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Contents

Assembly Business	1
Executive Committee Business	
Financial Provisions Bill: Royal Assent	1
Carrier Bags Bill: Royal Assent	1
Private Members' Business	
Giro d'Italia 2014	2
Marriage Equality.....	18
Oral Answers to Questions	
Culture, Arts and Leisure.....	23
Education.....	33
Private Members' Business	
Marriage Equality (<i>Continued</i>).....	42
Adjournment	
Downe Hospital: Minor Injuries Unit	55

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They should be sent to:
The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 April 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr McGlone: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, I missed posing a topical question on the Floor due to being unfortunately and inevitably delayed in my constituency. So, I was not in the Assembly on time to ask the question. My apologies to you and the House for not being here for that.

Mrs D Kelly: I also have to make an apology. I understand that I was last on the list for topical questions. I had a meeting of the Historical Enquiries Team working group here in Parliament Buildings. So, I was in the Building, but I was not aware of how quickly time had moved on. I apologise to you and the House.

Mr Speaker: First of all, I wish to say a word of thanks to Mr McGlone and Mrs Kelly for coming to the House this morning and apologising. A number of other Members were missing yesterday. I said yesterday that I know that minds may be somewhere else at this time, and that is understandable, but I would like to think that other Members who were missing yesterday will follow the example of the two Members and come to apologise to the House. Quite a number of Members do not turn up at Question Time when they are down on the list for a question to a Minister, and they do not come to the House to apologise and do not believe that they should give any reason to apologise and more or less treat the House with total contempt. So, we are mindful of those Members, and we are just waiting to see whether those Members come to the House and follow the example of the two Members who have apologised this morning.

Executive Committee Business

Financial Provisions Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the Financial Provisions Bill received Royal Assent on 28 April 2014. It will be known as the Financial Provisions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Carrier Bags Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Carrier Bags Bill received Royal Assent on 28 April 2014. It will be known as the Carrier Bags Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Private Members' Business

Giro d'Italia 2014

Mr Speaker: The first item of business is a motion on the Giro d'Italia 2014. 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. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is unable to be here for the start of the debate. However, she hopes to arrive in time to respond to it, and I understand that Mr Ross is taking notes on behalf of the Minister.

If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Douglas: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the Giro d'Italia is one of the biggest events in the international sporting calendar; warmly welcomes it to Northern Ireland; acknowledges the significance and magnitude of being chosen to host the Grande Partenza; understands the benefits to be obtained in terms of the economy, tourism, cultural exchange and education, promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and worldwide publicity for Northern Ireland; and calls on the Executive to take all necessary steps to maximise the potential to be gained through such a prestigious event.

As chairman of the all-party group on cycling, I propose the motion in my name and that of my North Down colleague Peter Weir. I note that the Alliance Party amendment is within the spirit of the motion, so we are happy to support it.

Next week, the Stormont estate will be buzzing when up to 30,000 people will gather to witness one of the biggest sporting events ever to hit these shores. The Grande Partenza, or Big Start, of the Giro d'Italia will be a spectacular event happening outside this very Building. As we came into Stormont this morning, I am sure that we all noticed the decorated lamps on Prince of Wales Avenue, which is testimony to the pink revolution that is taking place as Northern Ireland hosts the opening stages of the 2014 Giro d'Italia and welcomes 200 of the world's top cyclists.

The Giro's choice to hold this iconic event in the Province is historic because it will be the first time that it has ever been held outside continental Europe. The Giro event was first organised in 1909 to promote the 'Gazzetta dello Sport' newspaper and gained prominence to become one of the world's largest sporting events. We have all seen the impressive figures on television of the potential global audience of millions, and I am sure that others will speak about some of those figures later. This is undoubtedly one of the biggest opportunities that Northern Ireland will ever have to sell itself and to showcase the Province on the world stage. What an opportunity to show all that is good and creative about our Province. What an opportunity to promote tourism, increase healthier lifestyles, improve the environment and encourage voluntary effort.

We should be proud that the organisers of the Giro d'Italia, one of the world's most iconic and famous cycling events, second only to the Tour de France, have chosen Northern Ireland for the Big Start. On their visits here, the organisers will have noted that we have not rested on our laurels after successfully hosting world-class events such as the MTV Europe music awards in 2011, the Titanic centenary event just two years ago and the most successful and peaceful G8 summit ever in — I am sorry that the Minister is not here to hear me say this — beautiful Fermanagh. Who can forget the wonderful World Police and Fire Games or the hugely impressive UK City of Culture celebrations? That all points to the fact that Northern Ireland is making outstanding progress in establishing itself to stage world-class events that require first-class organisational skills to host them.

I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) for its work to date, particularly Susie McCullough and her Giro team, who have done a magnificent job in coordinating the work of the various Departments — we all know what it is like trying to coordinate work between Departments — and other working groups. There has also been work with councils across Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to the PSNI for its work to date. It has stepped up to the plate to make sure that we will have a first-class, enjoyable and safe Giro event.

I have been told that the Giro team has visited here a number of times and has been hugely impressed on each occasion with the event management. It is a great testament to the skills of our people and bodies such as the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. One of those organisers, who I think was from Italy, was even

heard to say, "If Carlsberg did Grande Partenzas, they would probably be like this".

I would like to acknowledge the many schools, businesses, community and church groups and, yes, MLAs, who have caught the vision. Some MLAs here this morning are in their pink. I pay tribute to them, particularly my colleague Gordon Dunne who is wearing a pink tie. Next week, Minister Edwin Poots and I will be participating in a smashing event — a Royal National Institute for the Blind tandem cycling event from Lisburn to Newtownabbey. That event involves dozens of blind and partially sighted participants; the Giro is for everybody.

I was on the excellent Northern Ireland Greenway's website last night. It reckons that over 20 MLAs are into cycling. Last Saturday afternoon, three of those MLAs — me, the First Minister, Peter Robinson, and junior Minister Jonathan Bell — went on a 25-mile cycle. Sadly, Jonathan Bell fell at Becher's Brook — *[Laughter.]* Sorry, he fell at the harbour estate, but he is OK now. I am sure that people witnessed some of the grizzly photographs that he posted on Twitter.

I was struck by a comment on the Northern Ireland Greenway's site, which we need to take on board. It states:

"The Northern Ireland government needs to seize the chance to use the Giro d'Italia Grande Partenza 2014 for more than cycling sport promotion and a fleeting tourism boost."

I agree with that sentiment. While we know that the eyes of the world will be watching, we need to make sure that Northern Ireland utilises this unique opportunity to bring an increase in cycling and a lasting legacy for young and old alike. Northern Ireland has the potential to become a hotspot — indeed, a major European destination — for cycling if we can maximise this unique opportunity. This debate is about how we can maximise the opportunities.

The Giro can be a wonderful showcase and an inspiration to a new generation of cyclists. Hosting such a high-profile event will definitely encourage cycling, but it also highlights the need for good infrastructure for everyday cycling to schools, work and, dare I say, shops. Part of that legacy is the need to encourage more children to take up cycling. Just this morning, when I was coming up to Stormont, I noticed a number of cars outside a school. I have been one of those people in the past who have taken the kids to school. Yet, when we look at Amsterdam and Utrecht in the

Netherlands, we see that 50% of kids travel to school on bicycles. Let us expand schemes such as the excellent Sustrans active school travel programme, safe routes to school.

Mr Speaker, I have a word of caution: the giro legacy, or the Giro legacy, must be for all.

Mr McKinney: The giro. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Douglas: That was a Freudian slip when you hear what I have to say. The Giro legacy must be for all.

Mr McGlone: We do not want any more drops like that.

Mr Douglas: Any chance. The Giro legacy must be for all, not just a cycling elite. We must ensure that benefits are not lost in our communities. A couple of miles from here, the Ballybeen Improvement Group is doing great work with parents and children. Local men have established a cycle hub in the estate, with excellent support from Sustrans Northern Ireland and the Public Health Agency. We need more of those community-led schemes. Let us be clear: social inclusion must be a major focus of any legacy or cycling revolution. Let us not forget the Ballymacarrett, the Ballymurphy, the Ballysillan or the Ballycolman estates.

To conclude, Mr Speaker, to host an event of this kind is a real coup for Northern Ireland — for the economy, tourism, health and cycling, to name but a few. The three-day event next week is set to ignite interest in cycling around the country. Cycling in Northern Ireland will never be the same again. A cycling unit has been set up, we are looking at a strategy, and we are looking forward to major changes and progressive developments for cycling in Northern Ireland. As our motion states, we call on the Executive to take all necessary steps to maximise the potential that is to be gained through such a prestigious event. I commend the motion to the House.

10.45 am

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

"and to allocate adequate resources for the delivery of a suitable Giro legacy plan to include improved provision and infrastructure for schools, commuting, leisure, tourist and sporting cycling in Northern Ireland."

As chair of the all-party group on cycling and on behalf of the Alliance Party, I am delighted to support the motion and propose the amendment. I congratulate those who tabled the motion. It is only right that the Assembly recognises the significance of the Giro d'Italia coming to Northern Ireland to our economy, health and worldwide publicity for Northern Ireland. It is important, however, that the Assembly recognises and notes the unique opportunity that this is to allocate adequate resources and deliver a robust legacy plan for cycling in Northern Ireland.

On 9 to 11 May, Northern Ireland will host the opening stages of the Giro d'Italia. Around 22 teams containing 200 of the world's best cyclists from over 30 countries will be here for the Grande Partenza, or Big Start, of the race. We will, therefore, be on a truly global stage that weekend. It is a fantastic opportunity to highlight all that is positive about Northern Ireland to a huge audience. It is important to recognise the excellent work of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Discover Northern Ireland and the excellent set of videos presented by our very own Graham Little. The videos showcase the infrastructure, the sights, the countryside, our city and the glories of east Belfast and the Stormont estate on the World Wide Web and the world stage. They also contain really interesting interviews with Giro winner Stephen Roche and are a fantastic promotion for the pink revolution that is coming to Northern Ireland.

I agree with the proposer of the motion that the benefits of hosting such an event are many. There is huge potential to be gained from the event on many different levels. With the amendment, I wanted to emphasise that there is an opportunity to ignite a spark that will lead to more investment in and commitment to cycling in the region. I also wanted to propose to the Executive that there be an increased allocation of resources for the delivery of a robust legacy plan to include and address provision for cycling: in infrastructure, schools provision, commuting, leisure, tourism and the sport in Northern Ireland.

As chair of the all-party group on cycling, I liaise with cycling organisations. As a novice cyclist, I am increasingly aware of the benefits of the pursuit, and they should be covered in any legacy plan. Although provision and infrastructure for cycling in Northern Ireland is improving, it still falls significantly behind other areas. In the past decade, there has been a major rise in cycle commuters in Northern Ireland, with an estimated 60% increase in

Belfast alone. A 2012 DRD Northern Ireland travel survey found that the average person makes seven journeys by bike each year as opposed to five journeys by train. That said, the Executive spend in the same year was £1 million on cycling but £44 million on the railways. That is a total spend of 58p on cycling per head of population in Northern Ireland, whereas, in the Netherlands, for example, the spend is around £24 per head of population, which has helped to produce first-class cycling provision.

A 2013 TomTom survey named Belfast as the most congested city in the UK and revealed that, every time you drive during peak periods in the city, you could face significant delays. Drivers who make a half-hour daily commute to work spend significant time in traffic. One way of tackling that problem would be to increase cycling provision and to use this unique opportunity to promote that. A recent QUB study for the Connswater Community Greenway project found that there was also an issue of people thinking it too dangerous to participate in cycling. This event will show just how enjoyable and safe it is as a pursuit. The recent DOE advertising campaign also displayed the challenges facing cyclists in the region, but, hopefully, it will go some way to increasing the safety and awareness of cyclists on our roads.

