?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He raises the need to maximise participation. We need to find people to go into ICT careers. We have to address the gender balance, encourage people who, perhaps, have not thought about ICT as a career and, indeed, address the needs of people who are facing particular barriers. A lot of good work has been done with communities in that regard. Obviously, when we talk about essential skills, that is not just literacy and numeracy; it is ICT. This month, we are mainstreaming LEAP across Northern Ireland. That is a community-based project that will engage with people.

A number of projects within the not in education, employment or training (NEET) strategy, Pathways to Success, and under the collaboration and innovation fund, which aim to engage with vulnerable young people or those who are facing barriers, are based around ICT. So, there is a focus on trying to touch the communities that Mr Campbell identified.

Mr Eastwood: Is the Minister confident that enough places are being offered in the north-west region to meet demand or to attract all the jobs that we want in the ICT sector?

Dr Farry: I think that the straight answer to the Member is that more can be done in this area, particularly in the north-west. Later this evening, we are having a debate about Magee and the potential of that university campus. I encourage much more attention to be given to the intermediate-level skills — the technical skills — for which particular demand is being voiced by employers, including those in the ICT sector. The Member will also note that, in support of the One Plan skills directorate, we recently appointed a member of my staff to act as a liaison officer. That was to provide much more focused attention on skills in the north-west.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his responses. He referred to the ICT action plan that was launched in June 2012. Will the Minister outline the alterations that he has made to that action plan since then, considering the economic climate?

2.30 pm

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. She, rightly, identifies that the action plan was never meant to sit on a shelf or be fixed in stone. We have periodic reviews of the action plan at which we bring the stakeholders together. As and when we come across a need for new initiatives, or when new initiatives are happening, we will update the plan accordingly.

I will give the Member a few examples of that. We are in a new context in which the A level is in place, which means that attention now shifts towards encouraging schools to offer that A level. At present, only a handful of schools make that choice available to young people. We have also developed a much greater focus on certain specialities, such as data analytics and cloud technology, which were mentioned earlier. That illustrates that this is a fast-moving industry and that new types of expertise can be required at relatively short notice. So it is important that we continue to have the flexibility to respond to the needs of overseas investors and indigenous companies. Those issues will be reflected in the action plan as we update it regularly.

Teacher Education Infrastructure

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the second stage of the study of teacher education infrastructure. (AQO 4562/11-15)

11. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the progress of the second stage of the study of teacher education infrastructure. (AQO 4570/11-15)

Dr Farry: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 3 and 11.

Members are aware of my previous statements to the Assembly and my plans to review the teacher training infrastructure in Northern Ireland before putting forward options for further consideration. Yesterday, I announced that I had appointed Dr Pasi Sahlberg to chair an expert panel of international standing in the field of higher education and with the professional expertise to meet the objectives of the review.

Dr Sahlberg is currently director general of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation in the Finnish Government's Ministry of Education and Culture. He has a long track record in education and development and has been an active figure in promoting educational changes in Finland and beyond.

He brings high-level strategic expertise and advice to this review. Dr Sahlberg will be supported by four other panel members, and I will make a further announcement about the other members in due course. I have placed a copy of yesterday's press release in the Assembly library.

The panel will have scope to develop its own methodology for taking the initiative forward, which, I envisage, will include engagement with representatives of the five teacher training providers. The final output from this assignment will be a report setting out the options for the future shape of initial teacher training in Northern Ireland. That will allow my officials and me to enter into further dialogue with the various institutions, with the intention of finding an agreed way forward.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has the Department made any projections or are there any indications to the Department of any possible adverse impacts of the study on future needs? Will future needs be in any way be threatened by the line that the Department is pursuing?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I can assure him that there is no danger of that in any shape or form. The Department of Education controls the teacher demand model, and it will set the numbers required.

My concerns are largely to do with the nature of the infrastructure itself. We have a multiplicity of providers for 1.8 million people, which goes against the trend in other jurisdictions; hence the need for an international perspective on what we do. We have looked at financial projections for the teacher training colleges in particular, and it is clear that they are not sustainable. Even if we do nothing, they will not be sustainable, but, in the event that other policy priorities change, that situation could come to a head even sooner. So the only responsible thing to do is to take forward this review. We will always ensure that we train teachers to meet the needs of the local market. If anything, at present, there is a surplus of trained teachers, and good efforts are being made to put some of them to good use in the area of literacy and numeracy. There is still a surplus, and we want to ensure that we invest in the right needs of our economy.

Mr McGimpsey: I, of course, am keen to know where we are as far as the status of Stranmillis University College is concerned. It was my understanding that, before the summer, you

appointed an expert to advise you. I now hear that this expert is the chairman of a panel that is yet to be appointed but will be "in due course", after which it will engage in a long discussion. But when I hear words like "not sustainable" and I hear about this long process, you will understand how anxious I am to find out exactly what your proposals are for Stranmillis college.

Dr Farry: Again, I thank the Member for his question. We are taking a deliberative, evidence-based approach to this. I intend to appoint the rest of the panel within a matter of weeks. We simply have to confirm participation with the panel before we proceed to announce the names. We have to have a degree of caution in that regard. It is intended that the panel will report on this issue in spring 2014.

I do not think that we are taking it slowly. If anything, the mood of the Assembly was against the potential merger of Stranmillis and Queen's University. That was placed on the table by my predecessor, the colleague of Mr McGimpsey, but it was very quickly apparent that the appetite was not there to simply address the future of Stranmillis through the lens of a potential merger with Queen's. Hence, there was a need for a much wider review of the infrastructure so that we can explore all the issues, including some of the equality issues that have been raised as matters of concern by Members.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does the Minister intend to move forward on the basis of agreement with the institutions in question? If no agreement can be reached, does he intend to impose change?

Dr Farry: I can understand why the Member is asking that question, but it is probably premature to raise that issue. My preference would obviously be to work on the basis of consensus with the various institutions. Obviously, we respect them, and they all have long and proud histories.

It is important that all the institutions engage with the review, but they must also recognise that the status quo of the system is simply not sustainable. Change is inevitable. It is better that we address change on the basis of consensus, and I believe that this process will allow for that opportunity. If people are not prepared to engage, we will have to see what happens. Even if we sit back and do nothing, the situation will change adversely as far as the

future interests of the various stakeholders are concerned.

Mr Wilson: I understand the importance of the various institutions involved in teacher training, but does the Minister accept that it is imperative not to keep training teachers for unemployment? Young people are being enticed into teacher-training courses only to find that there are no jobs for them at the end. Does he accept that, if this review is to be effective, the total number of teachers required is also an important factor to be considered when making any decisions?

Dr Farry: Again, I thank the Member for his question. I look forward to being grilled by him from the Back Benches over the months to come. I suspect that he has a major advantage over most other Members as he knows the ins and outs of a lot of the financial arrangements of the various Departments. No doubt, he will be forensic in his analysis of the various issues.

Having a more shared and integrated system for teacher training would be much more sustainable and would have a much higher tolerance for shifts in the numbers of teachers being trained in Northern Ireland. At present, there is a sense that the numbers being trained are as much a reflection of the need to keep institutions sustainable as they are of the needs of the economy as we move forward. To put it into very sharp focus: we are spending more money on training a teacher in Northern Ireland, when arguably we are training too many, and less on training an engineer, when arguably we need more engineers for our future growth.

Mr Allister: No doubt, the Minister will say that the panel has been appointed to look at infrastructure; but nothing in education is free-standing. Is it not the case that his choice of chair, Dr Sahlberg, is a person who, from his writings, is clearly an avowed opponent of selection, an avowed opponent of any form of standardised testing and an avowed opponent even of parental choice in education? Is there an agenda here that the Minister is following with the Education Minister?

Dr Farry: I am happy to give the Member an absolute categorical assurance that none of the issues that he outlined is part of the terms of reference for the stage two of the review either officially, unofficially or in any other way, and that there is certainly no conspiracy afoot regarding this being a Trojan Horse for any of those other issues. The House is well familiar with those issues, and there will be separate processes for discussing those and agreeing

changes, if any. However, with regard to what the Member is concerned about, he has nothing to fear whatsoever.

Apprenticeships

4. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on discussions between his Department and private sector representatives to improve the provision and success of apprenticeship schemes. (AQO 4563/11-15)

Dr Farry: In the main, discussions between my Department and private sector representatives to improve the provision and success of apprenticeship schemes have been within the context of the review of apprenticeships that I announced in February 2013. However, discussions have not focused solely on private sector representatives. I instructed DEL officials to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including young people, the voluntary and community sector, sector skills representatives and training providers.

I established an expert panel, which includes employers and education and skills providers, to advise on the work of the review. That has now met three times regarding apprenticeships and once focusing on youth training. Alongside that, my officials have met individual businesses and sector skills councils, and have worked with partners, including the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses, to engage directly with that sector.

I recently facilitated a series of stakeholder forums for employers, learners and providers, which have provided an opportunity for key stakeholders to help shape the review. A call for submissions on the review of apprenticeships was launched on 4 September. There will be a similar call for submissions on the review of youth training.

Ms McGahan: I thank the Minister for his response. It is my understanding that Electrical Training Trust students are unable to enrol in regional colleges to pursue apprenticeships, and that that is having an impact on their potential careers. Is the Minister planning to factor that into his review of apprenticeships?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. She touches on one aspect of a much more multifaceted problem, and a number of MLAs have been in touch with me in recent months to highlight that. At times, the rules around the current model of apprenticeships can be somewhat stifling, and

sometimes they may be perceived as being slightly illogical and may frustrate people's opportunities and their chances for progression. I assure the Member that, with regard to the current review, every single aspect of apprenticeship policy is on the table. Although we talk about the broad sweep regarding the headline changes that we want to make, we also want to look at the particular rules around apprenticeships that have caused some frustration, not only for Members but for young people across Northern Ireland.

Mr Newton: Does the Minister agree that, given the very high number of people who are unemployed in this potential apprenticeship group, there is virtually a social responsibility on many of our medium to large companies, particularly those in receipt of, in many cases, large amounts of financial support from DEL, to take up that social responsibility and provide an opportunity for training places?

Dr Farry: I fully agree with the Member. To give a specific example: there is now a much greater use of social clauses, which include aspects of engagement with apprenticeships, in public procurement contracts. The broader point stands, in that companies have a duty to invest in the future of the economy as a whole, and that includes investing in young people. Sometimes you will see some companies overtraining in the sense that they have an expectation that they may not hire everybody in due course, but that they will be available for the rest of the sector or, indeed, their supply chain. However, I would not wish employers to simply see this as a social responsibility. Hiring an apprentice adds to the bottom line of a business. Depending on the complexity of the training needs, an employer may well break even on productivity after a year. In a more complex area, that may be two years. However, an employer will get a productivity gain directly from employing an apprentice. So, they can employ an apprentice out of a sense of corporate social responsibility, but they can also do so in their own direct economic interest.

2.45 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Again, we will start with topical questions. Mr Fra McCann was listed first, but he contacted the Business Office within the appropriate time and withdrew his name, so I call Mr Seán Lynch.

Children in Care

2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he agrees that his Department has failed children in care and whether he intends to hold an inquiry into children in care here. (AQT 72/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The blame for the circumstances that we find ourselves in lies first and foremost with the perpetrators, not the Department. The blame should always lie first and foremost with the perpetrators of sexual or any other kind of violence.

Over the past number of years, the Department asked Barnardo's to produce a report and paid for that report to be produced in 2009 because we recognised that there was a risk. Subsequently, we took a series of actions, including establishing the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

Not all the responsibility lies with the Department. The police and the Department of Justice have a role. When young people themselves do not believe that they are the victims of violence or sexual violence, you have a great difficulty. Many of those young people wrongly perceive that they are being appreciated and shown some kind of care and attention when they are really receiving malign attention from people who have evil purposes.

So, let us be very clear about where the blame lies. It lies with people who go after young, vulnerable people. It is not just children in care, because 80% of children who are targeted by child sexual exploiters are not in care, and we need to get the appropriate messages out.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Can the Minister assure the public that children in care today are safe?

Mr Poots: It is important to indicate that children in residential care homes are in homes. That is why they are not locked up: it is to be a home, not a prison. Therefore, young people have the ability to exercise some discretion and free will. We identified that those young people who were most vulnerable, and who, for a variety of reasons, we took to secure accommodation, quickly reverted to how they behaved previously. Clearly, locking up young people does not work.

It is a difficult situation. We will highlight repeatedly to young people the issues and problems that can come to them as a result of engaging with the wrong types of people, how to avoid them, what to watch out for and when to seek support. We will also continue to work with the police. It is important that we recognise that, in all of this, I am sure that we can move things forward and improve things. The care of young people has improved over the past 10 years and over the previous 10 years. I have no doubt that we will be doing things in future years that will be better than today. We need to ensure that we pay heed to everything that comes to our attention and that we act on it. That is what we seek to do daily.

Care Homes: Admissions Policy

3. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will give statutory residential care homes for the elderly a chance and an opportunity to prove their viability by doing a U-turn on his policy of restricting new admissions. (AQT 73/11-15)

Mr Poots: The policy of restricted admissions is something that a number of trusts applied but not all. Last year, for example, the Western Health and Social Care Trust had an open admissions policy. Eighty per cent of people in the Western Trust area chose not to use statutory residential homes and opted for private residential homes, so Mr Allister's point does not resolve the issue. With residential care homes for the elderly, we need to look at the widest range of options for our elderly population and seek to meet their needs. The person, not the facility, should be front and centre of all those things — the needs of that person and where best their needs are met. If their needs are best met in a statutory residential care home, I am not opposed to that.

Mr Allister: The Minister likes to hide behind the trusts on the issue. However, his policy is to restrict admissions. On 9 October 2012, when he introduced Transforming Your Care, he told the House that there would, therefore, be a restriction on new admissions to statutory care homes. That is starving homes of the oxygen of occupancy that makes them capable of working. Take, for example, Pinewood Residential Care Home in my constituency. It is a 36-bed unit that has been starved of admissions to the point that it now has nine residents. Is the Minister not, quite clearly, clinging to a policy that is designed to close those homes? Why does he fear lifting that ban to let those homes prove themselves?

Mr Poots: In case Mr Allister takes the Assembly down the wrong line, he will find that there are more than nine residents in Pinewood, albeit that there are nine permanent residents. Many people use the facility for respite care. I just want to clarify that matter. Had Mr Allister had his way and the trust made its recommendations, does he honestly think that a direct rule Minister would have stepped in as I did? The truth is that Mr Allister's policy would have ensured the closure of Pinewood Residential Care Home. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Allister: You went through the Northern Trust 100%. You sat on your hands over it.

Mr Poots: Mr Allister does not like the truth. He does not like the facts. That is why he is behaving as he is.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: I wish that Mr Allister and, indeed, anybody else in the Assembly would visit some of the new facilities that we have developed. Recently, I opened one in Downpatrick. I visited one in Carrickfergus, which is not very far from Mr Allister's constituency. I urge people to gain a little knowledge on the subject about the standards of care that we might be able to offer our elderly population, which is a higher standard of care than is currently in place. Talk to the residents, staff and families, who will say that those facilities are much better — *[Interruption.]* — rather than unnecessarily hyping up and scaring elderly people in residential care homes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Listen: if you ask a question of the Minister, you should have the manners to listen to the answer.