Educating young cyclists and getting more children cycling will be another vital element of any plan. We have the lowest numbers of children cycling to school in the UK. It pales in comparison with other European countries. Further, cycling training in our schools is often seen as in need of modernisation, although I would like to recognise the excellent work of Sustrans in that regard. I know that the Department of the Environment has conducted a review of the active school travel programme. It would definitely be welcome if that could be increased and rolled out to a level 2 standard, which would include road travel training qualifications, in our schools to build on the momentum behind the Giro, produce future generations of cyclists in Northern Ireland and, indeed, encourage more children to cycle to school.

Access to bicycles is another barrier to cycling reaching its full potential in the region. Over 60% of households do not own a bicycle. There also appears to be a gender imbalance, with around seven males for every one female cycling to work here. Establishing and promoting social inclusion programmes alongside well-promoted schemes and initiatives, such as the cycle-to-work scheme,

are going to be crucial to removing any such barriers and should form part of a Giro legacy plan.

Expansions and upgrades of our cycle networks and greenways — we have the excellent Comber greenway that goes through my constituency of East Belfast — should help to attract more cyclists in the region. Improved upkeep of these networks, with measures such as regular gritting, maintenance and lighting, would also help us see more cyclists using these routes. It is essential that we have improved information about the routes and the cycling opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland through adequate provision of mapping. Good advertising to promote them could achieve that aim. Improvements on this note would also be beneficial in promoting our cycling product to tourists. That has been displayed in examples such as the Great Western Greenway in Mayo, which opened in 2011 and has won a European Destinations of Excellence award. It is also crucial, of course, that the Giro promotes the sport of cycling in the region and that cycling clubs and events receive relevant support further to it so that they can benefit fully from this event coming to Northern Ireland.

I hope that Members will be able to support the amendment — I welcome that that is the case for the proposer of the motion — and that this House will unite around the unique opportunity that hosting this event here in Northern Ireland is going to give us.

Bike Week will take place from 14 to 22 June this year. The all-party group on cycling hopes to use that event to engage with cycling in Belfast city centre and across the region. Hopefully, we can get even more MLAs out on their bikes to experience the commute in and around our city. More information about that will come forward.

I echo the sentiments of the proposer of the motion and encourage everyone in Northern Ireland, elected representatives and members of the public alike, to think pink; to get onto the Discover Northern Ireland website to get as much information about this fantastic event as possible; and to embrace the Giro d'Italia as it comes to Northern Ireland. It is going to pass through many amazing locations in Northern Ireland, including right here in the Stormont estate and east Belfast. I agree with the proposer that we hope that this event will provide a launch pad for the cycling revolution that the Minister for Regional Development has committed to delivering here in Northern Ireland. An essential aspect of that will be

having in place a real, meaningful and robust legacy plan for the Giro.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. The Giro will be an event on a scale that we have not seen in Ireland since the Tour de France way back in 1998, and, of course, it did not even come North at that time. On this occasion, from Ballycastle and all the way to Dublin, we can make a great success of this event. Of course, the legacy is absolutely crucial. In north Antrim, everything is going pink, from the cupcakes in Pappy's Bakery in Dunloy to Seamus McShane's Massey Ferguson in Ballintoy. We have a high concentration of cycling clubs in Dunloy, Ballymoney, Ballymena, Ballycastle, Loughguile and, indeed, Portglenone, all of which will be providing volunteers on day 2 to support stage 2 of the Giro through County Antrim.

Of course, there will be a huge tourism benefit, and we need to realise the longer term potential for sports, events, tourism and cycling. We need to invest to realise that potential. Millions will be watching, and I think that the general public have perhaps not realised the scale of the event that we are holding and the amount of people who will come from across Europe and the world to watch it. As has been flagged up by NITB in a number of presentations, it is a great marketing opportunity.

It is interesting that a number of cycling developments seem to be dovetailing at this time. The Sam Thompson Bridge was opened recently, which, I should point out, was made in Rasharkin. The Belfast bike hire scheme will be introduced shortly, and there is the Giro. There is a greater political focus on the issue of cycling, and the impact so far of the cycle-to-work scheme should not be underestimated.

I am sure that no one has failed to realise that there has been a huge increase in the number of cyclists on the road. If every person who would like to cycle to work did so, our obesity levels would plummet. We would have fewer mental health problems, and there would be big savings for the health service and better outcomes in health and well-being. However, the fact is that people will not do that because they feel that the roads are not safe enough and that the current infrastructure is totally inadequate. There is a culture of "car first" in road design and in Roads Service that we need to tackle. Many politicians, including us, and many stakeholders are still very car centric when it comes to transport. We do not recognise as much as we should and as much as many European mainland politicians the

potential health impacts of better road and transport design.

Sinn Féin wants to see investment in cycling increase from the 58p to which the chairperson of the all-party group referred to £10 per person each year. We want to ensure that cyclists are properly accommodated on public transport, including bus and rail. We want to see the proper enforcement of cycle lanes. There are many cycle lanes throughout this city and the North, and many a lick of new paint has gone down, but if they are not enforced and you have many different vehicles parking in them and blocking them, what is the point of them? There needs to be consideration by the roads Minister of how that can be more greatly enforced. We also support the 20's Plenty campaign and recognise that more 20 mph zones will increase the amount of walking and cycling.

If you look south to Dublin, you will see that the infrastructure is not great there either. The Dublinbikes scheme has been introduced, but the most recent figures have shown that the number of people using bikes will soon surpass the number using the Luas in the city. That should flag up the fact that a great proportion of transport users are using bicycles, but they are not getting the same level of investment as people using the Luas, the buses or the trains. If we invest and put £10 per person into cycling infrastructure, we will get more than double that back from potential health impacts and the reduction in congestion. Cyclists take up much less room than motor vehicles, so cycling leads to less congestion in our towns and cities. That improves everyone's lot, not just that of cyclists.

The legacy of the Giro will be reliant on political leadership on cycling. Although I have praised the Minister for some of the decisions that have been made, they have been easy decisions.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McKay: If we are serious about public health, obesity and relieving stress on the health service, we need to get serious about cycling.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mise sásta tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don leasú. I support the motion and the amendment. I welcome the opportunity to add my congratulations to all who have been involved in attracting and hosting the Giro d'Italia Grande Partenza, which kicks off in

Belfast and travels through County Antrim and, via County Armagh, to Dublin.

11.00 am

On day three, the Giro will travel through some of the most beautiful countryside that we have, starting at Armagh City, and then through the south Armagh villages of Newtownhamilton, Belleeks and Lislea, through the beautiful Ring of Gullion, on to Forkhill and across the border. We very much welcome the Giro in County Armagh. It is an excellent opportunity to showcase the beauty of the countryside.

Many roadshows, public meetings and community gatherings have already been held in the area to inform people about the event, encourage as many as possible to get involved, and present the Giro toolkit. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has the support and backup of Armagh City and District Council and Newry and Mourne District Council in dressing the Giro route in our area. That will help to maximise the impact for Northern Ireland as a whole.

The councils are actively promoting the event, and information flyers, posters, outdoor banners and adverts have been distributed throughout the area to raise awareness. There is tremendous enthusiasm for the event and the public are very much looking forward to it. Newry and Mourne District Council has purchased extra bunting and is working with groups along the route in dressing and decorating various areas. The council is keen to support the Tourist Board to present the best possible image of our area to the approximately 800 million television viewers.

The council is keen that the Tourist Board helps it as much as possible in dressing the route. I think it has been in touch with the Tourist Board to ask for extra help to ensure that all the route is properly dressed. I am interested to hear from the Minister the response of the Tourist Board to that request. There is great enthusiasm for the event in the area and the councils in Armagh and Newry are doing all possible to ensure the greatest possible tourism impact for the area as a result of the event.

Two hundred-plus professional cyclists will participate in the first three stages, of the gruelling 21 stages of the race, that will take place here. The race will finish in Trieste, in Italy, on 1 June after 2,141 miles. That is a huge distance by any measure. It is a coup for Northern Ireland to have this event here. Tourism is extremely important to us, supporting 40,000 jobs. The tourism strategy

for Northern Ireland 2020 is ambitious and plans to increase visitor numbers to 4.5 million and earnings from tourism to £1 billion by 2020. Those targets will be achieved only if all of us as individuals recognise opportunities such as the Giro and give such events every possible support.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr D Bradley: I very much welcome this event and wish all those involved success.

Mrs Overend: It is a pleasure to speak on one of the most uncontentious motions that I have ever seen in the Chamber. It is fair to say that, on this occasion, everyone in the Chamber will be embracing the pink revolution.

Few of us, apart from avid fans of cycling, would have been aware of the Giro d'Italia a year ago. Most of us could have named the Tour de France, but that was where our knowledge of bicycle road races started and finished. Now, less than a fortnight away from the start of the three stages, the Grande Partenza, it is fair to say that Northern Ireland has gone Giro mad, in a good way of course.

It is now the world's second largest cycle race, ranking behind only the Tour de France in prestige. The Giro d'Italia is one of the highlights of the racing calendar. The riders love it, I understand, because it is more relaxed than the Tour and because the tifosi, the Italian fans, are passionately enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Last year's Giro was broadcast in 165 countries, with an estimated global audience of 775 million people. What is also exciting about the Giro d'Italia is the level of community events that are running in tandem with the race itself in and around the route of the Giro. I see great parallels with the community events that surrounded the Olympic torch run and the Queen's jubilee two summers ago. That, along with having our very own home-grown successful cyclists, such as Wendy Houvenaghel from Upperlands in County Londonderry, works to highlight and increase Northern Ireland's interest in all things cycling.

The aim is for there to be a great party atmosphere during the weekend of the event as Ulster gears up for what is set to be one of the highlights of the sporting calendar. As a keen but fair-weather cyclist myself, I and my family certainly look forward to the Giro. The party Giro d'Italia atmosphere is certainly catching right across Northern Ireland. I was at Glenariff

forest park at the weekend, and, from there all the way up to the north coast, I saw pink everywhere, from lamp posts to shop windows, bus shelters and even garden ornaments, leading right up to Bushmills, where my colleague and friend councillor Sandra Hunter has even dyed her sheep pink.

A Member: *[Interruption.]*

Mrs Overend: Absolutely. Towns, villages and community and sporting organisations are all getting involved. The event is truly bringing an infectious smile to Northern Ireland, a bit like our friend the late David McClarty, to whom we all paid tribute yesterday but we will remember today, as he would also have been very keen to join in this sporting event.

At a local mid-Ulster level, despite the fact that the event does not visit my constituency, I am particularly delighted to see Cicli Sport, a cycle firm from Moneymore in the heart of mid-Ulster, with almost 40 years in the business, being so much involved in the preparations of the Giro d'Italia events. The recent Giro hall of fame celebration event at the Giant's Causeway, which saw Stephen Roche inducted to the roll of honour, follows Cicli's involvement in the Giro d'Italia launch last year. Cicli has been asked to supply a number of Pinarello bicycles for the launch and associated events, and it has brought its rich heritage in cycling to the build up to the historic race. Cicli Sport, which takes its name from Italian roots and brings three generations of cycling tradition to mid-Ulster, will tie the best of Northern Irish cycling with the world class sporting event. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate that local business on its success and contribution to cycling.

In terms of a legacy, of course we hope to benefit from an increase in tourism, but, more than that, as legislators we should really tap into the current enthusiasm for all things bike related by kick-starting a cycling revolution. My colleague the Regional Development Minister, Danny Kennedy, has already signalled where we should be going. As he said in March:

"We need to create an environment which invites people to walk and cycle as much as possible. That is my vision for Northern Ireland and I am committed to making it happen."

The Minister has created a dedicated cycling unit in his Department to develop infrastructure plans, working closely with organisations such as Sustrans, as well as other cycling

stakeholders such as the national cycling charity. I have no doubt that the all-party group on cycling will keep a close eye on how things develop in the months to come.

I would like to add my congratulations to those who successfully brought the Giro d'Italia to Northern Ireland for promoting the event within Northern Ireland and across the world. I look forward to hearing about the results and the successes for the economy. I will conclude by saying that —

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

Mrs Overend: Let us all commit to creating a cycling revolution in Northern Ireland as a fitting legacy to the Giro d'Italia in 2014.

Mr D McIlveen: I am very happy to rise in support of the motion and the amendment that has been brought forward in the name of Mr Lyttle. I do so as chair of the all-party group on tourism and also as a representative of the most beautiful constituency in Northern Ireland, North Antrim, which benefits very well from the route of the Giro d'Italia. I certainly look forward, at a constituency level, to seeing the benefits that will come to the area from that route.

Perhaps a year ago, as Miss Overend mentioned, other than avid cycling fans, very few people knew much about the Giro d'Italia. However, I think that many of us are now feeling the excitement build towards 9 May and are looking forward to seeing the race get under way. We are also looking forward to seeing all the hard work that the promoters, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Department put in yield the results that we all want to see. It is estimated that 100,000 spectators will be on the streets watching the race go by and cheering it on. That cannot fail to benefit our local businesses, as the spectators will avail themselves of the services that will be provided in many of our towns and villages. An estimated £10 million of revenue will come as a result of the event. That is an exceptional return for the amount that has been put in; the estimate is that around £3 million of investment will receive a £10 million return. I think that that is a good news story for anyone in the Assembly.

Twenty two teams are due to take part, with 200 cyclists. The event will be broadcast in 165 countries, and I gather that that number has now increased slightly. That is the type of publicity that money simply cannot buy.

Watched in 165 countries, the event will give an estimated 775 million viewers the opportunity to see what I believe to be the picture-perfect postcard view of Northern Ireland as the cyclists go around our north coast and then back down into Armagh at the end of the stage.

The one thing that I have to say is this: I feel that this is probably one of the most positive motions brought to the Assembly in recent days. It is regrettable that, unfortunately, it is not the one that will most likely grab the headlines today. For those who make the argument that, because of positions that are taken on certain issues, Northern Ireland can be viewed as a laughing stock, I say this: Northern Ireland has hosted the World Police and Fire Games; it has hosted world-leading golf tournaments; it is now the most economically developing region of the United Kingdom among the devolved regions; we had the UK City of Culture in Londonderry; we had the Turner Prize; we have weekly announcements — at times daily announcements — of foreign investment from companies creating jobs and wealth in Northern Ireland; we hosted the G8; and we are now hosting the Giro d'Italia. This country is no laughing stock. This country is the envy of the world.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo agus ar son an leasaithe. I am in favour of the motion and the amendment. I agree with the comments of the previous Member who spoke that this is a positive motion. It is one of those motions that, if people cared to tune in and listen to the debate, they would know how it impacts on the ground.

Given that everybody is plugging all the other areas, I want to talk about the best part of the North of Ireland, which is Armagh city and district and into Newry and Mourne. A key element for me is that, over the past weeks, I have met a number of community groups and have seen the way that they have embraced the event. I have to mention my own town. Last June, myself, Conor Murphy MP and Councillor Roy McCartney took the opportunity to engage with and meet members of the organising committee. I commend Stephen Gallagher and Darach McQuaid. People may or may not know Stephen Gallagher. Stephen was a professional cyclist from Richhill, and he played a big part in bringing the event to the North of the island. We took the opportunity to meet him, and when I asked him when he was coming to Armagh city and district, I suggested that he visit my own town of Keady and maybe travel up through Keady mountain, on up to

Newtownhamilton and into Slieve Gullion. Thankfully, that is going to happen, and the people of Keady have embraced it. A number of groups, including the community festival group, have, thankfully, got funding through the council to decorate the town and so forth.

11.15 am

I congratulate the groups that are playing their part, because it is about the community. I will talk about the legacy in a few minutes, but I want to commend all the groups that have embraced it. I also thank the Minister for Social Development and the local councils. Money is available to decorate all those towns. A number of dilapidated buildings now have a beautiful frontage; however, there is a storey behind the facade of those buildings. I do not want to be too negative, but I congratulate the councils for giving the money to clean up the towns.

This race will pass through our towns and villages for a couple of days and it will be away. However, it gives us a massive opportunity to grow and to build on. Armagh has a huge tourist potential with its cathedrals, Navan Fort, the observatory and the planetarium. Whilst I have said on a number of occasions that we have only the public sector — thankfully, the public sector — jobs in Armagh, there is an opportunity for tourism potential through the likes of this. I know that the Minister has done a lot of good work. I welcome the Minister at any time to Armagh City and District Council, and she has been down a few times. A lot of good work has been done, but there are great opportunities for tourism as a result of this.

I want to speak about health as well. If we give people the idea of getting on bicycles and getting fit, it will have a long-term impact on the health budget, and we will be able to redirect money to other things. However, this is the starting point, and I certainly welcome it.

In closing, I also want to thank all the schools that got involved. It has been absolutely incredible. I can speak only from Armagh city and district and Newry and Mourne's point of view, but the number of people who will be out on that day and the thousands of people who will flock to our part of the country to see it will be absolutely fantastic, and we look forward to it.

Obviously there is the legacy issue; other people have mentioned different things, and I do not propose to go into every single thing that other Members have said. I certainly do support it: I will be a good day. This is a good

motion and it should be looked on positively. With regard to what the previous Member said, it is up to the media's portrayal of the motion as to whether anything will come out of this. However, I hope that they can see the significance and the potential of the Giro d'Italia.

Mr Dunne: I, too, am happy to support the motion brought by my keen cyclist friend Sammy Douglas. There seems to be something about east Belfast; people seem to have really got on their bikes and made an effort. I had the privilege of the First Minister coming down to my constituency in North Down by bike during the summer holiday, accompanied by his colleague Sammy Douglas. Unfortunately, I was not there; I was away on holiday. Fortunately, the office was open for business, and they were assured that business was being done within the constituency — no doubt.

This is a very prestigious event to be brought to Northern Ireland, and we should put on record our thanks to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster — as we probably would do, over on this side of the House — for heading up this project. It is a very exciting event and another of the major flagship events that have come to Northern Ireland and that will come in the future.

The support of the Executive is very important, along with that of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, as has been mentioned, and the various councils that have got involved. Of course Tourism Ireland, to be fair, has also put in sponsorship. Without that sponsorship and support, these events would not happen. It is important that we recognise that and put it on record.

Of course, there are also the volunteers, the marshals, the club officials and the enthusiasts who get involved. Without enthusiasts, these things would not happen. The people who have the ideas, the drive and determination to bring forward these projects and who have a keen interest and commit to give of their time voluntarily are the people who make these sort of events happen, and it is important that we record that.

No doubt, this event will bring great excitement across most of Northern Ireland. Such events will bring a real boost to tourism. This is a great opportunity for first-time visitors to Northern Ireland. We have a lot to be thankful for in that things have moved on in this country and that such events happen. When people come here

and meet the people and sample the food, the hospitality and the warmth, they come back.

A great example of that over the Easter period was the Circuit of Ireland rally — I suppose that that is my hobby horse — and it was a great success. The event is part of the European Rally Championship, and this was the second time that we managed to get it, again with the support of various Departments. The competitors who came here from some 16 European countries were most impressed by what they saw. Fortunately, the weather was brilliant, as were the crowds that turned out to see it and the enthusiasm. In Newtownards alone, which, unfortunately, is not in my constituency but just outside it, 20,000 people watched the rally on a summer evening.

The most positive part of the event was the television coverage on Eurosport, which was beamed throughout the world. Just today, the organiser Bobby Willis, who is the enthusiast behind it, said that the head of Eurosport was blown away by the pictures of Northern Ireland's scenery. That scenery consisted of the Titanic Quarter, where part of the rally was based; Scrabo Tower; the Ards peninsula; and the Mourne mountains. South Down got quite a bit of coverage in the whole thing. It is a good news story.

These sorts of events have great potential, and I think that we as an Assembly and through the Executive should do all that we can to encourage them. It is positive news that promotes a very positive image of this country. As for the airtime that the rally got on television, two 35-minute programmes went out on Eurosport during the week, which were repeated in another hour-long programme. The television coverage, the footage and the scenery were mind-boggling. It is great, positive news. I believe that we should grasp and promote such events. When people get a taste of this country and the people here, they are bound to come back.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin agus an leasaithe. I support the motion and the amendment.

Cosúil le gach duine eile, tá áthas an domhain orm a fheiceáil go bhfuil an Giro d'Italia ag teacht go hÉirinn ar an tseachtain seo chugainn, nuair a thitfidh na céad chéimeanna amach i mBéal Feirste, in Aontroim agus in Ard Mhacha, roimh bhogadh ó dheas go Baile Átha Cliath. Like everyone else, I am delighted that the Giro d'Italia will come to Ireland next week, when its opening stages will take place in

Belfast, Antrim and Armagh before moving south to Dublin. As a Belfast woman, I am very happy to see the cyclists coming to my city. Like everybody else, I am more than happy to wear pink to show my support. This is a huge event, and it is a great boost for us that the Big Start, or the Tús Mór, will happen here in Belfast. Is ócáid mhór í seo atá ina neartú iontach dúinn go mbeidh An Tús Mór ag tarlú anseo i mBéal Feirste.

I have to admit that I did not know much about the Giro, but I have learned a lot over recent weeks. It has been running for over 100 years and will involve upwards of 200 professional cyclists from all over the world. While three days of the event will be held here in the North of Ireland, it is primarily an Italian long-distance road bicycle stage race held annually over a three-week period in May and June.

We can expect a major influx of cyclists and cycling enthusiasts for the event. For tourism, it is a fantastic opportunity to capitalise on having so many foreign visitors and to showcase all that we have to be proud of. We want to impress people who have maybe never thought of coming here before but are coming now because of the Giro. It is important that we ensure that those visitors have a great experience beyond the cycling and see it as a place that they will come back to visit again. Tá sé tábhachtach go ndéanfimid cinnte de go mbeidh eispéireas iontach ag cuairteoirí amach ó rothaíocht agus go bhfeicfeadh siad an tír seo mar áit ar mhaith leo teacht ar ais ann.

The world will be watching us between 9 and 11 May, because, as we are told, the Giro will attract a potential global audience of 800 million. In 2012, the opening stages of the Giro were held in Denmark, and the reports show that it was an extremely successful event. Up to half a million spectators were in attendance, generating an economic turnover of around €14.5 million, with €5.4 million coming from international tourists, so, clearly, we can reap economic benefits from the event.