Organ Donation

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the continued coverage of the issue of organ donation, whether he will provide an update on the survey work that his Department is carrying out about public attitudes toward organ donation in Northern Ireland. (AQT 74/11-15)

Mr Poots: Over the early summer, the Public Health Agency team conducted a face-to-face survey of the public, with a representative sample of 1,012 individuals, which is fairly large. That was done on the basis of age, gender, social class and local government district, so it was widespread. Focus groups and stakeholder engagement also took place

with health service staff, the BMA, charities, recipients, those on waiting lists and donor families. That work has now concluded, and I understand that the team has finalised a report on its findings. Some interesting views on organ donation are emerging. There is a lot of work to be done with the public on the issue to ensure that we can move and advance forward to ensure that more organ donation takes place in Northern Ireland with the support of the public.

Mr Ross: Will the Minister confirm that that report will be published? Will he indicate to the House when he anticipates that that will be done? Are there any early findings that would be of particular interest to the Assembly?

Mr Poots: I understand that the all-party group on organ donation meets next week. We would be very happy to make the report available to that group, and I think that that meeting would be an appropriate opportunity to do so. I have no doubt that the Public Health Agency team will make itself available to make a presentation if requested to do so. I appreciate the public and political interest in this issue. If it is not possible for the all-party group to receive the report next week, I will endeavour to have it published in the very near future. I think that the public need to know what the responses were, and we need to give attention to what the public say on these issues. As the survey was of a representative sample, it will indicate very clearly where the Northern Ireland public stand on the issue.

Legal Cases: Use of Public Funds

5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why he is using scarce public funds for legal cases against blood donation and adoption when his responsibility is to deliver a system that assesses the health and safety of blood donation and decides whether parental placements are in the best interests of a child. (AQT 75/11-15)

As this is my first topical question, I wish to extend my thanks to the staff of the Committee on Procedures, who undertook to develop my proposal to introduce topical questions. I also extend my gratitude to my Assembly researcher, Gareth Scott, whose idea it was to proceed down this route. I think that it is worth putting that on the record.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his modesty. *[Laughter.]* There is an old saying: "Self-praise is no recommendation".

On the issues that the Member raised, I was not aware that I went to court with anyone. However, when someone takes you to court, you have to respond; it would be quite foolish not to do so. It is very interesting that public money is being used by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which is a publicly funded body, in taking the Government to court, and legal aid is being used. We await the outcome of one of those cases in the not-too-distant future. Let us just see what happens.

On the issue of gay adoption, let us be absolutely unequivocal: I am just after saying that we need to pay attention to the public when they speak. When the direct rule Minister held a consultation, it revealed that over 95% of the community was opposed to gay adoption. It strikes me that some Assembly Members would prefer the courts, as opposed to this House, to make decisions. With respect to the courts, the Assembly is elected to represent the people of Northern Ireland, and it is a crucial part of the democratic process. We would do well to pay attention to the democratic will, and that is exactly what I am doing. I have to say that my stance was further strengthened last week when a piece of Queen's University Belfast research on looked-after children was published by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. The longitudinal report, started in 2003 and published only last week, found that 99% of children who had been adopted here had stability — 99% of children in adoptive circumstances in Northern Ireland find stability.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister that the two-minute rule applies.

Mr Poots: I am very sorry, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

That was because — the report included this — of the rigorous assessment process that takes place. So I make no apologies for not repairing something that is not broken in the first place.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response and his emphasis on the need for rigorous assessment. How can the public be confident that he is using public funds in a responsible manner when he continues to lose legal proceedings on these issues?

Mr Poots: That is a matter for the courts in the decisions that they make and the arguments that are put. Let me be absolutely clear: the European Court of Human Rights has found that there is no human right to adopt. Let us just nail that at the outset. This is not about adopters; it is about the children.

3.00 pm

In Northern Ireland, we are in a different circumstance from the rest of the United Kingdom, in that we do not have as many children on the waiting list for adoption as is the case in England, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland has a very robust adoption system, and I would have brought and am prepared to bring adoption legislation to the House to upgrade and improve it. However, because others decided to rush to court, that has been delayed. That is damaging to democracy, and I would have thought that Mr Lyttle should be a defender of democracy instead of trying to do down democracy. He may wish to do things through the courts; I would rather do things through the ballot box.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is the end of the period for topical questions. We will now move on to questions for oral answer.

Care Home Provision

1. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the total number of elderly people who will be living in statutory and private care homes in three, five and ten years from now. (AQO 4573/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is not possible to make exact predictions of that nature. Demand for residential and nursing home care is dependent on a range of variables, including levels of disability, the prevalence of conditions such as dementia and the availability of alternative forms of support such as domiciliary care. Moving forward, I fully support the general principle that home should be the hub of care for older people. I want a shift away from the provision of care in institutional settings to the provision of treatment, care and support closer to home. As the policy takes effect, I expect more of our older people to be supported to maintain their independence in their own home.

In August 2013, the Health and Social Care Board, as part of its project titled Improving Services for Older People — A New Process for Consulting, Engaging and Implementing Change, published a project initiation document on the future of statutory residential homes. As part of that project, the board is in the process of developing criteria that will likely include a measurement of the demand for statutory residential care that could be applied locally at trust level. The criteria will be subject to public consultation in the near future. However, I want

to provide an assurance that that does not mean that residential and nursing home care will not be available in the future. I fully recognise that, for some people, support in their home may not be the best option, and HSC will work with providers in the independent and voluntary and community sectors to ensure the continued supply of residential and nursing home care.

Mrs McKeivitt: In the absence of statutory homes, how does the Minister intend to provide vulnerable elderly people with the level of care that they require?

Mr Poots: In a range of ways. First, we should always seek to give people the option of staying in their home by providing appropriate and adequate support. Direct payment can be one means if people have strong support from families and can utilise that as a much more flexible service than the one we offer from the statutory sector.

Secondly, we need to ensure that we look at the option of providing supported living facilities, and that is a growing trend. I mentioned the very successful example in Downpatrick, which is in the Member's constituency. I urge her to visit that facility because I think that she would be wholly impressed by the service provided there.

Finally, we have the option of the private sector and, as things stand, the option of the statutory residential sector as well.

Mr Campbell: Fionnuala McAndrew from the Health and Social Care Board was interviewed last month, Minister, and, when questioned, she indicated that no elderly residents would be forced to leave their home. Can the Minister reassure residents, such as my constituents in Thackeray Place in Limavady, that that is the case and refute those who are party politicking and using elderly residents for their own ends?

Mr Poots: Thackeray Place is one of the strongest homes and one of the homes with the strongest cases for remaining open well into the future because it is very heavily occupied, with some 27 or 28 of 32 permanent places filled. That facility is clearly very popular in the local community. In these situations, you often look at what alternatives are available, and I do not believe that an alternative is available in Limavady town itself. All those issues are taken into account.

We are engaged in a process. The other process was flawed — I want to be clear about

that — and that is why I stopped it. The process that we are engaged in is not about forcing people out of their home; it is about improving the lives of older people and giving them a wider range of options. In doing that, it is important that we take steps that will allow us to make that investment in providing better options for older people in the future, but, at the same time, it is critical that we treat those older people who are currently in residential care with the greatest respect and decorum. I accept that that did not happen, and I do not wish for that failure to happen again.

Mr Beggs: As a Back-Bencher in 2009, the Minister fought for the retention of statutory residential homes, yet his current policy proposes their closure. How will the Minister ensure that residential care homes remain affordable and locally accessible to family and friends? How does he explain his U-turn?

Mr Poots: That is something for the Health and Social Care Board. It is doing work that is looking at what is available to older people and what the best options are. I have had the opportunity to look at the supported-living model, and it is something that, I believe, will deliver a much better service for older people; one where they can retain a greater degree of independence and have the support that is necessary. I can give an example of an elderly couple, one of whom develops dementia. They do not need to go into a home; they can move into a supported-living facility. As their need increases, the support for them will increase. That couple would be able to stay together, as opposed to one of them having to move into a residential care home while the other stays in their own home.

If Members think that that is not a good thing, and that that policy is wrong, I would love to hear them state that belief clearly. I believe that the policy is right, and I believe that we need to go down this route of doing things in a very structured way, unlike the Member's colleague who did things in an unstructured way and closed six or seven residential homes in his period as Health Minister, without any opposition from Mr Beggs.

Mr McCallister: Has the Minister had any discussions with the Secretary of State for Health in England or the Finance Minister here about the effect that a cap on residential funding, such as that paid by people in England, would have on the Budget here if he were to introduce it?

Mr Poots: I have not had direct conversations with the Health Minister on that. Normally, these things are dealt with through the Department for Social Development, and it is not my role to stand on other Ministers' toes. It will have an impact on me, so there would have to be contact with my Department if the Department for Social Development were to do anything. I would express an opinion on that when it would come to me.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn and referred to DSD for written answer.

Transforming Your Care

3. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what analysis, linked to multiple deprivation indicators, is undertaken to monitor the effects of Transforming Your Care on people in deprived areas. (AQO 4575/11-15)

Mr Poots: Although we have seen many improvements in the health of our population, those who are disadvantaged in our society do not have an equal chance of experiencing good health and well-being. Health and Social Care alone cannot fully address the issues associated with multiple deprivation; it requires joined-up working across government. One of the key principles underpinning Transforming Your Care (TYC) is a commitment to a focus on prevention and tackling inequalities. Changes to service provision through TYC, such as improved integration of care through the implementation of integrated care partnerships and the provision of enhanced services locally through primary and community care, will improve the health and well-being of all of our population and contribute to overall progress in respect of deprivation indicators.

TYC is a key element of our wider, holistic approach to tackling inequalities. We already have a wide range of activities under way to target the vulnerable and disadvantaged across Northern Ireland, including strategies and action plans with a wide range of associated indicators in respect of smoking, teenage parenthood and sexual health, mental health promotion and suicide prevention, obesity, and alcohol and drug misuse, as well as the forthcoming new public health strategic framework. We must all work together to ensure that we optimise life chances for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will an equality impact assessment (EQIA) be conducted for

specific services of Transforming Your Care, and is there a timescale for that?

Mr Poots: Our Department, as always, will follow all the guidelines related to equality issues, but let me talk a little bit about equality. If we want to truly change where we are, we have to go back to the starting point: the starting point is when a young person is born. I am very committed to ensuring that we give young people the best possible chance in life. I hope that Sinn Féin will be equally committed in the Departments that it has responsibility for to ensuring that those young people have the best opportunities for life, unlike the circumstances in west Belfast and the Shankill, where I had to step in because funding was not being supported by the Department of Education, which is led by a Sinn Féin Minister. It took a DUP man to sort out the people on the Falls Road.

Mrs D Kelly: What are the Minister's thoughts on the health action zones, which many recognise as having been a success in directing cross-departmental work in deprived areas? Does he have any replacement model in mind for the future?

Mr Poots: In all these things to do with deprivation, we have to first identify the nature of the problem and then seek to address it in a very focused way. I do not think that having Northern Ireland-wide policies, as such, does that, so the advantages of health action zones are fairly obvious in that instance. They give you a local perspective, and then you can deliver a local response.

In all that we do, we will seek not to have a broad brush approach to tackling these issues. Anti-smoking and such activities, for example, will cross the Province. In determining the nature of the problem of school truancy, for example, we know that it impacts on young people's health. If you have high levels of truancy in one area, we can focus on that and target what is going on. People smoking during pregnancy is a much greater issue in some areas than in others, so you have a particular focus on that. It is absolutely crucial that we seek to get as much qualitative information as possible to tackle inequalities in a very focused way that makes best use of the limited resource.

Mr McCarthy: How can the Minister use such honeyed words about domiciliary care when he presides over a Department that has deprived a number of elderly people in isolated rural areas of community meals? The criteria have been

lifted so high that thousands of people do not get one meal a day.

Mr Poots: More money and hours are being spent on domiciliary care. That will continue to be the case. We will invest further in domiciliary care in the years ahead because it is absolutely critical to ensuring the well-being of people who require such care.

Mr McCarthy: What about the community meals, Minister? Starvation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Paediatric Cardiac Surgery

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the British Congenital Cardiac Association's endorsement of a network model to ensure the implementation of standards and the successful development of service, to outline what meetings have taken place with Irish Government Ministers and officials in relation to the establishment of an all-island network of paediatric cardiac surgery. (AQO 4576/11-15)

Mr Poots: Members will be aware that I met the Republic of Ireland's Minister for Health, Dr James Reilly TD, on 8 May 2013 to ask that he give consideration to a two-centre model potentially providing paediatric congenital cardiac services (PCCS) in Belfast and Dublin. A further meeting of officials and clinicians took place on 23 May to determine whether such a model would be feasible. There has been ongoing engagement since then between clinicians and officials North and South. I had a further meeting with Minister Reilly on 12 September to discuss the issues, and the discussions are likely to continue over the next few weeks. I will inform the Assembly of the outcome when I announce my decision on the future commissioning of that service, which I hope to do as soon as possible.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. He will appreciate that this is a hugely important, sensitive and emotive subject for so many parents across Northern Ireland. Is he minded to give a commitment to ensure that the network model endorsed by the British Congenital Cardiac Association that is working in Canada and America could be workable in Northern Ireland and could give peace of mind to parents who are so worried about their children?

Mr Poots: That is certainly the model that I am pushing for. I need cooperation for that to happen. Minister Reilly has been very cooperative when we have looked at all those things. We have a more challenging issue with officials in both Departments to get this one over the line, but I am very determined that we should exhaust every possibility that exists here and give it every effort to ensure that we get a network facility that retains surgery in Belfast. I should say that we are in a better place than we were some time ago, when the proposal was that we went to England and when we had the potential to lose our cardiology services. I believe that we can ensure that the cardiology service stays without any issue, and the English model has now largely been dismissed, with the exception of the level-4 children who have to go to England for the most complex of surgery. So, it is a battle that continues, but I assure the Member that that is the model that I am pursuing.

3.15 pm

Ms Brown: What are the key factors that are required to make the Belfast-Dublin network work? Is he aware of arrangements such as the single network serving Toronto and Ottawa?

Mr Poots: Yes, I am aware of that network. We are looking at the fact that, on the island of Ireland, more than 500 operations are currently taking place. Ideally, Dublin does not want to go to fewer than 400, and, ideally, Belfast needs 200 to enable us to offer a 24/7 service, with 50 adult congenital cardiac procedures taking place. So, getting to the optimum is difficult, as I do not think that the border counties alone would bring us up to 200. Therefore, you would have to go deeper into the South of Ireland for that to work as well as you would like it to.