Although, for here, the event will be over this time two weeks, we need to ensure that there will be a legacy that will last far beyond that. We hope that it will prove to be an inspiration to many, who, as a result, will take up cycling as a sport, pastime, or, more importantly, just as a way of keeping healthy. It would be wrong to miss this opportunity to encourage our community to think about adopting healthier approaches. Bheadh sé mícheart má chaillimid an deis seo ár bpobal a spreagadh maidir le cur chuige níos sláintiúla.

We already know about the trend towards people being overweight and having increasing levels of heart disease, diabetes and mental health issues and the absolute importance of looking at ways of improving our lifestyles. None of us needs to be told any more that we need to eat healthier and take more exercise if we are to increase our chances of living a long, active life. So if the Giro d'Italia can inspire any of us to take up cycling or any other way of keeping fit, that will be a worthwhile legacy.

If we are to encourage people to get on their bikes, we need to enable them to do so by increasing the number of cycle lanes and making cycling a safe activity. In that regard, of course, the Cycle to Work opportunity is also a positive message. We know as well that the DRD cycling unit is working on developing a clear and aspirational vision for cycling that will be articulated through a long-term bicycle strategy for the North, which will take into account factors such as the wider, long-term economic, social and environmental benefits. Those are all positive developments.

The pink spectacle of the Giro d'Italia will last here for three days of its total three weeks. Like everyone else, I am sure that it will be a great event. However, I hope that its legacy will be even greater, with long-lasting positive outcomes in increased tourism, economic benefits and healthier lifestyles.

Mar fhocal scoir, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas agus buíochas a ghabháil le gach duine, grúpa agus eagraíocht atá páirteach san ócáid seo. On a final note, I congratulate and thank every person, group and organisation involved in this great event.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na daoine a mhol an rún agus, ar ndóigh, leo sin a chuir an leasú os ár gcomhair. I thank the proposers of the motion and of the amendment, which is very helpful indeed.

Along with the Tour de France and the Vuelta a España, the Giro d'Italia is one of cycling's three Grand Tours — marathon events that take place over three weeks. They are the test for professional cyclists. Being chosen to hold the Grande Partenza is a huge honour for this small part of Ireland. It is also recognition of the growth in popularity of cycling as a sport, not just in Ireland but across these islands. No one can have failed to notice the increased and increasing numbers of cyclists, in particular cycle club races, on our roads.

The popularity of cycling in these islands will also see this year's Tour de France begin in Yorkshire. The rise in popularity has no doubt been helped by the success on Europe's roads of British riders such as Bradley Wiggins, Chris Froome and the Manx missile, Mark Cavendish. Irish cycling is also in good health, with Nicolas Roche and Dan Martin winning Grand Tour stages in recent years. Of course success on the roads has been matched by success in the velodrome. I highlight the recent track record of Newtownards rider Martyn Irvine, who is undoubtedly an inspiration to many young cyclists. Unfortunately, Wiggins, Froome and Cavendish have opted out of the Giro this year; Yorkshire and the Tour de France are too close.

I am sure, however, that the riders who come here to compete will provide the spectacle that cycling fans are used to from the Giro. The Causeway and Antrim coast will certainly provide a stunning backdrop for the action on the road. I am sure that the organisers are hoping some for some crosswinds on the day for teams to negotiate.

The Executive have a responsibility to ensure that the tourism potential of the Giro is not just maximised in the here and now but that a legacy remains when the Giro leaves the island. At this stage, so close to the start of the Giro, I fully expect the tourism Minister to be able to recite — I am sure that she is — a list of promotional events and other measures geared towards maximising an immediate boost in visitor numbers and encouraging returning visitors in the future. I also expect there to be a concerted cross-departmental drive to ensure the smooth running of the Giro d'Italia 2014. On policing, transport, roads and accommodation, Ministers will be doing all they can to make sure that the Giro d'Italia is a great success.

11.30 am

My party colleague the Environment Minister would, I am sure, want me to mention his contribution in banning election posters from the route. Let us hope that all political parties can remember what they have agreed not to do.

It is disappointing, however, that, on the eve of the Giro d'Italia 2014, a major section of the national cycle network line is to close to walkers and cyclists for two years while Belfast City Council builds a £29.5 million extension to the Waterfront Hall. Surely, a somewhat better solution could have been found to that particular problem.

Executive Ministers have been concentrating on the immediate issue of making the Giro d'Italia 2014 a success, but it is also important that we build on the opportunity that we have been presented with. We need a legacy plan. That is what the motion and, in particular, the amendment, call on the Executive to do: to plan now for the moment that the Giro leaves the island and to create a legacy for future generations. That legacy should be for cycling, sport, health, education, transport, tourism and the economy. We need to provide the necessary resources to deliver that legacy.

The SDLP wants the arrival of the Giro d'Italia 2014 to be a landmark moment for Northern Irish sport. We also want it to be the foundation of a greater future for cycling on this island. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate today, and I support the motion and the amendment. Many Members have mentioned the scale of the Giro d'Italia, and I am delighted to see that the Estate here is already gearing up for the event.

The SDLP feels that the amendment tabled to the motion is very fitting, as, for us, it is the legacy of the Giro that will arguably be the most important part of its effect on Northern Ireland. In the short term, the tourism boost offered by it will be sizeable. We are hearing that 140,000 tourists are expected, and it will offer a chance for Northern Ireland to market its unique selling points to a worldwide audience, including its beautiful coastlines and the hospitality of its people. The real challenge now, however, is that legacy. We cannot allow it to become a fleeting showpiece; rather, it must kick-start a firm and sustainable cycling tradition here in the North.

We cannot underestimate the effect that cycling promotion and success can have on the economy. Look at Olympic cycling and the achievements of Team Sky. The UK cycle tourism market was worth £635 million in 1997, and that has now grown to an estimated £1 billion. That is staggering growth in anybody's money. Who is to say that we cannot replicate the successes of Team Sky and its riders, such as Bradley Wiggins and Chris Froome, when we possess talents such as Nicolas Roche and Dan Martin and the marketing opportunity that is Giro d'Italia? We must have the ambition to grow our cycling market and build on the success of our riders.

Look how Scotland, as was mentioned, has utilised leisure cycling. That may, too, be instructive in how we could do the same. The

emphasis that the Scottish Government placed on the brand of Scottish cycling and the use of theme has generated sizeable benefit, way beyond just cycling and revenue. However, the combined revenue from Scottish cycling in a single year, taking into account the additional benefits such as health, employment and cycling infrastructure, is up to £350 million. It is right to ask where our plans are.

The SDLP believes that too much of our health focus is on treating ill health and not sufficiently promoting active health lifestyles. The Scottish example is further proof that preventative health works economically, and, if Northern Ireland can build a cycling legacy, we, too, could see that economic and health benefit.

The Giro d'Italia originated in Italy and now receives worldwide affection when it comes to other countries. We have other two-wheel pedigrees: where is our ambition to promote our proficiency on two wheels in, for example, motorbike racing? How have we built on the legacy of people such as Joey Dunlop and can we do more?

In 2012, the Giro started in Denmark. They measured its effect, stating that it was a tremendous success in enhancing local tourism and expanding its international market. It has been done before, and it can be done again. Northern Ireland has been trying to achieve foreign direct investment and the recent troubles over the flag protests have harmed that. The international marketing improvements that Denmark has experienced would no doubt have great effect on the marketability of Northern Ireland and the vitality of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector in exports.

It has been said a number of times here that the Giro is a magnificent coup, and those involved must be congratulated for bringing it here. The SDLP has no doubt that it will be a success and encourages everyone to become involved and experience it at first hand.

It is particularly pleasing that, at this point, as my colleague said, there is broad consensus about the removal of election posters from the Giro route. However, to reiterate: this Government must work to ensure that the Giro is not a fleeting tourism spectacle.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Bringing the Giro to Northern Ireland is a very positive thing, and we heard about the other countries that it has been in. Although he does not represent Fermanagh, I am sure that, as a native of the county, he would be very pleased

if it came as far as Fermanagh which, unfortunately, is missing out on this occasion. Maybe that will happen next time, but I am sure he would be interested in having it in the county.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute to his time.

Mr McKinney: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Of course I would be absolutely thrilled if it was in every county, but the point I am trying to arrive at is not so much that we look within but that we use the experience of the Italians. They took a small annual event and broadened it out, and they now export the Grande Partenza. That is what we need to do: have vision and ambition similar to that which the Italians had with this project. They are sharing that project with us, and we are allowed to grow as a result. Is that not what part of our vision and ambition for this should be?

You are absolutely right, Mr Elliott: of course Fermanagh, Down, Armagh, Tyrone, Derry and Antrim should all have a share of this, but let us see if we can have a vision and ambition to share this out further. What unique products of ours can we share with other parts of the world?

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Grazie, Mr Speaker, thank you very much. It is very welcome and, indeed, timely that Members have had the opportunity to debate this motion, because, in just a few days, we will be hosting the Grande Partenza of the 2014 Giro d'Italia, and we will be firmly in the international spotlight. The Executive, my Department, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and others have all worked very hard and have committed significant resources to secure this historic and, we hope, spectacular event for Northern Ireland.

The World Police and Fire Games, which was the major sporting event of last year, generated a real sense of public ownership, involvement and celebration. Now, through the Giro, there is a growing excitement and anticipation right across Northern Ireland. I know that Members wanted to make comments about their own constituencies, but, as I travel around, I know that all of Northern Ireland is very excited about the fact that we are hosting this great sporting occasion.

Pink mania is spreading across Northern Ireland with talk of shops, restaurants, landmark buildings and even livestock going pink to welcome the Giro spectacle, and I have seen

pink sheep on the north Antrim coast. Just today, Royal Mail announced that it has created a special commemorative postmark to mark the Giro d'Italia coming to Northern Ireland. Such postmarks are issued only when there are major or historic events in the United Kingdom, and it is the very first time that we are going to have a commemorative postmark for a Northern Ireland event. We should all welcome that initiative by Royal Mail.

Bringing the Giro to Northern Ireland has the potential to contribute significantly to the economy by attracting additional visitors and generating additional tourism revenue. Up to 140,000 visitors — 42,000 of whom, we estimate, will come from out of state — are expected to attend the event, generating a festival atmosphere, boosting business and generating tourism opportunities in cities, towns and villages. Our tourism industry will be in full swing during the event, and hotels, pubs, restaurants, cafes and food producers can all expect to benefit.

It was very interesting to hear Mrs Overend say that a business in her constituency has benefited from the Giro d'Italia because people sometimes miss the fact that there are businesses here in Northern Ireland benefiting from the Giro coming. Yesterday, I visited John McQuillan (Contracts) Ltd, which put down the hard standing at the Titanic Quarter and which has benefited from supplying that facility to the Giro d'Italia, working with Titanic Quarter Belfast. We must not lose sight of the fact that many other local businesses are benefiting from the Giro d'Italia.

However, an event of this size and scope — one of the biggest events in the international sporting calendar — goes much wider than the economy and tourism, very significant though those are. I think a lot of Members have recognised that through references to health and the fact that we are trying to generate interest among young people in getting involved in fitness and, essentially, getting on their bike. That should all be welcomed as well.

It is expected that the Giro will generate some £10 million worth of worldwide publicity for Northern Ireland, as well as promoting and encouraging, as I said, sporting and cultural exchanges, educational opportunities and a healthy lifestyle. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the Giro goes out to 174 countries around the world. It has a daily audience of 1.7 million and a total TV audience reach of some 800 million. Approximately two million people stream the event live, and it gets a million page views per day on the Giro website during the

event, as well as 100,000 followers on Twitter and 120,000 app downloads. That gives you a sense of the scale of what we are going to be involved in next week.

This represents an unprecedented opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland, our people and some of our best tourism assets and scenic landscapes to millions of cycling enthusiasts and general holidaymakers around the world. It will build on our international reputation, already enhanced and primed by the successful hosting of last year's G8 summit in Fermanagh, the World Police and Fire Games, Derry/Londonderry's tenure as the first UK City of Culture and the highly successful ni2012 campaign the previous year.

Preparations to ensure that our Big Start is one of the Giro's best ever are now well advanced. The key stakeholders and partners in Northern Ireland are working closely with the race organisers, RCS Sport. My Department, through the Tourist Board, has set up a number of working groups specifically designed to address all aspects of the Giro d'Italia. Those working groups were exclusively created to discuss how local councils can capitalise on the Giro and the opportunities it brings to their areas.

Through the NITB, the Department has already committed £3 million to secure the event for Northern Ireland, and over £300,000 has now been utilised by NITB on event dressing to ensure that the route and surrounding areas are appropriately dressed. On Mr Bradley's issue around that and Newry and Mourne council, the Tourist Board has purchased very significant dressing and has given Newry and Mourne council the full dressing pack. It was waiting for the council to come through with potential dressing sites, but it has just received those, and the dressing plan has been agreed with both Armagh and Newry and Mourne councils. That is happening as we speak.

Of course, the dressing is very important to show the world, especially global event organisers, not only that we are capable and competent at hosting world-class events, but that we go the extra mile and really want to welcome people to Northern Ireland. In that respect, both my Department and NITB very much welcome the Environment Minister's temporary ban on election posters. I think that most parties had indicated their willingness to comply with that in any event, but it is good to have the ban in place. It is important that we are viewed in the most positive light while hosting this magnificent event.

We have a full programme of marketing activity to ensure that the benefits of hosting the event are fully maximised. We have put out a full suite of messages welcoming the Giro d'Italia to Northern Ireland at key points of entry into Northern Ireland, including Belfast International Airport, Belfast City Airport, Stena Line, P&O, Belfast Central station and Great Victoria Street station. Also, I am sure that everyone has received their Giro d'Italia guide, which was delivered to every household in Northern Ireland last week.

To promote the Giro to potential visitors, the Tourist Board is rolling out a fully integrated domestic marketing campaign to raise awareness of the event and to educate and encourage participation in the many festivals and events surrounding it. That campaign activity is being underpinned by extensive PR, social media and activation activity, and integration with our own Discover Northern Ireland consumer website.

11.45 am

Also, we are reaching out into the Republic of Ireland, to 600,000 homes in Dublin, Kildare and Donegal, encouraging people to book short breaks in Northern Ireland around the Giro festivities. Everyone knows by now that we have secured the services of the legendary cyclist and former Giro d'Italia winner, Stephen Roche, to market and promote tourism in the lead up to Giro, and he has done a magnificent job in his ambassadorial role for the event.

Mr Dunne mentioned the amount of coverage that the Circuit of Ireland rally received on Eurosport. I was delighted to hear what he had to say in relation to that. We supported the Circuit of Ireland through our events fund. I was also delighted that there was good weather for that event this year. Television coverage will play a huge role for us with the Giro as well. We want to reach out to overseas markets and it is very important that we do so through all media.

We have been focusing on the event itself, but today Members have obviously wanted to talk about legacy issues as well. Indeed, the amendment refers to that. I am responsible for tourism and economic development; other Ministers have responsibility for schools, sporting cycling and all those things. My Department has invested in off-road cycling, as you know, in Castlewellan, Rostrevor, Blessingbourne in County Tyrone and Fivemiletown. The whole ethos of cycling and outdoor activities very much forms part of our tourism offering in Northern Ireland at present.

I understand that my colleague the Health Minister has also been very much involved in promoting cycling as a way of keeping fit, and the Public Health Agency promotes the uptake of cycling through a range of initiatives as well.

In short, the 2014 Giro d'Italia will be a very significant event for Northern Ireland. Part of its legacy will include footage and imagery of an iconic cycling event travelling through our city streets, tourism landmarks and stunning landscapes. Everything is in place and we can only hope that the weather will be similar to what it was over the Easter period so that we can show off our best assets in the best way.

We have a legacy plan for the event itself. The Giro d'Italia's legacy is the Gran Fondo. I have already talked to a number of MLAs who are not hosting the Grande Partenza but who would like to host the Gran Fondo, and that is something that I continue to talk to them about. They want to be positive about the event and welcome the legacy event to their area. I continue to talk to those people.

As well as that, other cycling races have developed as a result of the Giro coming here. Indeed, in Fermanagh, Curadmir, a cycling event, is happening over the May period as well. So, we will see a roll-on event from the Giro d'Italia coming to Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, Mr Boylan's point about the community embracing this event has been very much part of what we in the Department and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board have been trying to do throughout our events. We want people who live here to have a sense of civic pride about the events we bring to Northern Ireland. I am very pleased to say that, so far —

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will indeed.

Mr G Robinson: Could we also include that, about a week later, the North West 200 motorcycle race takes place on the north coast? There is also the Milk Cup competition as well, which attracts quite a big audience to our towns, cities and the country in general. I commend the Minister for the great work that she has done in trying to host all those events.

Mrs Foster: Indeed, May is a very busy month. We started off with the Circuit of Ireland; we have the Giro d'Italia; and, of course, we have the very important North West 200 and the Milk Cup as well. The Milk Cup continues to be called that; despite the fact that it has changed

its sponsor, it is still very much the Milk Cup. I look forward to those events growing as well. We have a real desire to see our home-grown events grow and be sustainable. We will work with our local promoters and we want to bring events in as well.

Northern Ireland has now placed itself very much in the area where we are seen to be a home for events. That is something that we should be very proud of.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the unanimous support and positivity that we have had for the motion and amendment and, indeed, the encouragement that the Assembly is giving to everybody in Northern Ireland to join the Giro d'Italia pink revolution between 9 May and 11 May. It is truly a world-class and iconic sporting and cycling event, and our businesses, restaurants, shops, hotels, visitor attractions, community organisations, volunteers and clubs are all ready to provide first-class hospitality to the world. As the Minister rightly said, we have inspirational locations, stunning landscapes and the friendliest people to offer that welcome. The excitement and drama that will hopefully be provided by the time trials really will be a spectacle for everyone to behold.

All Members who spoke rightly referred to their respective "best" constituencies in Northern Ireland that will be part of this fantastic event, from Titanic Belfast to the Causeway coastal route, the glens and the historic city of Armagh. Of course, I would encourage people to particularly take in day 1 stage 1 in east Belfast from Titanic Belfast and the Titanic Quarter along the Newtownards Road. The Holywood Arches area has been dressed fantastically with Freddie Forte by the Tourist Board, the council and everyone involved. On the Upper Newtownards Road, Dave Kane Cycles and the Ballyhackamore Business Association have done fantastic work to ensure that everyone who visits that part of the route will get a really warm welcome.

However, all Members have rightly acknowledged that we want the ambition of the Northern Ireland Executive for the legacy of the Giro d'Italia to be broad and high. We hope that the debate initiates a real and meaningful discussion and action plan for cycling in Northern Ireland to deliver the cycling revolution and legacy that the Minister for Regional Development has committed to. We hope that that includes greater investment, better road and transport design, increased school cycling and active travel education for our young people, enforcement of our cycle lanes and information about and enhancement of the dedicated cycle network that we have in

Northern Ireland. That will take political leadership and Members to step up to the calls they made today.

I would like to echo the huge positivity that there is around the event. I also want to congratulate everyone involved in bringing the Giro d'Italia to Northern Ireland, including the work of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the fantastic work of the Tourist Board and Discover Northern Ireland. I encourage everyone — all members of the public — to visit the Discover Northern Ireland website for the Giro d'Italia. It is a fantastic website. It has some really interesting videos and a fantastic social hub in which people from all organisations and backgrounds are contributing to the excitement around the event with information on the routes. I encourage everyone to be part of the start and to make this a landmark moment for Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir: I welcome the very positive contributions from all parts of the Chamber that have embraced the motion. I suspect that we may soon be moving into slightly more contentious territory, but it is good that the Assembly has spoken very much with one voice in this debate. Indeed, the closest that we came to any degree of contention was when the proposer of the motion inadvertently referred to the event as the giro rather than the Giro. For one awful second, I thought that we were going to be dragged back to welfare reform. What has also been significant is that a number of MLAs from different parties across the Chamber have a strong commitment to cycling issues.

As mentioned by a number of the Members who spoke, there has been a sense that the community in Northern Ireland as a whole has embraced the Giro. That has been important as well. From the hard work of the volunteers to the pink sheep in north Antrim, as, I think, Sandra Overend indicated, it shows a spirit of embracing the Giro. I see that one of the Members for North Antrim was very confused at that sight. From that point of view, I think that it is important that we pay tribute to the Enterprise Minister and all those involved who have helped to bring this iconic event to Northern Ireland.

Many of us have not fully grasped the sheer scale of the event. Patsy McGlone and others mentioned that it is one of the triple crown events and one of the most significant world sporting events in existence. Sandra Overend referred to the 775 million viewers, and I think that Rosaleen McCorley added an extra 25 million to that. David McIlveen referred to the fact that the event will be shown in 165

countries, and the Minister referred to the one million hits on the website every day. That is an indication of the sheer implications for Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Minister's remarks about the range of proactive activities that have taken place promoting the event. The principal initial focus is obviously on tourism. Mention has been made of the direct benefits of £10 million of direct revenue. The most significant element, which, unsurprisingly, various Members around the Chamber have been making everyone aware of, is the tour of Northern Ireland that we will go on. Whether it is East Belfast, North Antrim, South Down, Newry and Armagh or a range of other areas, Member after Member expressed the beauty of their own constituency. Mrs Overend and Mr Elliott even took the opportunity to say how beautiful their constituencies are, even though the Giro will not go through them. As a Member for North Down, which, unfortunately, the Giro is also missing, I have to add that it is a pity that it is not going through the beautiful scenery of North Down. If anything, that is the one regret for some of us, but, inevitably, any route will not be able to encompass everywhere.

However, there is a very serious point. It is natural that Members will highlight the beauty of their own constituency, but I have to say that it is something that, at times, we get a bit blasé about in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a magnificent place with its built heritage, natural environment and scenery. It is a place of great beauty, and, at times, those of us who live here simply take that for granted.

From a tourism point of view, this is an opportunity to highlight that across the world. The Member who moved the motion and others highlighted that this is not simply a one-off coup for us to have obtained this event and that it is not simply an action in isolation but that it is part of a series of events that have taken place that have been able to highlight Northern Ireland to the world. Those events include the G8, the World Police and Fire Games, the City of Culture and annual events. Indeed, mention was made of the North West 200, the Milk Cup and the Circuit of Ireland rally. All those things contribute to a wider tourism strategy.

I mentioned that the House is united, and I am glad to say that, where the amendment is concerned, Mr Lyttle and I have been able to cycle in tandem on the issue. From that point of view, it is an issue of legacy, and I think that legacy can be seen in a number of different ways. It can be the inspiration that is produced for a new generation. For instance, during the

London Olympics, so many gold medals were won, particularly by British cyclists, and it was very noticeable to anybody going about the country during that period that a number of people were inspired to dust off a bike that had not been used for quite a while and get out there. I hope that there will be a similar level of inspiration with this event.