The other element of it is that it will be absolutely critical that our surgeons, anaesthetists and theatre teams have the opportunity to engage in surgery in Dublin so that their skills are right up there at the very highest level. That would make it more attractive for young surgeons to come to Belfast. I met the surgeons, and they do not believe that it is impossible to recruit, so there is some hope there. Our cardiologists are very highly respected for the care that they provide and the way that they do it, and we have something to offer the Republic of Ireland on the cardiology service. It is excellent, and we can support people in the border counties in that respect.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his words, and I declare an interest in that I have a seven-month-old son still waiting for cardiac procedures in Belfast. I endorse the Minister's words in speaking so highly of the surgeons and the staff in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Minister, perhaps it is anecdotal, but parents I talk to daily and weekly seem to be sending children to England for routine operations. I have asked for statistics comparing that with the number that we now send to Dublin. Can you explain to me why restrictions are still in place on performing some paediatric cardiac procedures in Belfast when they have been deemed safe to be performed there and why we still send children across to England?

Mr Poots: I understand that criteria were applied by the HSCB and the Public Health Agency (PHA) in conjunction with others that led to certain surgical procedures not taking place in Belfast. I understand that, subsequent to that, there was an independent assessment of that decision, which indicated that it was wrong. So, that very question has been asked of the relevant bodies only this week. When I get an answer from the bodies involved on why they have not changed that decision, I will be happy to bring it back to the House.

Age Discrimination

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he plans to undertake an age discrimination review of all aspects of health and social care in preparation for the introduction of the Programme for Government commitment to introduce age discrimination legislation in respect of goods, facilities and services. (AQO 4577/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department continually reviews all of its policies and standards for health and social care services to ensure that they do not unreasonably discriminate against any group. The fundamental principle is that access to health and social care services must be on the basis of prioritised, assessed health or social care needs. As the policy intentions and scope of the proposed new age discrimination legislation become clearer, we shall, of course, include them in our review processes to ensure that they are properly reflected in core policies and standards for health and social care.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. In view of the commitment

under Transforming Your Care to ensure that people can remain in their home for longer, does the Minister not agree that a review now would be even more relevant?

Mr Poots: We have a Northern Ireland Executive, and issues of equality fall within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Age discrimination appropriately falls to that Department, so, in some respects, the simple answer is that it is above my pay grade. However, to be more serious and less flippant, we want to ensure that elderly people receive the appropriate support and care. It is incumbent on us to ensure that that is the case and that, throughout government, we work closely with one another to ensure that all the checks and balances are in place so that it will be less likely that anybody — in particular, older people — is discriminated against or gets unfair treatment from government.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he give us an update on the older people's service framework?

Mr Poots: The aim of the service framework is to improve health and well-being for older people, their carers and their families by promoting social inclusion, reducing inequalities in health and social well-being and improving care. The framework for older people sets standards relating to person-centred care; health and social well-being; improvement; safeguarding; carers; conditions more common in older people; medicines management; and transitions of care. The OFMDFM strategy for older people, Ageing in an Inclusive Society, has been developed to update the direction of travel for older people's services, and the service framework for older people reflects and reinforces the core principles of that strategy. Those will shape and guide implementation.

Health Inequalities: Family Support Hubs

6. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how health inequalities and objective need will be used to decide the location of the 10 new family support hubs. (AQO 4578/11-15)

Mr Poots: Family support hubs are a multiagency network of statutory, community and voluntary organisations providing coordinated referral services for families needing early intervention services. Hubs facilitate access to services in a particular locality; they do not provide services directly. The outcomes group in each health and social

care trust area assesses the needs of its resident population, including health needs, and the locality planning groups are responsible for determining the number and location of hubs to respond to identified need in their area. Outcomes groups and locality planning groups operate under the regional Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership.

Hubs accept referrals from a range of agencies on behalf of families in need of early intervention support services, and they use their knowledge of local service providers and the regional family support database to signpost families to appropriate services. The Delivering Social Change hub signature project will support the existing network of hubs and develop 10 new ones. The initial priority is the establishment of hubs in areas in which none currently exists.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. In the location of hubs, will the Minister give due consideration to the recent child poverty statistics, particularly in the constituencies of Foyle and North Belfast?

Mr Poots: I think that we have already done that. I am sure that the Member is aware that there are hubs in Creggan, Shantallow, Waterside, Strabane and the Dry Arch, which provide excellent services. Four hubs are under development to cover north, south, east and west Belfast. In all that, we recognise that there are families who find things very tough and need a lot of support and help. If we are truly to avoid children ending up in residential care homes, we need to step in at that very early point in their life and provide support to the families. Indeed, in some instances, we need to step in to remove a child from a family if they are at risk. The hubs will help us to provide that necessary support, whilst the other arm, the enforcement side, will be used in other areas. The hubs will provide support to ensure that as many children as possible stay in their own home.

Mr D McIlveen: Will the Minister give the Assembly an update on other work that the Department is leading under the Delivering Social Change model?

Mr Poots: The Public Health Agency leads a parenting support programme that has five distinct elements, namely the Strengthening Families programme, infant mental health training, Parenting Your Teen, Incredible Years and Triple P — very trendy names, I might add.

Four of the programmes are in train, although at different stages of development. The Triple P programme has been delayed due to difficulties in identifying a suitable provider organisation, so consideration is being given to whether to proceed with commissioning that programme or to divert funding to an alternative parenting programme. We have links with, for example, Sure Start, the CAMHS teams, family centres, Barnardo's, Action for Children, the NSPCC, health visitors, social workers and others to ensure that the families who need support are able to access relevant information easily.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that, while there are indices to identify areas of serious and obvious social deprivation across Northern Ireland, there are people even in the most affluent areas who experience impacts? What does the Minister intend to do to ensure that those people are not slipping through the net?

Mr Poots: The Member is right to identify that there are people living in more affluent areas in households with a fairly high degree of poverty. Many of those people are in employment but are not well paid. Many of them acquired properties during the boom and have excessively high mortgages that leave them with very little money for day-to-day spending. It is incumbent on all of us to support groups such as the citizens advice bureau, which we do; to give people quality information and as much advice as possible through our constituency offices; and to be able to point people to appropriate services, including free school meals. People who have issues should not be embarrassed to take free school meals, because it is in the best interests of their children and may well open the door for other funding that they would not otherwise find available.

Health Inequalities

7. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the work undertaken with local government and others to improve service delivery and tackle health inequalities. (AQO 4579/11-15)

Mr Poots: Partnership working is vital if we are to tackle health inequalities effectively. The Public Health Agency and, before that, the health boards and trusts have worked effectively in partnership with local government and others for many years to improve health and well-being and to reduce inequalities in health through initiatives such as Investing for Health partnerships, health action zones and other issue-specific partnerships. A recent

review of joint working arrangements resulted in refreshed endorsement from the PHA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) to build on local joint working arrangements in the strategic context of the new public health framework and the reform of local government 2015. Examples of ongoing areas of collaboration include tobacco control, through direct support for council enforcement officers to protect people from exposure to tobacco smoke and encourage businesses to promote smoke-free environments and prevent the sale of cigarettes to children; the accident prevention programme, including a home safety check scheme; and physical activity programmes, through, for example, referral programmes, walking programmes, outdoor gyms and other changes to the physical environment. In addition to and in support of this work, the PHA currently funds approximately 156 voluntary and community organisations to deliver health improvement activity, with some 270 contracts supporting 600 to 700 community-based initiatives.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There is just about enough time for a quick supplementary question.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, Principal Deputy Speaker. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I was surprised to hear the Minister, in an earlier answer, pass his equality duties over to another Department. My question was about health inequalities. In the light of his section 75 duties, will models to track outcomes and impact now be developed as part of Transforming Your Care? It worried me slightly that you were dismissing your duties in relation to age.

Mr Poots: The Member must have heard only part of the answer or else she was just not listening: I indicated that the Department would ensure that it met all the equality standards. I hope that she did that when she was Education Minister. The Buddy Bear Trust, for example, which seeks to help children with profound physical difficulties did not receive any support from the Member when she was Minister. When we talk about equality, that should apply to everyone, including profoundly disabled children.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Regional Library for Northern Ireland

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the economic, cultural, social and educational benefits that a regional library for Northern Ireland would provide; and urges the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to engage with Executive colleagues and other partners to pursue Belfast central library's redevelopment plan to create a regional library as part of the overall Library Square project. — [Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure).]

Mr Hilditch: I rise as a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee to support the motion. While I welcome the attendance of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister at today's debate and look forward to her response and contribution, I also take the opportunity to acknowledge the work of the Department for Social Development to date, as it endeavours to progress the Library Square public realm scheme as part of the northside urban village, and the key opportunity that that presents to Belfast city centre.

I say this early on, as it puts the tenor of the motion in context. If the project is to be developed, a number of Departments, agencies and public bodies will have to step up to the plate in terms of delivery. I am neither a city councillor nor an MLA for the area, and I will give way to those with a greater knowledge and responsibility for the area, but, having attended our Committee meeting in Belfast central library on 27 June, together with being one of the few Committee members who visited the newly revamped Liverpool central library, I am aware of what we have on site and what can be achieved. Indeed, one can quickly see the similarities with Liverpool and how a very historical building, co-joined with a fit-for-purpose building could become an iconic anchor building in the refurbished, stunning Library Square, becoming a focal point in the local business community, a community asset and a cultural tourism must-see. However, we are a considerable way off the vision of the motion. Indeed, the presentations to the Committee at the end of June may have gone some way to help the development out of the starting blocks. It was also an opportunity to look at issues and concerns as well as the aspirations of the project.

The pre-Committee meeting tour was beneficial, as it gave members a chance to see some of the difficulties faced by the staff there and the provision of service at the central library. While it was great to see the many resources, collections and artefacts that are spread throughout the ad hoc mishmash of current buildings, my sympathies go to the hard-working staff, who are attempting to provide an adequate front line service to the public while having to endure very poor conditions in the non-public areas that are used for stock and storage. It really has to be witnessed, and how it works is a credit to the staff there.

A further area of concern that should be flagged at an early stage is the emerging project costs. I understand that, originally, the cost for the development was possibly in the region of £20 million. However, from the presentation to the Committee, it would appear that the figure is now probably in the region of £30 million. Considering the financial difficulties surrounding similar projects in Northern Ireland, particularly by this Department, a close scrutiny of the evaluation is required, and I understand that a business case will be submitted by Libraries NI shortly. While a regional library for a shared future will be a capital project, Members should note the work carried out in trying to sustain local libraries and how any annual revenue budgets might be affected or looked at in the future.

Finally, I return to the need for collaboration between stakeholders. I had a little concern listening to the presentations on the day of the visit and got a feeling that much more needs to be done. There needs to be a greater understanding of one another's position and enhanced communication. Creating a regional library as a flagship building for Library Square will involve every Department in this place working with other bodies, including Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and neighbours such as the Metropolitan Arts Centre, the University of Ulster and many other agencies and partners.

I support the motion, and I look forward in the years ahead to the Library Square project incorporating the special services of a regional library. To coin a well-known local phrase, we will witness the glory of the old made new.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I support the motion, which calls for support for the redevelopment of Belfast central library as a regional library for the North. Libraries NI is

updating a business case to be submitted to DCAL for a regional, state-of-the-art, 21st-century library located in Library Square in Belfast.

Belfast central library is one of the oldest historic buildings in the city. It was built in the late 1880s and has been awarded grade B listed status. Ach mar atá rudaí ag an phointe seo, ní féidir leis an leabharlann an gnó s'aici a chomhlíonadh. However, as it stands, the library is unable to fulfil its remit. The building is in need of major refurbishment and is no longer fit for purpose. It also falls far short of the required floor space. Níba luaithe i mbliana, tharla cruinniú seachtainiúil an Choiste sa leabharlann lárnach, agus bhí sé soiléir le feiceáil go raibh na háiseanna srianta ó thaobh soláthair agus féidireachtaí fáis de.

Earlier this year, the Committee's weekly meeting took place in the central library, and we were able to see at first hand how the facilities restricted service provision and expansion. The Committee heard how the redevelopment of the central library's facilities to give it the status of a regional library would provide a more fit-for-purpose setting to display its resources, collections and artefacts. That development will also allow the public to have much easier access to its specialist services.

The redeveloped library would be a very fitting flagship building for the Library Square redevelopment. This project will witness a merging of old and new, as the plans will seek to create a new, modern facility that will blend easily into the brickwork of the old, historic building. Beidh sí seo ina saoráid phoiblí nua-aimseartha a bheas ar fáil don phobal áitiúil i gCathair Bhéal Feirste agus níos faide anonn. It will be an ultra-modern public amenity that will reach out to the whole local community, the whole city of Belfast and further afield — it will be a facility for the entire North of Ireland. It will provide a range of modern, 21st-century library services, including a regional media tech centre that will give access to social history films, home movies, television programmes and a local film archive collection. In that context, I support the motion, which calls on the Minister to engage with her Executive colleagues and other parties to seek the redevelopment of Belfast central library in Library Square.

Mr Humphrey: I support the motion so ably proposed by my colleague and the Chair of our Committee, Michelle McIlveen.

The concept of a regional library for the city of Belfast is exciting and innovative and should be supported by the entire House. Recently, the

Committee visited central library and was greatly impressed by the work that is done there, albeit that it is done in a building that is of its time and is now clearly outdated.

Libraries Northern Ireland has made some great progress despite budgeting constraints and the economic downturn that has faced our United Kingdom. The financial position that our nation finds itself in has provided opportunities for a joined-upness that perhaps would not have been taken otherwise. One prime example is the Grove Wellbeing Centre in my constituency of North Belfast. Footfall in that facility has increased exponentially, as local residents visit not just to use the library but for doctor's appointments, health trust appointments and, of course, to use facilities managed by Belfast City Council. That collaborative approach is to be commended. The share of the burden of funding between the ratepayer, the taxpayer, Libraries NI, the Belfast Trust and the city council is the way forward. As a Member for North Belfast, a member of Belfast City Council and a proud son of this city, I fully support the development of a regional library at the central library, particularly given the University of Ulster's decision to relocate to north Belfast.

As the House knows, tourism is a growing facet and an increasingly significant contributor economically to the Northern Ireland exchequer. Cultural tourism accounts for more than 50% of tourists who travel the world, so a collaborative approach on this venture across the Executive Departments at Stormont, along with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Belfast City Council and Visit Belfast, is essential.

Our rich and diverse history and cultural traditions were once seen as divisive and negative. Today, diversity is a strength, and, although much progress needs to be made on tolerance and respect, we have come a long way. In my view, Belfast central library would be a key element in the tourism offer of Northern Ireland and the city of Belfast, nationally and internationally. The complete transformation of Liverpool city library, witnessed by the Committee during its recent visit, is a perfect exemplar.

Belfast central library was opened in 1888, a very historic year for the great city of Belfast because, in that year, Queen Victoria gave Belfast its city status. I warmly welcome and support the redevelopment of the historic institution of the central library. The Committee, during its visit, saw at first hand how facilities no longer met the demands and needs of today. The development of Library Square, the

relocation of the university that I mentioned and the creation of a new purpose-built library fully complement investments in the Cathedral Quarter and the north-west section of our city.