Legacy is also vital for the long-term position. We often look at things in the here and now, but, in the context of infrastructure and long-term development, I can see that, in my constituency, the legacy from the Olympics is the Aurora swimming and leisure complex, where we have been able to provide 50-metre swimming facilities. That is a long-standing legacy, and it is vital that that legacy is built on.

12.00 noon

A number of Members have mentioned the need for investment, particularly in infrastructure. That is a key point about legacy. Indeed, the proposer of the amendment rightly said that we need to be aware of the barriers that need to be overcome if we are to transform into that cycling revolution that has been mentioned by the Minister for Regional Development. We should embrace good practice from various parts of the world and look at where it is being done.

It is also important, as highlighted by the proposer and others, that, in looking at the issues of legacy, we also ensure that we have social inclusion. It should not be seen simply as something that is to benefit a few people; it should be built into communities.

There is no doubt that, for the past number of years, there has been a growing cycling revolution from the grass roots upwards. The very fine work of Northern Ireland Greenways, Sustrans and a whole host of community groups around the country has been mentioned, and individual cycling activists have been pushing a cycling agenda. That is very welcome. We are starting to see at government level — the establishment of the cycling unit in DRD is a good example of it — the green shoots appearing in the Executive to embrace that. However, it is important that it is all-embracing, because the benefits of cycling will impact on a wide range of Departments and require action from a number of Departments.

A couple of Members rightly praised the work of DSD on the presentational efforts that it has made in towns. DOE's good work has been mentioned, but cycling will have a range of impacts. It will have an impact on transport and

infrastructure and will have a major impact on education and sport. Indeed, given the increasing pressures on the health budget, we should embrace a healthier environment and one in which more and more of our people are taking exercise and perhaps helping to avoid illness and problems.

Rarely would I quote him, but I saw a very apposite retweet this morning from Eamonn Mallie — sort of the *éminence grise* of the press — of a slogan that said:

"You are not stuck in traffic. You are traffic. Get a bike."

That is a very positive message and a very positive way of doing it.

There is cycling revolution going on in this country that is operating from the grass roots. It requires leadership from all of us in the Assembly to be able to embrace that, and I think the Executive are up to that. However, for once, let us unite today with a very positive message that we welcome the Giro, we see the enormous benefits for Northern Ireland and there is a collective determination to build upon the benefits of the Giro and create a legacy that will permeate generations as a result of this magnificent coup for Northern Ireland. I urge people to support the motion and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the Giro d'Italia is one of the biggest events in the international sporting calendar; warmly welcomes it to Northern Ireland; acknowledges the significance and magnitude of being chosen to host the Grande Partenza; understands the benefits to be obtained in terms of the economy, tourism, cultural exchange and education, promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and worldwide publicity for Northern Ireland; and calls on the Executive to take all necessary steps to maximise the potential to be gained through such a prestigious event and to allocate adequate resources for the delivery of a suitable Giro legacy plan to include improved provision and infrastructure for schools, commuting, leisure, tourist and sporting cycling in Northern Ireland.

Marriage Equality

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. As a valid petition of concern was presented on Monday 28 April in relation to the motion, the vote will be on a cross-community basis.

Ms Ruane: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that other jurisdictions on these islands have moved forward with equal marriage rights for same-sex couples; believes that all couples, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, should have the same legal entitlement to marry and to the protections, rights, obligations and benefits afforded by the legal institution of marriage; supports freedom of religion by allowing religious institutions to define, observe and practise marriage according to their beliefs, granting them the freedom whether or not to conduct same-sex marriages; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to introduce legislation to guarantee that couples of any sex or gender identity receive equal benefit; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that all legislation adheres to the Executive's commitments to protect equality for all.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molann Sinn Féin an Ceart um Chomhionannas Sóisialta, Gnéis agus Cultúrtha. Sinn Féin advocates the right to social, economic, gender and cultural equality. That encompasses equality for all irrespective of race, age, marital or family status, sexual orientation, physical or mental capacities, ethnicity, social origin and political or religious affiliations. Creating the conditions for establishing an equal society means recognising the many diverse groups and sections of Irish society that need protection from the state.

We must tackle the trend to blame a person or group for their exclusion from society. Irish republicans are only too aware of what it means to be treated as second-class citizens. Our politics are the result of decades of resistance to marginalisation and discrimination.

Last night, demonstrations were held in Belfast and Derry, organised by the National Union of Students–Union of Students in Ireland. I was at the Belfast event. It is fitting that it was held at

the City Hall, home of the first council in Ireland to pass a motion in favour of equal marriage. That motion was proposed by Sinn Féin councillor Mary Ellen Campbell. I pay tribute to the National Union of Students–Union of Students in Ireland, Rainbow, Cara–Friend, Amnesty International, the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission for their very strong stand on this important issue. They all deserve credit because, to stand up for your rights, loudly and proudly, is a brave thing to do. What struck me about last night was the number of young people who speak out on this important issue. Maith sibh — well done — for leading from the front. Those young people come from all communities, all political and religious beliefs and all affiliations, but what unites them is a strong belief that enough is enough. They instinctively understand the damaging effects of gay-bashing and the effect that inequality and discrimination have on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGB and T) community.

Attitudes are changing all over Ireland, all over England, all over Scotland, all over Wales, all over Europe and throughout the world. In some ways, it reminds me of how attitudes on unplanned pregnancy changed in a very short time. Women and girls who became pregnant were expected to hide, give their babies up for adoption, travel abroad and, in many cases, never come back to this country. They were traumatised, and, in some cases, they searched the globe, across a lifetime, for their children. However, a previous generation of women and men, led by feminists, was not willing to allow the criminalisation of women and those little babies to continue.

It takes courage for our LGB and T communities, because, in the past, the North was synonymous with the "never, never, never" brigade embodied by the DUP. The DUP was against the decriminalisation of homosexuality and against civil partnership. It is now against equal marriage, gay people adopting and people from the gay community donating blood. It is against, against, against. What is it for?

It takes courage for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community because fear of rejection by your family is probably the biggest fear of all. It takes courage from them because a gay couple knows only too well how scary it is in the dark of night, when a brick might come in through the window. It takes courage because hate crime is on the rise. I urge every politician in the House to ensure that their words and actions do not fan the flames of hate crime. Do not wring your hands and say that you are against violence if your words are the words

ringing in the ears of the person throwing the brick through the window, because you are as guilty as they are.

Let us examine some of the arguments that are used against marriage equality. It is said that we should not be wasting public money debating the issue; it is a gimmick; we should not be threatening family values; we should not be redefining marriage; they have civil partnerships, why do they want marriage; it denies the right to religious belief; Sinn Féin is using it to gain votes; and Sinn Féin will lose votes because it is bringing it forward. We then have the wild nonsense peddled about incest and polygamy. I note that the person saying that is not in the House today.

I want to take each of those arguments in turn and respond to them. This debate, and the earlier two debates that we had in the Assembly during this term, are not a waste of time or money. Equality is a matter of public interest. The mental and physical health issues of the LGB and T community, discriminating against a community and constantly bombarding them with negative messages takes its toll. Despite the strength, resilience and courage shown by that community, it impacts on them. That is why there are higher rates of suicide and self-harm. Is anyone telling me that suicide and self-harm is not an issue of public interest?

The no-men are using the gimmick argument to try to stop the debate. They are not so worried about wasting public money. Their Minister Mr Poots has no problem with wasting public money: £48,149 to date appealing against decisions about adoption in the High Court and Supreme Court, and £37,112 on the lifetime ban on blood donations. I expect those costs to rise.

What about threatening family values? The same arguments were used to justify the laundries — women were packed away to the laundries so that family values would not be threatened — and adoption practices in the past. What threatens family values is discrimination against some members of and children in families. What about threatening the institution of marriage? Where did we hear that before? It was in the apartheid regime, to justify why white and black could not marry. Enough said. Some say, "They have civil partnerships. Now they want more". Yes; the LGB and T community are entitled to full equality. It is the state's duty to legislate for that.

What about the argument that it denies the right to religious belief?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will.

Mr Beggs: The Member is seeking marriage equality for the gay, lesbian and bisexual community. How is she going to achieve marriage equality for bisexuals in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ruane: What we need is equality for the LGB and T communities.

The Sinn Féin motion states that it:

"supports freedom of religion by allowing religious institutions to define, observe and practise marriage according to their beliefs, granting them the freedom whether or not to conduct same-sex marriages".

We are not here to legislate according to our consciences; we are here to legislate on the basis of equality. I thank the Catholic and Presbyterian Churches for sending letters that lobbied us to vote against the motion, as is their right to do. I encourage them to engage with us and the LGB and T community on this important issue. I am not even going to waste time dealing with the offensive claims made by a Member in the media yesterday about polygamy and incest. It was well and truly fanning the flames.

We now have marriage equality in South Africa, Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Argentina, some parts of Mexico and the United States of America, Uruguay, Canada, New Zealand, England and Wales. We will soon have it in the South of Ireland. We will also have it here in the North of Ireland. The best way would be for the House to legislate for it. Failing that, I have no doubt that the LGB and T communities will continue to legally challenge discriminatory decisions in local and international courts. Why wouldn't they? Leanaigí ar aghaidh.

Mr Storey: There are many pressing issues facing Northern Ireland that impact on all our families and communities. It is, yet again, unfortunate that those issues are not being addressed in the House today. Rather, we are returning to an issue that has been rejected. On each previous occasion, the House has rejected same-sex legislation. I am confident that the outcome of the debate today will be the same. I am sure that that will not stop the parties opposite subjecting us to further similar

motions in the months to come, but the answer will still be the same.

12.15 pm

Marriage has only one definition. It is the lifelong commitment between one man and one woman. That has been the accepted position since the dawn of creation. It is a creation institution. As the Evangelical Alliance in England has said:

"Marriage is now a fluid, gender-neutral institution defined by consumer demands and political expediency and it is likely that pressure for further changes to it will follow."

The Archbishop of Canterbury stated:

"Marriage is abolished, redefined and recreated, being different and unequal for different categories."

This is a reminder of the seriousness of the issue that faces us as a society. The traditional value of a family unit is the bedrock of any stable society. It has been undermined in many ways in the past number of years, and we all reap the consequences in our communities.

The redefinition of marriage would represent a change of monumental significance. It must not happen in Northern Ireland. I know that I speak for a large number of people across the community divide. When we come to the House, we are often challenged about being in the sectarian camp. On this issue, Members, many Protestants, Roman Catholics, people of other persuasions or of none want no change to the definition of marriage. Many in the Roman Catholic community feel let down and indeed betrayed by their political representatives. They are turning to this party as the only major party in this Assembly that takes a clear and unambiguous stand on the issue. This is not an issue for trivial dismissals. This is not an issue for political bantering. This is an issue of the utmost seriousness that this House needs to respect today.

As we have heard, Sinn Féin is always very keen to portray itself as the champion of equality and human rights, but today's motion has nothing to do with equality or human rights. The European Court and other legislators have ruled that same-sex marriage is not a human rights issue. That is a fact. I know that it is difficult for some to accept, but that is how it is. During the campaign for civil partnerships, we were told that those partnerships would ensure equal rights in law for same-sex couples and

that there would never be any campaign for full marriage. Here we are today —

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: I will give way.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that it causes people real concern that this is the thin end of the wedge? We see people who have already been tried in court in England and who have been sacked from jobs for expressing a viewpoint. It is an issue of major and real concern that people will be forced to do things against their will. No matter what goodwill parties may have, they have no control over how the courts interpret things thereafter. Consequently, this is a freedom of conscience issue.