I represent a part of the Shankill in this place. A couple of years ago, I attended the opening of the revamped Shankill library. It is an open, bright and accessible building, now widely used by the local community and schools across the age ranges. I remember being taken there as a pupil of Glenwood Primary School to join, and I have been a member ever since. It is a valued part of my community, greatly valued by my constituents and, I am glad to say, very well used by them. Investments in local libraries are essential and welcome. For reasons articulated by others in the Chamber, the development of a regional library in Northern Ireland is a must.

I support the motion and believe that a regional library is needed and wanted by the people of Northern Ireland, not just for education but for tourism, academia and the revitalisation and rebuilding of the great city of Belfast.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím ar an ócáid seo le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún atá os ár gcomhair. I also support the motion in favour of a regional library here.

In a region that hopes to develop a knowledge economy, grow the creative industries and attract more and more tourists, it is imperative that we have regional library facilities that support all those activities and, indeed, more. The role of the library has changed radically in recent years with the growth of the internet and the use of various digital devices. Although traditional book transactions are still an important part of library business, the means of accessing knowledge and information have been revolutionised by the computer and digital age. To my mind, it is important that all the modern advantages and technologies that are now a part of library services should be matched by facilities and buildings that can adequately house all the book collections and other artefacts, as well as providing a modern setting in which people can gain access to information through communication technologies and do so with ease and comfort.

I also had the opportunity to visit the central library during a previous session of the Assembly, and I saw very clearly that the existing facilities were no longer adequate.

I am not suggesting for one minute that we should abandon the heritage building that we have there, but that we support the central

library's proposal to merge the existing building with a new modern build that would fulfil all the needs of a 21st century library, in keeping with the various legislative requirements.

3.45 pm

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has visited a number of locations where traditional libraries in city centres have been transformed in such a way as to create impressive iconic buildings. I was particularly impressed by the transformation of the Liverpool central library, which has brought an impressive iconic building to the centre of that city. It is a building that meets the needs of library users and staff and adds to the regeneration of that city centre.

The new Liverpool central library is a good example for Belfast to follow. It is a welcoming and bright space, which meets all the needs of the changing information technologies. It has high-tech solutions, Wi-Fi, improved lending services, open access to stock and a dedicated children's library. That is part of the proposal that Belfast has made. The Belfast proposal also includes creative lab facilities, a business library, an accessible facility for fine book collections, as well as a learning centre and a community meeting space. Other Members have mentioned additional facilities that the library will have.

I believe that the central library proposal is an exciting one. I think that we need a regional library here. We need to highlight all of our culture and to support our business, and that includes the creative and information industries. We also need to continue to support numeracy and literacy, and I think that an iconic, new library in the centre of Belfast would be a very strong indication that we want to move in that direction.

Ar an ábhar sin, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, tá an-áthas orm tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún atá ós ar gcomhair agus tá mé cinnte go mbeidh an tacaíocht chéanna ó na comhaltaí uile anseo. Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I support the motion, and I am sure that all Members will do likewise.

Ms Lo: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am sorry that I was a bit late coming into the Chamber, but I had a miscalculation of timing.

I support the motion. My party and I have long been supportive of our local libraries, which

provide a vital service to the communities in which they are situated. In my constituency, I have worked closely with local councillors to try to maintain library services across south Belfast, particularly with our 3 Steps to Help campaign, through which we encouraged greater use of Cregagh library, which was threatened with reduced hours.

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. Will the Member join me in congratulating the local people from Killyleagh in my constituency who were threatened with the closure of their library, which, thankfully, at this time, has been saved? We hope that it will continue to offer the service that they need.

Ms Lo: Absolutely; thank you.

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

Ms Lo: Thank you. Although our libraries are often the hub of the communities, providing a lifeline for many people who live around them, it is essential that they adapt to maintain their relevance in the 21st century. Many libraries have started to do that already with the inclusion of computer and internet provision or community meeting places. A couple of years ago, I supported the Ormeau Road library's silver surfer initiative to encourage older people to learn to use the internet.

I agree with Birmingham library director, Brian Gambles. He said that the whole concept of the library needs reinventing and that libraries can no longer just be about books, if we are to encourage people to continue to use them in a manner which means they are sustainable.

I welcome the plans for the redevelopment of Belfast central library, the plans to create a regional library and the technology that it will include and how it intends to move beyond just books and embrace social history.

The inclusion of a dedicated children's library, as other Members mentioned, is an excellent step, which will encourage children to take an interest in reading from a young age and to use the library. My own two children used to love a trip to the local library. I registered them both at our local library, would you believe, at five months and five weeks old.

Mr McCarthy: They could not read at that time.

Ms Lo: Yes, they loved the picture books. My youngest son would stay in the bathtub to read the coloured plastic books and would not get

out. You instil a love of books in them, and I am glad to say that they continue to like to read.

I would also like to see provision in libraries for the major ethnic minority communities here, such as literature in Polish and Chinese. Many years ago, I assisted a number of local libraries in Northern Ireland to stock Chinese books and magazines, which are very well used.

I encourage the Minister and the Executive to pursue these plans as best they can. The plans sit well with Belfast City Council's objective to make Belfast a learning city and will contribute hugely to the regeneration of the north side of the city as well as greatly complementing the expansion of the University of Ulster's Belfast campus. Of course, it also links with the Cathedral Quarter, which provides a thriving cultural scene.

We have only to look at examples from around the world to see the impact that a well-resourced modern regional library can have. The newly opened library in Birmingham, as many Members mentioned, had over 10,000 visitors on its first day. When looking at examples from the UK and further afield such as Seattle, which is widely regarded as one of the first libraries to integrate the internet and the revolutions that it has made in the publishing sector into the library, we must learn from what has worked there and embrace the technologies that they have implemented.

I would add a note of caution, as a number of protestors in Birmingham did, that although a regional library would be a wonderful asset to our city and, indeed, to all of Northern Ireland, it is essential that local community libraries are not forgotten about. That being said, we have a rich literary history in Belfast and across Northern Ireland. I believe that a well-resourced, beautifully designed, inclusive and interactive regional library as laid out in Belfast central library's redevelopment plans would be a fitting and appropriate way to celebrate that history.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Tacaím don rún seo. I support the motion and welcome the fact that nine Members contributed, along with the usual intervention from Kieran McCarthy.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Hear, hear, Kieran. All politics is local.

I believe that it is an indication of the interest that has been shown in the motion. I welcome the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's motion and the opportunity to debate some of the issues that have been raised around the redevelopment of Belfast central library.

At the outset, I state my broad support for the motion. I believe that Belfast central library in particular has served its local community and the city well. I grew up beside the library and it was where I obtained the first library card that I ever had. I had many enjoyable Saturdays and evenings after school there and I got a lot of help. I have a big grá and a lot of respect for libraries.

I am pleased that many members of the Committee, in particular, spoke about their visit to Belfast central library in June this year and saw at first hand the range of issues that the library faces. As many have said, those need to be addressed urgently.

Following an earlier visit to Belfast central library, I asked my officials, through Libraries NI, to take forward an up-to-date outline business case that would set out a range of options, particularly around redevelopment. Many Members commented on one of the figures and, like many figures for capital and infrastructure development, that figure has been there for some years and needs to be updated. I expect that information to be returned to me no later than the end of October. However, I am mindful of the fact that substantial public money will be needed, so if it takes more time, then so be it.

I am delighted that every Member who spoke detailed the importance and value that they place on libraries and, indeed, on the library service. I think that it is really important for Libraries NI and its partners that that was recognised in a very positive way today.

Members said that libraries are not just about borrowing books. We have heard about formal and informal lifelong learning, the way in which libraries reach out to communities and help to address issues such as social exclusion, tackle inequalities and build good community relationships. They also promote creativity and the creative industries. Indeed, I think that we had a previous debate that alluded to the promotion of romantic interludes in libraries. However, Jim Allister is not here and it would be unfair to speak about him in his absence. I will just leave that one with you.

I want to outline my vision for the Belfast central library and the services provided in that facility,

particularly given that there will be other major developments around Belfast city centre and in what has become known as the Library Quarter. It is important that the status of the central library in the provision of fit-for-purpose services is maintained and developed. We need to look at the provision of the central library in the same way that we did with public records. Indeed, the MAC was mentioned as another example of a recent infrastructure development with DCAL money. I am mindful of the Department for Social Development's (DSD) plan to regenerate Library Square in Belfast, and I recognise the potential that that could yield in conjunction with the development of the Ulster University campus there.

My particular focus has been on looking at libraries as a way of tackling poverty and social exclusion. It was on that basis and for those reasons that I sought to keep the libraries that were under threat. That was much to the disappointment of the other two members of the DCAL family, which lost out in their budgets. That is certainly something that I am mindful of.

Michael McGimpsey, David Hilditch and Ms Anna Lo made the point that, although we all support the need for a central library, we cannot lose sight of the fact that libraries in the community are just as valuable and important. I have visited really good examples of redeveloped libraries on the Falls Road and at the Grove Wellbeing Centre, and William Humphrey was at the opening of the new library on the Shankill Road. I also visited redeveloped libraries on the Whiterock Road, in Dungiven and in many other places. You can see the value that the citizens and residents place in their libraries and the strong emotional attachment that they have to them.

Libraries are a place for people to meet. People feel that they can go through the doors of a library, and there is absolutely no discrimination. Everybody goes through the same door, and whatever services they access beyond that door are handled in a very confidential way. Libraries work with preschool, primary school and post-primary school children and with those who are involved in lifelong learning through computers and e-learning. They also look at things like those I have just alluded to, which, I suppose, come under the promotion of better mental health and well-being. Libraries NI is involved in many initiatives that give you a bigger sense of libraries, rather than being just a place where you can borrow books.

I do not think that the fact that the central library has been there for 125 years is lost on

anybody. However, the fact that the library was extended in a very ad hoc manner in the 1920s, 1960s and 1980s to ease storage problems has made it quite a miserable place for some of the staff who work in those conditions. Despite the beauty of the old building and its heritage and culture, it is not good if you are stuck in a storeroom trying to provide a 21st-century facility in conditions that are not fit for the 21st century.

4.00 pm

Members spoke about the stock in Belfast central library, and, as I said, there is insufficient space. Librarians have to go physically up and down stairs to fetch books when they are requested, which takes time. Indeed, we are worried about access, and accessibility is an issue.

I have absolutely no doubt that, when Libraries NI provides the business case for a central library, which it is preparing, all the concerns that it knows about and those that were raised during the debate will be factored in. I believe that the business case will be objective on costs, and the benefits for refurbishing the existing building must be evaluated against the cost of locating the library elsewhere. I believe that the cost will be in the tens of millions of pounds, a figure that has been mentioned today. It could be £30 million-plus, which is a substantial amount of money. Given these times, I am certainly not taking that figure lightly. However, I recognise the need to maintain library services.

For us, the balance always has been and always will be providing regional infrastructural developments and, at the same time, trying to strike a balance and provide community provision. Providing services, particularly services such as libraries, will not be any mean feat, but I am certainly going to try to meet that challenge, as will Libraries NI.

I am delighted that the motion was tabled. It will give support and reassurance, particularly to Libraries NI, about how much its services are valued and will continue to be valued. Although I am not making excuses for my predecessor, it is certainly not easy for anybody, I imagine, to close any public service. At the same time, it is difficult to try to maintain an argument for funds for public services when we are also trying to justify the need. With places such as the Grove Wellbeing Centre, I can see the value of placing a library in conjunction with other services, as the number of people using the library has increased. That is what we mean by enhancing opportunities for access. We need to make

things a lot easier for people rather than putting obstacles in their way, particularly for those who go through obstacles to get to a location in the first place. We need to open it up.

There is a wonderful opportunity for the central library in line with what DSD is bringing forward for the redevelopment of Library Square and the university. I hope that the ambitions and wishes for a library can be fulfilled. Another exciting thing would be the development of social clauses, which would certainly help with local employment, apprenticeships and so on. So, although vast amounts of public money are being directed towards public services, opportunities are also being created for employment, particularly for those who are long-term unemployed and for apprenticeships. That, in itself, would be part of the legacy.

I am delighted to support the motion, and I look forward to receiving the up-to-date outline business case from Libraries NI. I give a commitment to do what I can to help to realise this vision of a new central library for Belfast.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I support the motion. I thank all the Members who took part in today's debate. Their comments add considerable weight to the case for Belfast central library being redeveloped as a regional library for Northern Ireland. I will reflect on some of the themes of the debate later.

It has been said, but it worth repeating, how important a regional library is for the continuing development of people in Belfast and Northern Ireland. Such a library not only would be a valuable resource, providing information, education and community space, but would allow a much greater proportion of the central library collections and artefacts to be put on show. The Committee saw how effectively that was done in Liverpool, and we are all aware of the stunning new library in Birmingham.

The library in a redeveloped form would offer a real hub for learning and education, and a place where communities could come together. It would provide a valuable boost to the regeneration of that part of Belfast and be a source of civic pride. As has been said, the redevelopment of Belfast central library as a regional library for Northern Ireland would provide a range of economic, social and educational benefits. The existing library building is severely limited in space and by its age. It cannot provide the range of services that it could if it were better housed. That is not to say that the library and its staff do not do a

good job, but they could do much more with the right building and facilities. It would also provide a fitting flagship building for the Library Square redevelopment.

Members spoke about how a redeveloped central library would contribute to a number of priorities in the Programme for Government. It also makes sense to turn the library into a communications and learning hub as part of the regeneration of the area, which includes the Library Square redevelopment and the development of the new University of Ulster campus, with 15,000 students. Libraries NI's proposal will benefit all the people of Northern Ireland and should attract visitors from outside the Province, complementing our existing cultural facilities, such as the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the MAC and the Ulster Museum. The redevelopment plan would allow considerable support for the creative industries, providing a range of economic benefits for numerous sectors.

Important social benefits would come from the library's redevelopment, with the building contributing significantly to the Together: Building a United Community strategy, which outlines a vision for a united community based on equality of opportunity, good relations, reconciliation and celebration of cultural expression. The library's collection of cultural heritage artefacts, local and national, can support and enrich the community's understanding of the past and its role in shaping the present and the future. We all know the importance to our communities of shared space where people can come together and reflect on each other's cultural heritage.

The current library building is limited in the new technologies that it can support, which is badly damaging its ability to move with the times. Redevelopment of the library would allow cutting-edge technology infrastructure to be put in place, which would bring a host of benefits. It would help to support people who are unemployed by assisting them to gain the skills necessary to improve their employability. Children would also have a learning space and a place where they could develop a love of reading.

Libraries NI is expected to submit a business case to DCAL at the end of October, seeking financial support for its vision for a regional library for Northern Ireland. We urge the Minister and the Executive to support that vision.

I want to reflect on Members' contributions to the debate. Rather than give an account of

what each Member said, I will highlight the themes that were raised. Members talked a great deal about the library's limitations in showing its collections. That means that people cannot see or use a number of the materials that the library has. Members were keen that the central library be redeveloped and made fit for purpose. Members reflected on the fact that better facilities would attract more than the current 400,000 visits annually. There was a great deal of discussion about the redeveloped library being a key part of the regeneration of that part of Belfast.