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

Mr Storey: I concur with the comments of my colleague. They lead me onto the broader point that the LGB agenda is part of a much broader campaign to bring about a social revolution. Pressure for further change will undoubtedly come. This is the beginning of a process that will undoubtedly continue. If we follow the spurious argument that it is all about equality, human rights, love and so on, the logical outworking of that can go in many ways. If a man says that he loves his sister or brother and wants to marry them, surely that is his human right. If a group of people of whatever gender decide that they love each other and want to get married, why not? Those are just a few of the possible scenarios.

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

Mr Storey: In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I will quote what the apostle Paul said in Ephesians chapter 4, verse 15:

"speaking the truth in love" —

I want this quote to be placed on record so that we dispense the issue of homophobic —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Storey: — actions.

"Loveless truth is brutal. Truthless love is hypocrisy. Love in truth is necessary."

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an seans a bheith agam chun labhairt ar an rún tábhachtach seo. Is rún tábhachtach atá faoi bhraid an Tionóil inniu mar go mbaineann sé le cearta tábhachtacha do dhaoine. Sílim go bhfuil cothromas áirithe sa rún seo sa mhéid go n-aithníonn sé cearta an lucht creidimh agus cearta na ndaoine sin atá ag éileamh a gceart.

I thank the Members who brought the motion to the Floor of the House. I think that it is a balanced motion in so far as it seeks to uphold the rights of all concerned. I pay tribute to the late P A Maglochlainn, a member of the SDLP who was a pioneering crusader for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) rights in Northern Ireland. Yes, this is a debate about rights and equal rights. It is also a debate about freedom: freedom from discrimination and freedom from stigmatisation. It is about legal protections, responsibilities, rights, obligations and benefits afforded by the legal institution of marriage, but it is also —

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Yes.

Mr McKinney: The Member referred to the fact that the debate is about rights. Does he agree that it might be worthwhile to reflect on a number of the rights that we are talking about? I will highlight one or two of them. There is the right to time off work to care for a spouse and the right to be considered next of kin for emergency medical decisions. One more among a range of others is that unmarried surviving partners do not automatically inherit property should their loved one die without a will. These are the types of rights that we are talking about in this debate. Does the Member agree?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute to his time.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for that intervention, and I do agree. There are further rights that the Member could have mentioned. As I said, it is a debate about rights, but it is also a debate about real people. It is about sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts. It is about people who want to live in a loving, secure, stable and permanent relationship protected by the legal institution of marriage. It is about parents who want to see their children in a loving, secure, stable and permanent relationship protected by the legal institution of marriage. It is about parents who do not want to see their children marginalised,

stigmatised or wondering what the future may hold for them. Their love for each other and their commitment to their relationship should be afforded the very same protections and benefits that the rest of us derive from marriage. In this case, it refers to civil marriage.

As I said before in this House, the LGBT community is not asking for more, as some suggest. It is simply asking for the same. Extending the rights to those who are denied them should not be seen as a threat to anyone or to those who already have those rights or to their faith, belief or right to hold a different view. The motion makes a clear distinction between the civil and religious aspects of the issue. It states:

"all couples, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, should have the same ... entitlement to marry".

However, it also states that religious institutions ought to continue to have the right:

"to define, observe and practise marriage according to their beliefs".

The SDLP is strongly in favour of that right being enshrined in legislation so that there is absolutely no doubt about that question.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he not recognise that, in relation to the recent Tony Barlow case, the first surrogate parents said:

"I want to go into my church and marry my husband ... The only way forward for us now is to make a challenge in the courts against the church."

That is where this is going to lead.

Mr D Bradley: If the Member had been listening to me, he would have heard me say that the rights of Churches and faith communities should be enshrined in legislation. There is no desire for any religious denomination or celebrant to be compelled to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies against their beliefs or their faith. The SDLP strongly believes that that should be the case, and the motion indicates that. Those who propose equal marriage in Northern Ireland are also committed to the protection of the rights of religious denominations and celebrants who do not wish to conduct same-sex weddings.

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

Mr D Bradley: The motion recognises that the state does not have any role in dictating to religious groups which ceremonies they can and cannot conduct. I support the motion. I realise that there is a petition of concern —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — but, eventually, this motion will prevail.

Mr Kennedy: I will be opposing the motion. This is the third debate on this issue in approximately 18 months. It is clear to everyone that the decision of this House will not change. I say to the proposer and her party that those who tabled this motion are guilty of engaging in a highly cynical political exercise — perhaps an electoral exercise — that has no benefit for any section of our community, not least the LGBT community, from which, presumably, Sinn Féin and others expect support.

I choose to speak not as a Minister or on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. The House will know that my party believes that issues of this nature are matters of personal conscience. Therefore, although called as an Ulster Unionist, I speak in a personal capacity. It is a matter of regret that members of all political parties are not allowed the liberty to speak freely to their conscience on this issue.

In the previous debate on this matter, I made clear my opposition to any change in the current legislation in order to allow for same-sex marriage. That remains my position. It is a position based on my religious beliefs and is consistent with the teaching of my Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the publicly expressed views of other Churches, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland. Finally, it is a position that is fundamentally consistent with the teaching of Holy Scripture.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I will give way.

Mr Agnew: I ask the Member whether he believes in religious freedom and, if so, although it is his belief that same-sex couples marrying is outside his religious views, whether he agrees that religious institutions that wish to have the freedom to bless civil partnerships or, should we get it, marriages of same-sex couples, should have the religious freedom to do so?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. My position is that the most fundamental position is the teaching not of any Church but the teaching of Holy Scripture itself. It is clear to me that that teaches that there should be no change in the current situation.

I ask Members who support the motion to consider this point, which I made in the previous debate: the law of the land is something that it is necessary for all of us to obey. Indeed, as public representatives, we have an obligation to do so. However, I contrast that with obeying the teaching of the Church — not a church; the Church. That is an entirely personal and voluntary decision, based on individual free will. The historical separation of Church and state therefore becomes of extreme importance. The Church should never be the slave of the state and, consequently, the state has no right to dictate the terms of religious marriage to the Church. The state has created the mechanisms under which same-sex civil partnerships can be enacted with protections under the law, which, in most cases, are equivalent to the rights enjoyed by married heterosexual couples. In my view, it is neither sensible nor desirable to allow the state to interfere in the religious institution of marriage simply for political convenience.

Redefining marriage would have far-reaching consequences for our entire society. Furthermore, I do not believe that there is widespread public support in Northern Ireland for such a proposal. In holding my view, I do not believe that I should be regarded as homophobic. Indeed, any suggestion would offend and abhor me. I do not disparage the LGBT community, many of whom I count as personal friends, neither is it my role or practice to be judgmental. However, although I remain tolerant of the views and lifestyles of others, the same cannot always be said of all those who want to promote change of that nature to Christians, whose personal convictions put them at odds on an issue such as same-sex marriage.

For the reasons I have set out, personal and deeply held convictions that I cannot and will not set aside, I remain opposed to the proposal.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension today. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of

business when the House returns will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Archaeological Artefacts

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she plans to transfer the thousands of unclassified archaeological artefacts, currently stored by private companies, to a more appropriate storage facility with an adequate curative process to enable long-term preservation and public access. (AQO 6020/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his question. The Department of the Environment and the NIEA hold responsibility for policy and licensing in the matter but are urgently considering the issue, with input being provided by my officials and museums in an advisory capacity. On 2 July 2012, an Assembly debate was held on the management of artefacts that have been generated since the introduction of planning policy statement (PPS) 6 in 1999. At that debate, Alex Attwood, who was then Environment Minister, gave a commitment to present an Executive paper setting out the need for a strategic shift in resources, policy and law related to the protection of our heritage. Since then, officials from DOE, NIEA, museums and DCAL have sought to identify the full range of issues and possible solutions.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for that very positive answer. Does she agree with me that every town and village has its secrets? Kilrea, for example, has its arrowheads and stone hatchets and so forth that came from the River Bann when it was excavated. Does the Minister agree with me that there has to be a better way in which local communities can share their heritage and past and, in doing so, perhaps come to a better understanding of where we are today?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly do agree with the Member. In his constituency, Mount Sandal is earmarked as one of the first settlements. He will, I am sure, agree that the success of the Brighter hoard, which was brought to

Limavady, is an example of a treasure of such stature being brought to a local facility. I look forward to the process being concluded so that we can ascertain what artefacts there are and what status they have. Given the nature of some of the history and heritage in our surrounding towns and villages, some of which the Member pointed some out, there is nothing to say that artefacts cannot be brought to a local art gallery, museum or school to be exhibited. Local people want to see big government working locally.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister concerned that some valuable materials and artefacts have potentially been lost because of the storage and archiving system that has or has not been in place to date?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. In fairness to him, I think that that is a concern across the board and one that has been brought to my attention from both the professional and community sectors. I note that the Member used the word "potential". That will always be there until we ascertain what we have. Many collections have been discovered by private companies in the process of developing certain works. When the findings of the joint working group come before the Executive, which they will do in an Executive paper, they will map out not only the process but the way forward and the implicated cost. Once that happens, we will be able to engage in a process that will very quickly ascertain what we have. If there are occasions where treasures or findings of significant importance have been uncovered, we will do our best to make sure that they are not lost and, in response to his colleague John Dallat, we will do our best to make sure that they are preserved and exhibited.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Pat Ramsey is not in his place. I call Sandra Overend.

Giro d'Italia: Legacy

3. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any discussions that have taken place between her Department and local cycling clubs to ensure that a new generation of cyclists is a legacy of the Giro d'Italia 2014. (AQO 6022/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department and Sport NI are working with a variety of cycling bodies, including local clubs, to ensure that a new generation of cyclists is a legacy of the Giro d'Italia. That activity is set out in the Giro

legacy plan, which is led by NITB and includes contributions from key stakeholders.

Sport NI continues to support Cycling Ulster as it takes forward a number of strategies to develop cycling here and, in particular, its youth strategy, which aims to increase participation in cycling in local clubs, communities and schools. Sport NI is providing specific courses for local cycling clubs, which will see more leaders and coaches trained to promote cycling from grass-roots groups to high-performance levels. The giro legacy plan also includes a schools engagement programme, and Sport NI is working closely with schools to offer competitions and activities to promote the event and the benefits of cycling to ensure that we can maximise the legacy outcomes.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for that response. It would be good to get further details of the work that is ongoing with the young people and trying to get them involved, whether that is through schools or youth organisations. Will the Minister provide some specific information about what is happening in my constituency of Mid Ulster?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am certainly happy to write to the Member with the details of what is happening in her own constituency, but I can give her some broad headlines. Through her own inquiries and contacts with local schools, she can ascertain how that impacts on the mid-Ulster area. For example, as I outlined, work is under way with Sport NI and some of the local schools to look at a youth strategy. It also involves Sport NI, in conjunction with Cycling Ireland, looking at performances.

Clubs, communities and schools are also involved, and 71 schools have been involved in cycling opportunities and designing banners and bags around the giro and cycling. Indeed, they have been involved in cycling charities. The VC Glendale club received £10,000 as a result of the World Police and Fire Games legacy to try to promote and enhance cycling in the Shankill and Colin areas. However, as I said, I am happy to write to the Member with details specific to her constituency.

Mr Hilditch: To follow on from that, it is good to hear of the coaching, the projects and the programmes involved. However, Minister, will it take us any closer to the much-needed facilities for cycling?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may be aware, through his participation in the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, that Sport NI and

DCAL have been working very closely with Cycling Ulster and Cycling Ireland. It is really important to identify gaps in facilities, even though we know where they are in our constituencies. At times, we probably know them more acutely than some of the governing bodies. However, work is well under way to look at gaps, feasibility studies and business cases, more so in the preparation for a velodrome, but not exclusively for that.