Some Members expressed concern that the new library would threaten community libraries. That is not the Committee's intention. Rather, the Committee sees community use of the library as vital to its function. A number of Members reflected on how the new library would complement the nearby expanded University of Ulster campus. Additionally, a new library would become a beacon for tourists, with many more of the library's assets on exhibit.

Some Members have stressed how the library will provide a multifunctional space. Others talked about the redeveloped library's role as a communication and information hub. The library must meet the challenges of the digital age, and to do so redevelopment is needed.

Other Members said that people in Belfast deserve the best modern facilities that can be provided. Again, Members reflected how Liverpool and Birmingham have used the redevelopment of their central libraries to help the economic regeneration of those cities. There has been a clear feeling that the library is essential to provide a neutral space that reflects our shared heritage and culture.

Another theme was that libraries must adapt in order to stay relevant. There was also a suggestion that a new library would deliver Belfast City Council's commitment to be a learning city.

I thank the Minister for responding to the debate. I also thank her for offering her support to the motion. She acknowledged the challenges that the Belfast central library faces and that they need to be addressed. She hopes to see the business case before the end of October and will give it serious consideration. The Minister agrees with Members that the central library must be fit for purpose.

In conclusion, I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, Libraries NI and the

DSD for helping to prepare for the debate, and the Committee staff. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the economic, cultural, social and educational benefits that a regional library for Northern Ireland would provide; and urges the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to engage with Executive Belfast colleagues and other partners to pursue Belfast central library's redevelopment plan to create a regional library as part of the overall Library Square project.

Private Members' Business

Emergency Services: Day of Recognition

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion regarding a day of recognition for the emergency services. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other speakers will have five minutes.

Mrs McKeivitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the valuable and life-saving work of the emergency services; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to set aside an annual day of recognition, beginning with Michaelmas Day on 29 September 2013, in order to create a lasting legacy of the World Police and Fire Games 2013.

I thank the Minister of Health for being in attendance for the debate this afternoon.

The motion before the House is a wonderful opportunity to recognise and honour all the brave members of our emergency services and put in place a lasting legacy of the very successful World Police and Fire Games. The games featured almost 7,000 competitors across 56 sports at 41 venues, with 3,500 volunteers who ensured that all ran smoothly. The games have been quite accurately described as the friendliest games ever. They had great support from all in our community who came out across the North to support the events.

As I watched the numerous events, it was evident to me that the people who came out in support were not just merely there to shout for one team over the other or to cheer for a particular country: they were there in admiration of the roles that the participants — retired or current members of the emergency services — had in society and their sacrifice and unselfishness in saving lives.

I believe that all of us will need to make that 999 call at some point in our lives, be it because of a road accident, an accident at sea, someone taking ill suddenly or even a fire. It is comforting and reassuring to know that there are teams of people on hand who are qualified

and keen to provide a lifeline in emergency situations.

The 999 emergency service celebrated its seventy-sixth birthday this year. The service was launched in the UK on 30 June 1937. The number of 999 calls has increased from more than 1,000 in the first week of the service to an average of 597,000 calls a week across the UK.

Of all the calls that are passed to the emergency services, 52% go to the police; 41% go to the Ambulance Service; 6% go to the Fire and Rescue Service; and 1% goes to the Coastguard. An estimated 8,000 to 10,000 emergency calls are made in Northern Ireland weekly.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

4.15 pm

We in the Assembly know more than most about the cost of those calls. More importantly, we have heard in great detail about the cost of bogus and hoax calls, which not only place a major burden on our finances but put lives at risk by tying up resources. The other negative aspect for emergency responders is the number of attacks on their personnel. Ambulance personnel, firefighters, police and even paramedics have been attacked while attending or being lured to emergency locations. I believe that both those abuses could be reduced or eliminated by promoting and celebrating our emergency services' work. The dedication of a special day in honour of and tribute to all dedicated and brave emergency workers, combined with a campaign to highlight the obscenity of making a hoax call or attacking responders, will help to educate anyone capable of such an offence.

When considering tabling the motion, I felt myself slipping back in time to my schooldays, and I asked myself the questions that I know a certain form teacher would have asked me: who, what, when, where, why and how?

Who are we honouring? Members of the Northern Ireland Police Service, Fire and Rescue Service, Ambulance Service, the Coastguard — collectively, the emergency services — the RNLI, mountain rescue and all other search and rescue bodies will be recognised on this day, so there should be support for the services of all the main groups of responders.

What are we celebrating? We are celebrating and honouring the dedication and sacrifice of

everyone who devotes their life to protect others, as well as the legacy and success of the World Police and Fire Games.

When will we commemorate it? On 29 September, which is Michaelmas Day. As protector and defender against evil, St Michael is often seen as the patron saint for law enforcement and is one of the most common icons used on police uniforms. He is also recognised by all the emergency services already.

Where will we celebrate? Across the country, in every city, town, village and hamlet. After all, it is those areas that are being covered.

Why? Because we need to show our appreciation to active, retired or other members and to those who have lost their lives saving others; to show that we do not take them for granted; and to mark the great success of the World Police and Fire Games.

Maybe most importantly: how? As per the motion, I expect a number of Departments to adopt and support the proposal of a special day. It will also create a great opportunity for support groups, charities and the organisations themselves to promote their message.

Given that we are celebrating emergency responders, I even came up with a special name for this day — "blue-light day". I envisage the public purchasing and wearing a blue-light badge or emblem with pride, with proceeds going to support worthy emergency causes. I did not know whether to be disappointed or honoured when I later discovered that a few counties in the UK already celebrate a blue-light day. Nonetheless, I seek unanimous support to have our own blue-light day on Michaelmas Day on 29 September 2013.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I welcome the opportunity to speak on today's debate. At its meeting on 10 September, the Committee agreed that it would support today's motion calling for a day of recognition for the emergency services. I thank the proposer for tabling the motion.

The World Police and Fire Games were a success in many different ways, aside from what happened on the track, in and on the water, on the ice or even up and down the stairwells of buildings. The people of Northern Ireland welcomed its visitors with open arms and generous hospitality, and the volunteers created the foundation to make the games the best that the competitors had attended, which

they were often heard to comment. I am pleased that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure last week committed to making volunteering a legacy of the games.

This motion, however, offers the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the opportunity to add to that legacy, and I thank him for making himself available for today's debate.

Members will offer their personal reflections on the valuable and essential role of our many emergency services and their positive contribution towards our safety, health and well-being. There can be no doubt that they are indispensable. The professionalism and dedication of our emergency services is tested daily, and I am sure that Members will agree that this group of largely unsung heroes deserves some level of recognition and celebration for the work that they do. It is right that, in the spirit of the World Police and Fire Games, this recognition extends to those who have served as well as those who are serving.

The president of the World Police and Fire Games described this summer's Belfast games as the friendliest and best games ever, and all our emergency service competitors and many volunteers can take pride in that. The games should not only provide a tremendous showcase for what Northern Ireland has to offer, they should also provide a lasting legacy for the emergency services here. A fitting part of that legacy would be a special day to celebrate the work of the emergency services. A dedicated day would have the added benefit of highlighting that work to young people, inspiring them to go into these professions and offering members of those professions the respect that they deserve. There are those in our emergency services who do not receive that respect from certain parts of our society, and, on a personal level, I feel that that needs to be addressed. If passed, the motion would send out the message to those in those services that we, in wider society, appreciate what they do for us at all times, in all weathers and in all manner of hazardous conditions. Some things that they have seen and had to deal with as part of their daily job do not bear thinking about, and it is right that we express our thanks in some way.

I appreciate the proposer's reasoning behind the choice of Michaelmas as the suggested day to mark the work of our emergency services, and, if a day had to be chosen, I understand the symbolic nature of 29 September. However, it is perhaps ambitious for this to be in place by next weekend. I hope that Members engage in

the debate in the spirit in which the motion was intended. This issue should transcend party politics. I support the motion.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá leis an rún seo ar dtús. The motion, on the face of it, is a valuable one that praises those who take risks and go into communities to deal with road traffic accidents, suicides, house fires, drownings and the like. The motion might bring up a useful discussion point about the definition of an emergency service and an essential service, because there might be some lack of clarity on that count. The proposer of the motion put forward as emergency services the police, the Fire Service, the Ambulance Service and the Coastguard. I talk to paramedics, and they told me that some parts of the Ambulance Service feel that they are an essential service rather than an emergency service. The debate might bring out some clarity on that, and I would welcome that.

I do quite a bit of sea fishing in my spare time, and one of my favourite points is a place called Shamrock Pinnacle, which is about 10 miles north-west of Rathlin. If I got into bother out there, I would like to see a lifeboat coming to get me. So there are a lot of other people who may not be recognised in the emergency service but play a part in it. Likewise, I do a bit of hillwalking, and we have to pay tribute to the volunteers in the mountain rescue service, as Mrs McKevitt did when she spoke.

Three years ago, when I was mayor of the borough of Limavady, we had a snap storm at the end of March. Within about an hour, the Glenshane Pass was blocked, and some 400 people were trapped in their vehicles. It was a very sudden event, and the heroes of that day were the local community and councils and the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) Roads Service. It is easy to see how this could broaden to include everyone who delivers a service. I was proud of and pleased with the people who delivered that help. We were able to open all our leisure centres and get hot food. The community rallied round and local farmers and so on were there. Likewise, we had a number of incidents of heavy flooding last summer, and people such as those in the Rivers Agency came out and did their essential bits and pieces.

There is a whole discussion to be had as to what constitutes the emergency services or, indeed, essential services. I would welcome the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and others coming forward to give some recognition to the people who supply

those services. I agree with the Chair of the Culture Committee that it is ambitious to try to get something in place for 12 days' time. It is something that we might look at in the medium to long term. However, I know where she is coming from and I agree with the symbolism, although I think that St Florian is the patron saint of the fire service.

As for the lasting legacy of the World Police and Fire Games, the connection is a little tenuous in that the World Police and Fire Games was restricted to a certain extent to some services, and retired members of the services there were not recognised either. There is a bit of an issue there.

I welcome the debate; I think that it is a worthwhile one. The motion could have been slightly better worded, but we will take what we have. I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: I doubt that anyone in the House would be churlish enough to withhold praise and admiration for the emergency services here in Northern Ireland. The work that they do is so valuable that it would be difficult to put a price on it. I am sure that no one would disagree with the sentiments of the motion, which seeks to establish an annual day of recognition for the emergency services along the same lines as Armed Forces Day, for example.

There is one matter that I would like to raise, which I am quite sure is at the back of the minds of most Members of this House; that is the way in which the Ambulance Service and Fire and Rescue Service staff are attacked by mobs when they come into certain communities to give assistance to members of those communities. It totally escapes me how people can do that. It would be quite wrong of us to talk today about having an annual day of recognition for the emergency services without raising this issue. There has been a falling off of mob attacks over the past 11 years, largely due to education programmes that emphasise the way in which the emergency services help communities.

There have been incidents of highly-charged atmospheres in the summer that has just passed, although the overall trend of mob attacks is downward, both in their number and their intensity. Such mob incidents are not confined to Northern Ireland alone. In Scotland, there were 80 incidents of attacks on Fire and Rescue Service personnel in 2012-13. That represented a decline of 32 incidents on the previous year, so the pattern of decline exists in Scotland too. The number of West Midlands Ambulance Service staff assaulted while

working has also fallen by 16% in a year. Physical attacks on staff fell from 210 to 175 between April 2012 and March 2013.

It is not just a question of attacks by rioters. Attacks are made on the emergency services by the very people they are coming to help. The London Ambulance Service has a register of 226 addresses where staff are believed to be put at risk of physical violence, while the North East Ambulance Service has a list of 236 such addresses. Figures show that around 163 staff across the NHS are attacked by patients or relatives every day. An annual emergency services day would help us to raise awareness of the physical assaults that emergency staff often face. I welcome and support the motion.

4.30 pm

Mr McCarthy: The legacy of the World Police and Fire Games is certainly a most powerful one for Northern Ireland. Many people have, quite rightly, dubbed them "the friendliest games". The games served as an excellent showcase for the economic, social and cultural potential of Northern Ireland. They demonstrated the natural hospitality of all the Northern Irish people to the world. That can be only a good thing. The games also have another important legacy that lies in focusing our minds around the much wider contribution and service made by the men and women of the various emergency services, whose sporting prowess we directly acknowledged in the games. I take this opportunity to thank Karen McKevitt and Dominic Bradley for bringing this very important motion to the Assembly this afternoon.

The World Police and Fire Games should not be the only or initial trigger that leads us to recognise the critical role played by all our emergency services. Unfortunately, we have had plenty of evidence and reasons for reaching those conclusions, especially over the past number of decades and perhaps even not so far back. However, if it finally takes the success of the World Police and Fire Games to bring us to this conclusion, so be it. In doing so, we should be mindful of the very particular context that exists in Northern Ireland in which the emergency services operate and how they have served all in this community for so long.

Sadly, there were times when they were unable to get on with their lawful and essential work due to the reckless actions of others. Our colleague Sam Gardiner has just spoken about when the emergency services have shamefully been attacked by evil people. As the Assembly will, no doubt, resolve to pass the motion later,

we should nevertheless be conscious that, at times, some in the Chamber or in leadership positions in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in this society may not have made things easy for our emergency services through their lack of leadership or in being dilatory in standing up for the rule of law.

Moving from the situation on the streets, we must recognise that attacks sadly continue to occur against key workers, particularly in our health service in places such as accident and emergency departments, GPs' surgeries and the like. Society has a collective duty to stand up against that and, at the very least, not to make life any more difficult for those who are operating in very challenging or stressful situations. We must continue to support a zero-tolerance approach to that behaviour. We must also be conscious that, in the transformation of our health and social services, the roles played by the members of the emergency services are changing. I have in mind the functions that are carried out by our paramedics, all of which we fully appreciate. Surely part of the agenda of respect and acknowledgement is giving highly trained individuals the opportunity to fully deploy and utilise their skills and training.

We should perhaps reflect on how grateful all of us are whenever we or our families and friends fall into situations that require the intervention of the emergency services, whether the police, the Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service, paramedics, coastguards, lifeboat personnel, air and sea rescue, mountain rescue and many more. We salute the dedication and bravery of the individuals in our society who literally risk their own lives to save others. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I fully support the motion.

Mr D McIlveen: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. I thank the Members for bringing the issue to the Assembly today. I have to concur with other Members that the principle of this motion is very good. Obviously, creases will have to be ironed out, as they have to be, at times, with these things.

It is very appropriate, especially given the full success of the World Police and Fire Games here in Northern Ireland, that we recognise our emergency services and give them the credit that they are due. The Member for Strangford just mentioned that it had had the ambition to be the friendliest World Police and Fire Games, and I am glad that that was achieved. Indeed, Mike Graham, the president of the World Police and Fire Games Federation, acknowledged that that was the case. So, I believe that Northern Ireland delivered in that event, and the people

who organised it and the people who volunteered should be very proud of themselves. In particular, the participants should be very proud of themselves. I had the privilege to spectate at a number of the events, and I also had the privilege to distribute medals at one of the events. I am glad that I was spectating and not competing. Seeing how fast some of the cyclists could get up that hill was phenomenal; there really were top-class athletes here for that event. I certainly can recommend it to anyone.

We have to accept the fact that our emergency services this year, probably more than any year, have not had to go looking for problems. Our police force in particular has, this year, found itself caught in the middle of a lot of high-profile and high-risk situations. The G8 was one of them, and, again, it passed off very successfully. Obviously, there have been parading and flags issues, which the police have also found themselves caught in the middle of. Whilst it is fair to say that no side of this House could say that they have not disagreed at times with our police force, we have to accept that the police find themselves in a very difficult situation. Therefore, it is very fair that we should recognise the danger that they find themselves in.

It is not just our police force. We read in June that, in Glengormley or Newtownabbey, an ambulance crew was attacked by a man with a meat cleaver. When you see innocent health service workers being put in that position, you have to wonder whether a day of recognition is enough gratitude to show these people. They do put themselves very much on the front line.

So, we support the motion wholeheartedly. Obviously, we hope that the World Police and Fire Games model will be mirrored on the day that we recognise our emergency services in that the games were open to retired police officers and retired members of the emergency services. When it comes to ironing out the details of the day of recognition for our emergency services, I hope that that will be the case.

I also hope that it will send out a ripple effect and that we will take the work of our emergency services seriously. I hope that, when our emergency services come to this place and ask for help and assistance, they will be given, where possible, the help and the assistance that they are asking for and that we will treat them with the respect that they deserve. I also hope that, from an education point of view, our children and young people can appreciate better the work that our emergency services do.

To comment on what Mr Gardiner said, I believe that there is work to be done in that regard. Recently, I was involved in taking a Sunday school class and was using as one of my props a fire engine. I asked the children for the first thing that they think of when they see a fire engine, and a little four-year-old boy put his hand up and said, "Throw stones." Although that is, in some ways, humorous, we have to educate our children and young people that these faithful public servants are here to help and that we should be giving them the respect and courtesy that they deserve. I welcome the principle of the motion, and I look forward to seeing what the day will look like when it comes through. I will leave the rest to the Minister.

Mr Dallat: As someone who was rescued from the sea many years ago, I hope Members will forgive me for being a little prejudiced towards coastguards. Apart from rescuing me — I am not sure that everybody thinks that was a good idea — they have saved hundreds of lives along our coast, and in our lakes, rivers and mountains. Let me say immediately that all our emergency services are important, and it is good that the Assembly has come to the stage at which it can debate a motion such as this and give it unanimous support.

Those people who make up the emergency services make enormous sacrifices to deal with life and death issues. I can think of nothing more noble than being involved in saving the lives of other people who, for whatever reason, find themselves in distress and totally dependent on others to live or die. Speaking on the motion affords me the opportunity to give thanks that we still have a coastguard service in Belfast and at Malin Head. Members will recall that there was a proposal to centralise the Belfast coastguard service in, I believe, Liverpool. Thankfully, that plan did not go ahead, and the Assembly can claim some credit for that. More recently, the Irish Coast Guard service based at Malin Head was also scheduled for relocation in Dublin. Again, common sense eventually prevailed, and both coastguard services, which work in seamless partnership, continue to coordinate the rescue services that we so heavily depend on.

Sadly, last weekend, there was a tragedy on the north coast, leaving one person missing and presumed dead and another fighting for his life. Again, as always, the two coastguard services were involved, not only in the coordination but in the provision of helicopter services to assist in the search and rescue operation. That is noble, and it is a perfect example of cross-border cooperation.

Unfortunately — this has already been touched on — I believe that there is a lack of knowledge of the work of our emergency services, certainly in the case of coastguards. I hope that agreeing the motion will mean that the public can be better informed of the work of all those — police, fire, ambulance and others — who are involved in providing essential support in emergencies. That most definitely includes the coastguards, who have been doing that work for the best part of 200 years. Quietly and modestly, the men and women of HM Coastguard and the Irish Coast Guard have worked together, well away from politics or division, and have modestly saved hundreds of lives of men, women and children who are alive today thanks to the knowledge that they have of the sea, our coastlines, the tides, the currents, the winds and everything that is essential to successful rescues. That sort of thing could not have been provided either in Liverpool or in some industrial estate in Dublin.

Let us have a lasting legacy of events around the World Police and Fire Games, but let us make sure that we include the coastguards. Let us also rededicate ourselves to ensuring that never again will either coastguard service become the victim of centralisation, be that in Britain or in Dublin.

Our coastline is not only beautiful but is part of our tourism and recreation, our leisure and our opportunities, perhaps to simply stand and stare. What greater comfort can we have than the knowledge that there are people working 24/7 to coordinate any emergency that may come along at any time of the year, be it on our shores, out at sea or, as I said, in more recent times, in our lakes, rivers and mountains?

Mr G Robinson: The debate is about a small recognition for the emergency services that have saved lives, endangered their own lives and, in some cases, lost their lives to protect the general public. In some cases, the very same emergency services, such as ambulance crews and A&E staff, take a lot of abuse from the public. It is a small gesture to acknowledge, with sincere thanks, today's heroes and those heroes of yesterday. Those in our elite emergency services have specialist skills and a dedication that is surely worthy of acknowledgement. Many of us have reasons to be grateful to emergency personnel from all the services. I believe that it is only correct that their dedication be publicly applauded and recognised.

4.45 pm

Police, fire, ambulance, sea rescue and coastguard services are our protectors, rescuers and, indeed, lifesavers. Sadly, this past weekend, my constituency saw one life lost, and one left hanging in the balance. That is a side of the work of emergency personnel that is not often acknowledged. To deal with such incidents is traumatic, and none of us can imagine the psychological pressure that emergency personnel are under. It is also harrowing for the families, who are in our thoughts at this difficult and traumatic time. With a successful World Police and Fire Games behind us, it is appropriate to consider public acknowledgement of their actions. I support the motion and commend it to all Members.

Mr Hussey: I begin by paying tribute to all who serve in our emergency services, whether that be the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Coastguard and, of course, others such as Lough Neagh Rescue — recently in the news because of the rescue operation that it undertook — the Lisburn rescue service and, of course, the one we have, Foyle Search and Rescue.

When this debate was first mooted, I looked up St Michael. I did not discover Marks and Spencer, but I did discover that St Michael is seen as the patron saint of all emergency services, which leads to the choice of Michaelmas Day, 29 September. Unfortunately, I have a problem with that. The last Sunday in September is National Police Memorial Day. Next year, National Police Memorial Day will be held in Belfast. It is a United Kingdom event; this year it is in Cardiff. We have to bear in mind that the proposed day should not clash with that. We do not want to take away from it; we want this to be seen as a united approach to all our blue-light forces. Therefore, I ask for the date to be reconsidered.

I declare that I am a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. As such, I would like to see our Police Service recognised. We know the number of police officers we lost in the past: over 300. We have lost officers since the formation of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, including four in south Down in a tragic accident, and one in Londonderry in a tragic accident. Fire officers are out there in the worst of times. In my time in the Police Service, I was present with the Fire Service when the nights were so cold that balls of ice as big as snowballs formed on the coats of the firemen and women. They are prepared to go out in conditions that mere mortals will not. They go

into situations that we would find difficult. I would find it impossible to put on a breathing mask, yet they can do that, and they do their work effectively and save lives. They are the bravest of the brave. In many cases, they are volunteers. We still have part-time firefighters. We still have part-time police officers. The RNLI lifeboat men are part time. Those volunteers deserve to be recognised for the work that they do and have done for this community.

Much reference has been made to the World Police and Fire Games, which brought all the various police forces and fire services to Northern Ireland for the friendliest of events. During the games, a service was held on 4 August at St Anne's Cathedral to commemorate brave men and women who had fallen. I suggest that, if we are going to consider a date and try to associate it with the games, why not the first Sunday in August, to continue what has been started? During that event, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer said:

"We want to join with the relatives, friends and colleagues of the fallen Officers to show that their commitment to protecting their community has not and will never be forgotten. The Fire, Police and Prison Services in Northern Ireland work so hard to protect our local community and keep people safe ... I hope that members of the public will join us in a poignant tribute to remember our fallen colleagues."

I suggest that the format taken for that is a formal recognition here in the city of Belfast, in whichever cathedral one would want to use, to remember those who were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Many fire officers, prison officers and police officers were injured in the course of their work. In the past year, there were nearly 100 attacks on staff in the A&E department of a hospital. Those people deserve our recognition. There are also people who go out in ambulances in all sorts of weather, and we have seen ambulances involved in collisions as they try to make their way from one area to a hospital.

I fully support the motion and the concept, and I put on record again my thanks to those people who are prepared to go out and help us. My only problem is with the day and the date. I ask for that to be looked at, but I have no hesitation in supporting the basics of the proposal.

Mr McCallister: Like other colleagues, I support the motion. Like everyone in the

Chamber, I recognise the tremendous sacrifices that all our emergency services make.

The proposer of the motion and I share the same constituency. We would probably say that we have it all in South Down; mountains and coastline. However, it also means that we have inherent risks with those things. We have the Coastguard, the lifeboat, the mountain rescue, the police, the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service, and most of us, on some occasion, have needed some of those services.

One of the words used most in today's debate is probably the word "respect". I think that is a hugely important word to use. We should have respect, but we should also respect the rule of law. Every Member of the House should support the rule of law, because we legislate and make the law. I warn Members not just to be fair weather friends to the emergency services, not just to condemn attacks in hospitals and then think that attacks are all right on the streets against our police force. We need to respect both. If it is right to respect our emergency services in hospitals, it is right to respect our police force on the streets. You cannot have some Members condemning attacks in hospitals, rightly so, and then equivocating on attacks on our police service. You cannot have people saying that attacks in hospitals are wrong, yet supporting those on flag protests who turned away medics or people with medical supplies who were having bother getting through to our hospitals. There is too big an inconsistency in that argument. You either support them all and support the rule of law or do not get up in the Chamber and be a fair weather friend to some of the emergency services. Do all or do nothing.

I will not be found wanting. I will condemn anyone who attacks medical staff in hospitals and I will condemn those who riot and attack our police.

The motion talks about the success of our World Police and Fire Games. Does everyone remember the headlines as we were all going to bed on the last night of our World Police and Fire Games or the headlines the next morning? It was not that we had successfully hosted the most successful World Police and Fire Games: it was that we had rioting in Royal Avenue in the very centre of our capital city. That was what the headline was, and that is what we should be reflecting on. This House should be condemning wholeheartedly attacks on all emergency services, from throwing stones at police officers and at the Fire Service, wherever it is. We should stand, united in one voice in the Assembly, supporting the rule of law and

condemning all — all — attacks on the emergency services.

Mr Wells: I think that we all are totally agreed in our support for the motion. I have worked with the rescue services in Northern Ireland on many different issues, and I have nothing but the utmost respect for the work that they do. However, I maybe come at this from a slightly different angle. Not only are these men and women — I am glad to say that there is an increasing number of women — dedicated, brave, hardworking and diligent but they have to face some of the most difficult situations imaginable.

I will give three examples from South Down that have happened since I was elected. A car crashes on Newcastle Street in Kilkeel. Four young men are in the car: two are dead already; one is very close to death and has to be cut out; and the other is in absolute agony, screaming at the top of his voice and pleading to be cut out of the vehicle. Can you imagine the thoughts going through the minds of the police, the fire brigade and the Ambulance Service members who arrive on that scene? They have to make life-and-death decisions about who to cut out and who to leave. They are human beings. They are people who, after a day's work, have to come home to their families and remember all that.

In another case, which I will simply say occurred in South Down, a young couple fell out, and the boyfriend decided to commit suicide by pouring petrol on himself and setting himself alight. I spoke to the ambulance officers who came across that scene. Can you imagine the incredibly difficult situation that that was for them personally? They are not people who can go home, switch off and forget about such incidents. They take it home with them. They deal with situations that, frankly, most of us simply could not deal with because of the trauma.

One of the most poignant tragedies that has happened since I have been an MLA for South Down was the loss of the Tullaghmurray Lass. That trawler went down off Kilkeel, leading, sadly, to the death of a grandfather, a father and a son. The rescue divers had to go down and retrieve the bodies, which had been in the sea for several days. Again, can you imagine the trauma that they faced when they came across that sunken trawler?

Those are terribly difficult situations for all concerned, and I pay tribute to the men and women who deal with them. They deserve our full support. They certainly do not deserve to

be stoned, spat at or vilified when they go into housing estates.

A few years ago, I went into A&E at Craigavon Area Hospital unannounced at 2.00 am one Sunday. I sat and observed the waiting room, which was absolutely packed. It suddenly dawned on me that the only sober people in that room were me and the triage nurse, and I think that she was being driven to drink by what she was having to face. Everybody else in that room had alcohol on them. Indeed, the reason why the vast majority were in A&E was that they were intoxicated — they had fallen or been in fights or car accidents etc. I remember two members of the emergency services having to physically sit on top of a young woman who was so intoxicated with drink and drugs that she was uncontrollable. She was swearing, kicking and spitting at the emergency services members who were trying to restrain her. That is what those men and women have to face.

Frankly, as Mr McIlveen and Mr McCallister said, one day is not enough to recognise what those people do. Sometimes, particularly in the Fire and Rescue Service, they sit for long periods of inactivity, and then the phone goes and it is a mad dash to save lives.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

Mr B McCrea: I join the Member in his condemnation of the attack on the A&E staff, and so on. However, does he agree with Mr McCallister that anybody who attacks the emergency services, whether with swords, stones or anything else, ought to be completely and utterly condemned? Does he also agree that what all Members need to do is join in supporting our brave police, Ambulance Service, fire brigade and air-and-sea rescue, and that there should be no equivocation on the point that anybody who attacks our emergency services deserves to have the full rigour of the law brought upon them?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added on to his time.

Mr Wells: I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would disagree with what the honourable Member said. Those people are carrying out their duties. It can sometimes be unpleasant, and it can sometimes be unpopular. We have every right to complain to the Chief Constable or to write to the Police Ombudsman and say that we disagree with certain tactics that have been adopted.

However, the scenes that were alluded to brought no goodwill for the community in Northern Ireland. It was a disgraceful set of circumstances. Before Christmas, there was a very ugly incident in the Royal in which someone attacked staff working in A&E. I was heartened that, when the case went before the courts, the judge, quite rightly, handed out a lengthy custodial sentence. He drew a line in the sand and said, "Enough is enough. If you come before the courts for attacking the emergency services, you will go down." That has to be the rule from now on. We cannot countenance this any further.

5.00 pm

Unfortunately, I was ill at the weekend and went to Daisy Hill Hospital A&E. I noticed that the Southern Trust was paying security staff to make certain that the A&E area was safe for staff. When we have so much difficulty getting the money to buy medicines and carry out surgery, what a waste of resources it is to have to pay to provide security to medical staff.

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

Mr Wells: That cannot be allowed to continue.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I would like to say how much I welcome the opportunity to pay tribute to and recognise the work of our emergency services: the firefighters, police, Ambulance Service and paramedics who serve the public of Northern Ireland.

The timing of this debate is very appropriate, given a particular incident that took place in my constituency. Last Sunday was the anniversary of the incident involving the Spence family. I recently talked to the father of one of the fire officers, and he told me that his son could, very often, still taste the slurry, as he had given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to members of that family.

When the emergency services are called out, they will do everything that they can to save the life of others. In 2012-13, for example, 46,000 responses were made by the staff of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to life-threatening situations. I am sure that my appreciation would be echoed by everyone in the House who has not had the opportunity to speak today and by the individuals who received that vital and timely service, and their families and friends,.

I am sure that the Assembly and the public of Northern Ireland equally appreciate and value Fire Service personnel. They attended each of the 3,000 major fires that occurred in Northern Ireland during 2012-13 and rescued 214 people as a result.

The World Police and Fire Games were a tremendous showcase of what we have to offer. There have also been, and continue to be, significant wider benefits and legacy aspects to those games, such as a greater appreciation of the benefits of volunteering, as Miss McIlveen pointed out, increased community involvement in sporting activity and future major international events being attracted to Northern Ireland.

My Executive colleague with responsibility for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which delivered the games, is committed to taking forward new initiatives inspired by the games to create a lasting legacy and positively impact on the lives of local people.

We need to use sport as a way to inspire young people, particularly those who are disengaged and who, perhaps, throw stones at fire tenders and ambulance personnel. DCAL officials are exploring ways to further the relationships that were built between schools, communities and the services during the games. The aim is to provide a new generation of sports ambassadors and to champion grass-roots sports.

Our police, firefighters, prison officers and customs officers who took part in the World Police and Fire Games events demonstrated that they are on a par with service personnel from across the world.

Recognition for the very valuable contribution that our emergency services provide already exists in several forms. For the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, we have the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal and the Queen's Fire Service Medal; for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, we have the Queen's Ambulance Service Medal and the Ambulance Service Medal for non-emergency staff; and, for police officers, we have the Chief Constable's Commendation and High Commendation and the Policing with the Community awards.

In Northern Ireland, we are in the unique position of having an integrated healthcare system.

Westminster looks positively at our model, and Ministers from other devolved legislatures value

our experience and actively seek to learn from our experiences.

I want to acknowledge the very worthy sentiments of the motion, but I believe that it is somewhat restrictive in terms of whom and what deserves recognition. That has already been pointed out by Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Dallat and others who wish to recognise the Coastguard. That is something that we need to look at.

I want to fully recognise and place on record my appreciation to all of the staff involved in the daily delivery of emergency services, but I believe that there is an opportunity to consider further the recognition of front line staff working in health and social care. I am aware of the recent, well received, NHS Change Day initiative in Great Britain, and I know of the interest expressed by local health care professionals. I believe that a similar local Health and Social Care initiative may be worth consideration. That could showcase the very valuable services delivered by our front line staff through our integrated health and social care system on a day and daily basis.

Formal appreciation across multidisciplinary and multidelivery organisations is a complex issue, requiring full consideration. Unfortunately, I do not believe that the timescale suggested in the motion allows for that level of consideration at this time. So, although I am supportive of the thrust of the motion, I think that we need to give a little more consideration to all of the issues that have been raised in the House today. Consequently, I do not think that we will deliver it for 29 September of this year, but it is certainly something that we should aspire to in a reasonable time frame.

Mr Speaker: I call Dominic Bradley to conclude on the motion. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltaí uilig a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht shuimiúil a bhí againn inniu. I thank all the Members who contributed to this interesting debate. In particular, I thank Mrs McKevitt. It was mainly at her instigation that the motion was tabled.

I believe that it is a very good and timely motion. Perhaps it needs to be pared, refined and redefined in some areas, but, as most Members who spoke agreed, the principle at the heart of the motion is a good one. The time frame is probably not achievable this year, but, as the Minister said, we should give due consideration to this day being celebrated in the

very near future; if not in 2013, then, hopefully, in 2014.

Most Members who spoke agreed that the idea of setting aside a special day to pay tribute to the work done by the police, the Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service, the Coastguard and the various voluntary services, such as St John Ambulance, the Order of Malta, mountain rescue services, the RNLI and the Lough Neagh services — all of those groups; we are not trying to be prescriptive in any way — was a very good one, and they supported the idea.

Most Members took the opportunity to pay tribute to the emergency services, and they underscored the fact that their work saves lives and makes our homes, roads and, indeed, workplaces safer.

Once again, Members emphasised the fact that, quite often, the emergency services face horrific scenes in the course of their work and have to deal with highly stressful and highly distressing situations as they strive to save lives. Indeed, that was graphically illustrated by Mr Wells in his contribution, and the Minister referred to the incident in which the Spence family members lost their lives.

Other Members mentioned the fact that emergency services personnel work around the clock and are available to go anywhere at any time whenever the call comes in. As public representatives, we must always do our best to support them and ensure that they have the best available resources and support to carry out their important work. A day of recognition for the emergency services and allied services would be an empty gesture if those services did not have those resources and that support. From the contributions of Members here today, it is obvious that they have that support from all sides of the House.

As I said, Members agreed that setting aside a special day would not only recognise the work of the services but would, in some cases, provide an excellent vehicle to highlight some of the issues around the services. The day would be an opportunity to raise awareness of the work of the services through events in communities, schools, youth clubs, churches, and so on. It would also be an opportunity to remember those members of the services who have lost their lives in the line of duty. It could also highlight safety issues such as the provision of fire alarms, the reduction of speed on our roads and many other pertinent matters.

Unfortunately, as Mr Gardiner pointed out, we still have those misguided people who think that it is all right to attack members of the emergency services. Perhaps a day of recognition will provide an opportunity to press home the important message that we will not tolerate such attacks.

Mrs McKeivitt saw the special day as an important legacy of the World Police and Fire Games. That sentiment was echoed by many contributors, not least among them the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Michelle McIlveen. All contributors underlined the life-saving role of the emergency services. Mrs McKeivitt mentioned the who, what, where, when and why of the special day. Michelle McIlveen underscored the success of the World Police and Fire Games and said that they were the friendliest and the best to date. She described the members of the emergency services as unsung heroes. Perhaps the special day would give us an opportunity to sing their praises. That sentiment was echoed by Mr Wells and others.

Cathal Ó hOisín mentioned the fact that there was a distinction between emergency services and essential services. As I said, we do not want to be prescriptive in our sentiments; we want to be totally inclusive. If it is not possible to have this event on 29 September — it would seem that it is not — we have the time to redefine some elements of the motion and ensure that it is inclusive of all those who should be included in such a day.

Mr McCarthy underlined the importance of standing up for the rule of law. He said that there should be zero tolerance for those who attack emergency personnel. David McIlveen of the DUP said that he saw a few creases in the motion but thought that they could be ironed out. As I said, we do not disagree with him on that point. John Dallat admitted that he was a little biased towards the Coastguard because on one occasion that service snatched him from the sea and, thankfully, saved his life. He welcomed the fact that the Malin Head and the Belfast coastguards, which were to be moved to Dublin and Liverpool respectively, were permitted to stay in their home locations. He hoped that this House would, in future, oppose any move towards the centralisation of those services.

5.15 pm

Other Members who contributed to the debate included George Robinson, who supported the motion and Ross Hussey, who cautioned against clashing dates and gave a very

eloquent eulogy on the emergency services. John McCallister underlined the support for the rule of law. He said that we should not just be fair-weather friends to emergency personnel but should support them at all times.

As I said, Mr Wells referred to a number of actual circumstances in which emergency personnel had to make life-or-death decisions on the spot. He also referred to the fact that the post-traumatic impact of those decisions stays with those emergency personnel, and said that we should support them in whatever way we can to come to terms with those horrific situations.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Sure.

Mr Wells: In the time allowed to me I wanted to say that the other very difficult task that the emergency services have to do is to go to the homes of the deceased and tell parents or loved ones that someone has died in terribly tragic circumstances. I would find that enormously difficult, yet these men and women have to do it all the time.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his contribution.

I would like to thank the Minister for his attendance today and his contribution to the debate. He mentioned that there were 46,000 responses by the Ambulance Service. He also said that the Fire and Rescue Service dealt with 3,000 major fires, and I think that he said that its personnel rescued 140 —

Mr Poots: It was 214.

Mr D Bradley: They rescued 214 people. Thank you. The Minister said that —

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

Mr D Bradley: — he had some minor problems with the wording and definition of the motion, but that he was willing to work with us. Hopefully, a special day will be set aside in 2014 for the purposes outlined in the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the valuable and life-saving work of the emergency services; and

calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to set aside an annual day of recognition, beginning with Michaelmas Day on 29 September 2013, in order to create a lasting legacy of the World Police and Fire Games 2013.

Mr Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease as we move into the Adjournment debate.

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

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

Adjournment

University of Ulster: Magee Expansion

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who are called to speak on this occasion will have seven minutes.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to bring this Adjournment debate to the House. I suppose that it is a direct follow-on from the Public Petition on the expansion of the University of Ulster at Magee that was presented to the House in June.

It is important to put the expansion issue into context. The city's One Plan was developed and launched in 2011 through a very lengthy participative process and one that the city and region had probably not seen before. It involved hundreds of individuals and groups from across the public, private, community, voluntary and political sectors as well as individual residents from across the city and region. The result was a mission statement that placed equality at the heart of regeneration.

The final One Plan featured a range of interdependent catalyst programmes for the economic, social and physical regeneration that is required to target the needs and inequalities that exist in the north-west. To fulfill the economic, social and physical regeneration ambition of the One Plan, the explicit institutional targets for higher education expansion in Derry need to be met by 2020.

I welcome the Minister's intervention to date and, indeed, the progress that has been made to attain the interim target of 1,000 extra maximum student number (MaSN) places by 2015. Thankfully, we are well on our way to meeting that interim target. However, the project needs additional momentum, collaboration and focus to ensure that the scale and timeline of the One Plan's objectives for Magee are met in full. Those objectives are 9,400 full-time students, including 6,000 full-time undergraduate students.

The consultation and engagement that I referred to, and the findings of the One Plan process on higher education (HE) expansion, are robust. However, there is a need to reinvigorate and strengthen the coalition around the One Plan action for university expansion. The imperative now is to deliver that which was agreed during the process.

A Magee implementation body is to be set up to provide the impetus needed to deliver the agreed 9,400 objective. It is right and proper that the implementation body is led by the University of Ulster in partnership with the local authority. The implementation body will not be stand-alone; it will be constituted as a subcommittee of the city strategy board, which will, therefore, provide the democratic legitimacy and the policy oversight for the project. It will report directly to the city strategy board and will be scrutinised by it.

The implementation body's objective is to carry out the economic analysis, and there has been much debate over recent months about the merit of the economic analysis or business case that may be required. The implementation body will look at the economic analysis/business case preparation and business planning work required to support the implementation of the agreed vision for the expansion of the University of Ulster at Magee, including the attainment by 2020 of the following milestones: 9,400 full-time students, including 6,000 MaSN students; a viable portfolio of courses reflective of the needs of the 21st-century economy; the establishment of a teaching and research foundation for a medical school in conjunction with Altnagelvin/Western Health and Social Care Trust; an enhanced research portfolio providing a foundation for teaching excellence, local and inward spin/outward investment as an attractor to mobile academic and research staff; and, of course, access pathways, through further education for those disadvantaged and vocational students who might otherwise be excluded from higher education.

The Minister for Employment and Learning, in a response dated 18 July 2013, stated:

"If a proposal were to be taken forward to expand the Magee campus in line with the vision set out in the One Plan, then a full economic appraisal would be required."

As a city, we welcome that clarity, and we ask the Minister for Employment and Learning to support the new implementation body in commissioning the business case. We seek the Department's engagement on the implementation board, and we also seek that its

departmental delivery plan will include the expansion of the university at Magee.

Mr P Ramsey: In many regards, we welcome the debate; we welcome any debate that highlights and promotes the importance of Derry as an appropriate university city. It is important that the Minister for Employment and Learning is here. Clearly, it is not solely the responsibility of the Minister for Employment and Learning. As the Member outlined, we have the One Plan to lead the way and to prioritise the needs of the region. As the Minister is fully aware, one of the main priorities is the expansion of Magee to almost 10,000 full-time students. The mayor has convened a meeting on Friday with Richard Barnett and the key parliamentarians in the city to discuss a way forward. The sponsoring body for the One Plan is the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and it has a clear duty and responsibility. It signed up to that plan but not to the delivery mechanism that is so important in delivering it.

At times, we strongly champion and advocate the cause of the present Minister for Employment and Learning. In Committee or at Question Time, I share his frustration at times when we are lobbying for certain things. However, there is a shared responsibility and duty. If the priority in the One Plan is for the expansion of the Magee campus within the University of Ulster, and it is the economic driver of the One Plan, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has to come up to the mark.

There is no point in Sinn Féin coming in here and making demands of the Minister for Employment and Learning. Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness have a job to do. They signed off on the One Plan, which is the economic driver of the regeneration of the city in terms of jobs.

We have to be honest with ourselves, mindful that the provost of Magee went on Radio 5 recently to say that Sinn Féin claimed that it had delivered on student numbers in 2011 during an election when it failed to do that. The question that has to be put to Sinn Féin is this: will it accept the responsibility that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have in their duty of care to deliver on this at the Executive? They are only people who can deliver this project.

Without going over the history of what everyone has seen in the city — why Derry was ignored in the 1960s, and why John Hume entered politics in 1966 — it was discrimination that the

status of a university went to Coleraine and not to the second city. Derry has borne a hurt and a wound since that occasion, and we are continually reminded of that.

Derry is going through a vibrant time. I have never seen the people of the city feeling so good about themselves or taking such an immense sense of pride in what is happening there. However, there is a consequence to that. We want to ensure the legacy and opportunities of that for the coming generation of our young people, namely the economic regeneration driver of 10,000 students at Magee.

We were all disappointed on both occasions when the MaSN cap was relaxed. We do not have to rehearse the arguments. Queen's was informally contacted to make sure that it entered a bid in the first round. How those student numbers were distributed is still a hurt and a sore. Although the University of Ulster is clearly claiming that any increase in MaSN numbers will go to Magee, we have to be absolutely sure. We were all disappointed — I raised the matter with the Minister recently — that the University of Ulster made a fundamental decision by removing the crèche facility at Magee. We are trying to encourage further participation in third-level education, yet that decision was made. At a time when we are trying to create an environment for 10,000 students and get the most marginalised into full-time education, that decision was wrong, Minister. It was as wrong in Derry as it was at Jordanstown.

After this debate, we have to be absolutely sure. The only people who can deliver this project for Derry and the region are the Executive, not solely the Minister for Employment and Learning. He is certainly the guider and leader on this issue but we have to demand that the Executive listen and heed what they agreed in the principles of the One Plan and its main economic driver. We should not shy away from that. Regardless of whether Members who speak in the debate are party colleagues, Martin McGuinness has to take a much stronger lead in delivering this for his own city.

5.30 pm

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I want to congratulate Maeve McLaughlin for tabling the Adjournment topic. I think that most of us who live in Derry do not see this as particularly a Derry issue. I notice that other colleagues, particularly from West Tyrone, East Derry and,

indeed, South Belfast, have remained in the Chamber because they have some interest in the expansion of the Magee campus.

There is absolutely no doubt that for as long as most of us can remember, the issue of the university in Derry has been very much part of the political agenda. Indeed, if it can be encapsulated in a small way, I think that when you look at other cities on the island of Ireland and how many university students they have, it is very telling. Dublin has 53,000 students, Belfast, 32,000 and Cork has 19,000. I accept that those cities are bigger than Derry. However, Galway has 17,000 students and Limerick has 12,000. Those cities are smaller than Derry, yet Derry has only 4,000. Coleraine has around 8,000 student places. It is a smaller town than Derry. In many ways, that encapsulates it for me.

There is always a tendency that people in Derry are accused of not speaking with one voice. There was a serious attempt by the One Plan to bring all those voices together. It was a long, drawn-out process. Sometimes, Pat Ramsey indulged himself — although not today, when we are speaking with one voice — but that is understandable in the cut and thrust of politics.

The One Plan is part of the Programme for Government. If today is a day for saying that Martin McGuinness should do A, B, C and D, Sinn Féin will not be found wanting in telling the Executive that they have to do A, B, C and D. My party has told them that with the One Plan. Quite rightly, in the past, the Minister reminded us that if there is no business plan, it is difficult for him to deliver. Sometimes, we have to learn that lesson. We learned it with the City of Culture in particular. People in the city were calling from a distance. We needed money for the City of Culture, and we were told that we needed a business plan. The business plan was then submitted, and the Executive, through Martin McGuinness and Carál NíChuilín, were not found wanting. Therefore, if we make the demand and present the business plan properly, and we do not take shots at one another, perhaps, we can deliver.

Pat Ramsey gave a glowing tribute to John Hume and his entry into politics through the university. Nobody doubts that. However, it would be cheap of anyone to say that the SDLP had the Department for Employment and Learning for a number of years. Was there an expansion of Magee then? Were resources put towards Magee? The answer is no. I will not say that that was the fault of Sean Farren, the SDLP, or Mark Durkan because he was the joint First Minister at the time. However, I will

say that they, possibly, could not do it because we had not presented the plan properly.

Maeve McLaughlin outlined today, and I think that there is acceptance, that even with it being in the One Plan and being a Programme for Government commitment, there is a need for a re-energised focus. That is the reason why a task force has been set up. If we put all of our energies into a task force, which brings in people from across the political spectrum, civic society, business and the community and voluntary sector, to refocus and redirect our energies, we will ensure that when we present the case for it, the Minister or anybody else cannot say that it is weak. Let us ensure that our case is strong. When it is strong and we have to go to the door of the Executive, Sinn Féin will not be found wanting. We knocked at the Executive's door for the City of Culture and we delivered. We have absolutely no doubt. That was our commitment. I do not know whether the provost of Magee said it with regard to what we said in 2011. We said that the expansion of Magee would be guaranteed. We will guarantee its expansion as we go forward.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member who raised the Adjournment debate. I am pleased to participate in it not only because of my interest in upskilling people throughout Northern Ireland and in the west, but because I was a very happy student of the University of Ulster at Magee College some time ago.

Indeed, it is the case that Northern Ireland has the lowest number of university places per head of population of all the UK regions. Under-provision is at its highest in the north-west, which is why it is important to ensure that we increase provision at Magee. The University of Ulster has been lobbying for that for quite some time, and it is clear that there is considerable support for it to be taken forward. I believe that all six Foyle MLAs support the expansion, and, indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party firmly supports it.

The expansion of the Magee campus is seen as the central plank of the wider plan to regenerate Londonderry and, indeed, the north-west region over the next decade. If the 9,400 undergraduate target is reached, it is believed that that could generate about 2,800 jobs. Therefore, the economic potential of the expansion cannot be underestimated.

In December 2011, the Employment and Learning Minister, Dr Stephen Farry, announced an additional 322 undergraduate places and, in November 2012, a further 250

places for the university in STEM subject areas. The university allocated all those additional places to Magee, and, as a result, all pre-registered nursing courses are being provided on the campus. I understand that a new school of Irish language and literature has also been established in the faculty of arts at Magee.

I draw particular attention to the science, technology, engineering and maths courses. I believe that if Northern Ireland is to compete globally and to increase exports, the STEM sector is vital. We need to ensure that there are skills to match demand, and our universities are a means of doing that.

I believe that, in November 2011, the university also paid a deposit to Foyle and Londonderry College for the option to buy its lands once the school relocates from its current site in 2016. That represented another important step forward in the expansion plans. Therefore, it is clear that some work is under way, and I commend all those involved for that.

Indeed, the university is on course to deliver 1,000 new undergraduate courses by 2015, with 572 secured already. However, there is, of course, an appetite for things to move quicker, and some have claimed that the university needs to be more proactive. Indeed, the Member who proposed this topic said that university bosses need to step up to the plate and produce a robust business case for the expansion, claiming that a failure to do so is what is holding up the expansion.

However, the Minister has said that no business case is needed, and the Magee provost, Dr Heenan, also said that detailed costings are not being sought. So, we need to have clarity on the expansion. We in the House are all aware that budgets are stretched throughout all Departments, and the higher education budget, I am sure, is no different.

I am particularly pleased to see the Employment and Learning Minister here today to respond to the debate. I trust that he will outline the work that has been done, the scale of expansion that is expected in this budgetary period and the work outstanding that the University of Ulster needs to take forward.

Mr Eastwood: Given what Mr McCartney said, I am reluctant to get too combative, because it is important that we speak with one voice on Magee. In fact, we have been speaking with one voice on the 'University for Derry' campaign since 1964, when unionist and nationalist leaders came up here to protest against what was a very unjust decision. It is important to

put it in that context, because the people of Derry have been living with that decision since then. I think that they understand very clearly the importance of education and the link that that has to developing an economy.

We have made a tremendous effort in Derry this year to prove that we are not going to allow our past to determine our future. I stood and watched the largest loyalist march in Northern Ireland go through the city centre of Derry with no problems whatsoever. The very next day, we had the all-Ireland fleadh and the greatest celebration of Irish culture in the world. So, I think that Derry knows well what its job and responsibility are to deliver on the economy.

However, it is very difficult for all us whingers — as the Enterprise Minister would have us called — to deliver on those promises when the fundamentals are not right. The road system is not right, and the higher education system, clearly, is not right.

I remember the day that the One Plan was launched because I happened to be mayor. I spoke alongside the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and 9,400 places by 2020 was the headline figure. I want to make it clear that 9,400 was our compromise, because we recognise — Mr McCartney gave the figures — that cities of a comparable size need a much greater number than 9,400 full-time students. However, we took that for starters. Mr Ramsey is right to say that the One Plan included that commitment, but, unfortunately, that was never really followed up in the Programme for Government. I made the point at the time that the Programme for Government said that we would "develop" the One Plan. There was no specific target for or commitment to the most important part of the One Plan, which was the Magee expansion, and there was no specific commitment in a number of other areas.

That was one of the major failings of the last period. The SDLP was not the party that changed the "speaking with one voice" phrase or put up posters saying that Magee was guaranteed. If you do that, you have to be prepared to help to deliver it, and we will engage and commit to any process that brings people together to try to deliver on that promise. We will not let the Executive away in the smoke either, because the University of Ulster has a commitment and the Minister has a commitment. However, we really need the whole Executive to say, "This is our commitment now. We want 9,400 students in Magee, and this is how you do it." I think that everybody would come up to the mark. That is the spirit in which we approach the issue. We

will engage in any process to try to help to deliver it, and I am happy to see and support economic plans and cases being made. The economic case is as clear as day: an expanded university with the right courses at Magee would make a massive difference to the economy of Derry, Donegal, Tyrone and all the surrounding areas. So we will support anything that will help to make that easier, but it has to be pointed out that the case has already been made — it has been made repeatedly.

It is difficult for us to see the University of Ulster committing to a £200 million project in Belfast. We do not begrudge Belfast a £200 million university project, but people in Derry see that and do not see anywhere near an equivalent commitment to our city. However, we are here to be positive and supportive. We hope that the Minister will get the support from his colleagues around the Executive table to deliver this, but a political will needs to come from every single part of the Assembly and Executive to make it happen. If we do not deliver, in 50 years' time, people will not thank us, because this mistake was made 50 years ago and still has not been corrected.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I thank Maeve McLaughlin for securing the debate. Despite all the attention given to the issue, this is the first formal debate on the Floor, and I welcome it. I should also acknowledge the contributions from everyone else and the work that was carried out on the development of the One Plan, which, amongst other things, sets out an ambitious vision for the expansion of higher education in the city and region. I am, of course, convinced that investing in higher education helps to bring about future economic growth. Indeed, the Executive's economic strategy recognises that skills are the bedrock of an innovation-based knowledge economy.

Northern Ireland already has a strong track record in participation in higher education, albeit with some pockets of under-representation that we are addressing through Access to Success, our strategy for widening participation. However, we export many of our young people out of Northern Ireland, and I certainly want to offer many more opportunities locally. That would significantly increase the prospects of graduates building their careers here and contributing to the local economy.

5.45 pm

When I took up office in May 2011, there were no plans and no resources allocated to allow for

any expansion of undergraduate places in Northern Ireland, never mind in Derry specifically. Nevertheless, I have focused on expanding higher education across Northern Ireland because I believe that it is an investment that must be made. To date, I have been able to secure an additional 1,350 undergraduate places, all of which are in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. The Programme for Government has a commitment to achieve 700 additional places, and, hopefully, we will have delivered around twice that number, if not more, by 2015. The first tranche of places was secured as part of the wider tuition fee settlement agreed by the Executive in September 2011 in order to manage increased demand for local places that arose from that. The second tranche of places was secured in November 2012 as part of the jobs and economy initiative in order to further invest across Northern Ireland in higher-level skills relevant to our local economy.

I point out that the delivery of 700 additional STEM places is the only commitment relating to higher education contained in the Programme for Government. The key and only commitment relating to the One Plan that is in the Programme for Government is to:

“develop the ‘One Plan’ for the regeneration of Derry/Londonderry, incorporating the key sites at Fort George and Ebrington”.

However, as I have said, the Executive have acknowledged the crucial role played by higher education in its economic strategy.

Leaving undergraduate places aside, I have also been able to increase the number of PhD places being funded through the public purse. From a baseline of 495 places, I have made funding available to increase this to 845 places by 2015-16. Our higher education strategy Graduating to Success has a target of increasing the number of such places to 1,000 by 2020. We are well on the way to achieving that, and we are optimistic that that target will be met in advance of 2020, with 60% being met by 2015.

I am committed not only to expanding higher education but to delivering it. However, in doing so, I recognise that the benefits of expanding higher education must be felt across Northern Ireland, and I have deliberately followed a policy of expansion at all higher education providers at every possible opportunity. Progress is steady and higher education provision in further education colleges and both universities has benefited.

The University of Ulster is receiving 652 of the places, and it has undertaken to allocate all of them to its Magee campus. One of the outcomes detailed in the One Plan is a targeted increase of 1,000 undergraduates by 2015, and we are well on the road to achieving that. I am optimistic that I will be able to fund the 1,000 places by 2015, and I remain committed to seeking opportunities to make additional funding commitments over the months and years ahead. I welcome the undertaking that the University of Ulster has given to allocate to Magee those places that it receives.

I wish to place on record the fact that I understand the importance of the expansion of the university to the city and wider region of the north-west through the additional local spending that would come from additional students, an increased pool of graduate labour, and an enhanced labour research base. However, to go beyond 1,000 places will require resources that I do not presently have. In the current year, both universities will receive £177 million in recurrent grant, and I have a total capital budget of £16 million available for higher education. These resources are insufficient to accommodate the estimated annual costs in the One Plan for the expansion of the Magee campus of £28 million capital and £36 million in recurrent funding over the period to 2020. The scale of the investment required to deliver the One Plan’s vision is therefore substantive and well beyond the scope of the current budget.

We must also consider future Northern Ireland Budgets. There is some uncertainty over the future of the current level of funding for the higher education sector. As Members will know, the freezing of tuition fees locally was not factored into the block grant and we have to fund that commitment from making our own choices on public expenditure priorities. It is important that the freezing of fees does not come at the cost of the higher education offering. It is also important to stress that additional undergraduate places need to be baselined into the Budget.

I understand and recognise the fact that an implementation group is to be set up to commission a business case for the expansion of Magee along the lines envisaged in the One Plan. I await the outcome of that work with great interest. However, I would counsel the implementation group to be realistic about the outcome that it will achieve. For sure, the development of a business case would, in all likelihood, show that higher education expansion in Derry would benefit the city. However, I will need to be satisfied that the expansion there will be in the best interests of

Northern Ireland as a whole. Any business case would need to show that the impact of additional places will be stronger in Derry than elsewhere in Northern Ireland. We also need to consider the issue of whether investments in other aspects of the skills agenda would achieve a greater impact than undergraduate places, whether we are talking about the north-west specifically or Northern Ireland as a whole. Also, any investment on the scale envisaged by the One Plan will require the approval of not only my Department but the Department of Finance and Personnel. Assuming that the business case receives all the necessary initial approvals, its existence does not guarantee that funding will be made available for it. Indeed, DFP approval may be contingent on that funding being available.

I want to address the specific issue of whether a business case is, indeed, required. In the context of a specific proposal on a stand-alone basis to expand Magee, we would need a business case for that purpose. For what we have adopted to date, which has been a policy of incremental growth of university places that adopts a pan-Northern Ireland approach, albeit, I have to confess, with a certain skewing towards the University of Ulster and Magee, we do not need a business case to proceed because we have the backing of existing departmental strategies. I stress that, without a business case, incremental growth can still continue.

The 1,000 target in the One Plan should not in any way represent the ceiling of our ambitions. I have no intention of stopping opportunities to find additional resources for higher education once we hit that 1,000 target. I am committed to moving beyond that if we can do so. It is also worth stressing that it remains open to the university to reallocate places across its campuses. In addition, I highlight that part-time study is becoming more prevalent. As the nature of participation in higher education evolves, our funding models will also need to change. We are committed to reviewing the maximum student number (MaSN) system. There is also potential for a considerable increase in the number of international students, who are outside the MaSN financial control. Building on the success of the City of Culture, the all-Ireland fleadh and other events, Magee will surely be best placed in that regard to attract students from other parts of these islands, elsewhere in Europe and internationally.

I thank everyone for participating in the debate. I am acutely aware of the great level of interest, demand and potential associated with the

expansion of the university in Derry. We are delivering for the university through the incremental approach that we have adopted to date. I am committed to continuing that. Although we are not actively seeking a business plan — I have explained the context behind that — we will certainly give proper consideration to any business plan that is forwarded to us.

Adjourned at 5.53 pm.



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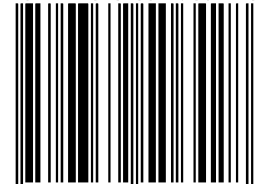
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