It is also about how we can work existing coaching programmes with emerging sports, and cycling is one of the sports that is not just emerging but growing. Therefore, I am happy, through the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and through direct correspondence, to keep the Member up to date on that. It is very important, particularly at community level and grass-roots level, to see the gaps in facilities and to encourage better participation.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. During the past three or four years, we have already seen the new generation of cyclists coming through, especially in a sporting and competitive sense. In my constituency of North Antrim, we have no fewer than seven cycling clubs at present, and that was not the case five years ago. In that context, and given the increased competition in the sport of cycling, can the Minister update the House on the business case for a velodrome? A velodrome is not present on the entire island of Ireland, and it would be a crucial piece of infrastructure to try to develop cyclists to a more professional standing.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I touched on this very briefly in answering David Hilditch's question. DCAL and Sport NI have been working very closely with Cycling Ireland and Cycling Ulster. At this stage, we are looking at the governing body, with support of officials from DCAL, bringing forward the business case for a velodrome.

Cycling has taken off quite well over the past couple of years, and the Member's constituency is one example of where numerous clubs have been looking at getting more people involved and looking at elite performance. Certainly, the business case for a velodrome did not stack up a few years ago, but my understanding is that that has changed.

The process has started and is well under way. When the process has been completed, I will need to find out exactly what the figures are. If the numbers are there, and if it has the support of the governing bodies, we need to take it

forward in the future. However, it is very, very early days. To give the Member some good news, the process has started and it is very encouraging.

City of Culture: Legacy

4. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her work to ensure the legacy of the UK City of Culture. (AQO 6023/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. In November 2013, I announced that I would set up a DCAL north-west office and a company limited by guarantee to deliver City of Culture legacy programmes and activities. The north-west office is now in place. I met the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 31 March to discuss my proposals for the north-west. DCAL officials are progressing plans to set up a company, subject to a funding bid being agreed by the Executive.

In the interim period, I have continued to support a number of legacy projects in collaboration with Derry City Council, with over £2 million being invested since January 2014 in projects such as Other Voices, the Walled City Tattoo and the iconic 'Armoured Pram for Derry' artwork. I have also allocated £2 million capital funding towards the Daisyfield/Showgrounds project, which will contribute to the regeneration of one of the most-deprived areas in the city.

Next month, I will host an all-Ireland creative industries conference in the city, which will highlight Derry as a regional driver for the creative industries.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that information. In her keynote legacy speech at the Gasyard in Londonderry last November, she referred to developing modern sports facilities, including complexes in Derry, Dungiven and Coleraine. I would appreciate being given a knowledge of what those are and the timeline for their completion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I mentioned the Foyle valley gateway, which is looking at the Daisyfield/Showgrounds project. That is primarily about sport in the city of Derry. A total of £2.5 million has been identified, through Limavady Borough Council, for a new sports complex in Dungiven and £1.5 million for Coleraine Showgrounds. Indeed, some capital moneys will be put into boxing as well. Needless to say, I have absolutely no doubt that Strabane and other surrounding towns and villages will come forward. I am sure that the

Member agrees that there has been underinvestment in that geographical area for some time now. This is a good start, but we are not done yet.

We will make sure that we put money into collaboration and partnership working with projects that have already started and are under way and that we do that on the basis of identified need. That will ensure that, when there are a couple of funders and a cocktail of funding, projects will happen, that there is better economic sustainability and that there is buy-in from as many people as possible in the community.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware that, for the year and a half before the City of Culture year, issues arose about trying to make sure that the year was celebrated in an all-inclusive way in Londonderry. That was dealt with fairly early on in the year, thankfully, at some considerable length. Now that the legacy is being built on and that a considerable amount of public expense is quite rightly going into the legacy project, what steps will she take to ensure that that inclusivity is deepened and broadened throughout not only Londonderry but the entire north-west?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and for his support in making sure that there is investment not only in his constituency but in the broader north-west. A lot of work has been under way, and there have been a lot of mature discussions. Many people, despite some of their differences, have put their shoulder to the wheel and moved this forward. That is continuing.

At the weekend, there was a Pan Celtic Festival in the city and elsewhere. I was in Dungiven for one of the sports elements. The festival is also about music, and it involves the Bands Forum, the Walled City Tattoo and all the people who participated in the fleadh. It is growing.

Those conversations have happened and are continuing and growing. We need to make sure that all that good work, all that pain and all that maturity are sustained now and into the future. I am encouraged by some contributions from political representatives for the area who have said that, in the here and now, they will support the groups making those mature decisions as well as supporting their journey in the future.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. She mentioned the £2 million for the Daisyfield development. When is that

likely to be allocated, and when are we likely to see work on the ground?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member should be aware that that money has been allocated, and we are working with Derry City Council and other partners, including Ilex and DSD. As the Member will be aware, the Foyle valley gateway has more than one funder, which is the way that it should be. Moneys were made available, and I bid for that in the October monitoring round last year. The work, albeit preliminary, has started. I am happy with the progress that has been made.

As for what is needed in the future for other facilities in that area, work has already started to try to secure funds not only for the Brandywell stadium but for other projects in the city of Derry to make sure that there is a lasting legacy from the City of Culture.

2.15 pm

Sporting/Cultural Events

5. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any engagement her Department, or its arm's-length bodies, have had with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to develop bidding plans for major sporting and cultural events. (AQO 6024/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In 2010, the Executive agreed that responsibility for events would transfer from DCAL to DETI. My Department and its arm's-length bodies work closely with DETI to bring internationally recognised sporting and cultural events here.

With regard to sporting events, DCAL and Sport NI have key roles in the Giro d'Italia Big Start, which includes participation on the local steering committee, the activation committee and the groups dealing with the cycling legacy, as well as promotion in schools and volunteering. Sport NI is also providing technical expertise to the race committee. My Department is also working with DETI, the NITB and other key stakeholders, to see how we can bring the Rugby World Cup to Ireland in 2023.

With regard to cultural events, my Department has engaged with NITB to secure events such as 2012: Our Time Our Place, the City of Culture, the World Police and Fire Games and the forthcoming 'Game of Thrones' exhibition.

Looking ahead, collaborative work between DCAL and DETI will continue, thus helping to

ensure that we continue to benefit from hosting major sporting and cultural events.

Miss M McIlveen: The Minister has highlighted a number of events where the Department is a minor partner. However, last year, we saw the success of the UK City of Culture and the World Police and Fire Games, which demonstrated that Northern Ireland has the capacity to deliver key cultural and sporting events. The lack, to date, of a DCAL-led strategy to attract similar-scale events is disappointing. Would the Minister not agree that that perhaps demonstrates a lack of innovation in her Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that on her colleague's watch, the events, for reasons that will be known to the Assembly fairly soon, had to be transferred. So, poor governance and poor performance under the DUP watch meant that the events had to be transferred to another DUP Minister to mop up their mess. I have brought the City of Culture and the World Police and Fire Games, in partnership with my Executive colleagues. I am happy to do that and to work in whatever role that I can in future to make sure that we have events that we can all, rightfully, claim as ours.

I do not think it helpful that people score cheap political points over something that you know is beyond my control. However, I look forward to seeing the result of the inquiry into what happened in the events and to sharing it not just with the Member, as Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, but with other Members of the Assembly. That is because we need to learn what happened and what mistakes we can avoid for the future. We need to have a reputation that does not put people off coming here for big events in the future.

We are lucky that we have plenty of sporting and cultural champions who help to attract people to our shores. We need to focus on that: rather than look back we need to look forward.

Mr McGimpsey: Minister, we are not just looking for events coming in, which is all well and good, and we have a number of notable successes in that. However, we also have home-grown events that do much for our image. I am talking about the North West 200, the Ulster Grand Prix and, indeed, the Milk Cup, for example. The Milk Cup has been described by Alex Ferguson as the finest youth soccer tournament anywhere in the world. It has challenges as far as its sponsorship is

concerned. Will the Minister outline what steps she is taking, individually or with colleagues, to ensure that this vital tournament gets the support that it requires?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Rather than wait for one Department to pass the buck to another, I lifted the Milk Cup and the Foyle Cup last year and funded them directly from DCAL, simply because I totally agree with the Member, irrespective of the view that Alex Ferguson, or anybody else, holds, although that is important in giving a status to a competition that has an international status. It also attracts many children and young people to aspire to play on those pitches and to be part of that competition. To that end, rather than wait for someone coming back and making a decision at the last minute, I made an intervention for both. I will do it again if I have to, because I think that it is money well spent.

Film Extras

6. Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many local people have been employed as film extras in the projects developed by her Department and Northern Ireland Screen in the past two years. (AQO 6025/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As sponsor Department for NI Screen, my Department's role is to support the organisation to meet its business objectives across all its activities. NI Screen does not develop projects but instead provides funding for a variety of film and television productions.

Local extras for individual productions are supplied by an external agency and, according to the figures from that agency, almost 2,000 positions for extras from the North were created by NI Screen-funded productions in 2012-13, rising to over 3,000 in 2013-14. In addition, a total of 246 extras from the South of Ireland were employed during the same periods. The film extras have worked on a range of productions, with the majority having appeared in large-scale productions such as 'Game of Thrones', 'Dracula Untold' and 'The Fall'.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful to the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Looking around here at the moment, I think that we could do with some extras to fill the empty spaces, which may make my supplementary a bit more interesting. The Minister mentioned the numbers, but I wonder whether she is in a position to indicate what sort of pay rates a film extra could expect to earn and how much additional money has been introduced to the

local economy through that type of employment. Can she possibly relate any specific examples?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have information on the pay rates, but I am happy to raise that on the Member's behalf, and —

Mr McNarry: If I was wondering what we earn in here —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not sure, but, when we find out exactly what the pay rates are, perhaps people can make a decision about whether they want to moonlight part-time, although most of us should not have any spare time at all if we are as busy as we say we are.

Local film and television production has provided nearly £40 million to the local economy. That is certainly not to be sniffed at by anyone. The creative industries are not just accruing money through their own productions but are providing employment for local people, not just extras but those involved in hospitality, accountancy and trades. Hotels, B&Bs and guest houses have certainly benefited. As the Member might be aware, for example, 'Game of Thrones' has travelled to a couple of different locations and has therefore invested in those local towns and villages at times. That is the sort of economy that we need to see grow. The local, small businesses depend on us to bring those opportunities.

I am happy to get the information about pay scales to the Member.

Mr McKinney: What potential benefits will Northern Ireland Screen's Opening Doors fund bring to the local community?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will know, the Opening Doors fund has created a lot of employment and support in the local film and television industry. The strategy aims to help the screen industry in this part of the island. We are looking at high-end television and drama tax credits; further incentives; budgets; and showcasing sets and scenery that other areas and regions cannot offer. The Opening Doors strategy is not just about making this area an attractive option for marketing but about what we do in investing in those companies. The strategy ends this year, and NI Screen is well on board with its targets if it is not exceeding them, which is good news for us all.

Kelly Gallagher

7. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the gold medal success of Bangor Paralympian, Kelly Gallagher, what further action her Department can take to support and promote sporting participation by people with disabilities. (AQO 6026/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe that Kelly Gallagher's gold medal success at the Winter Paralympic Games in Sochi will inspire more people to get involved in sport, particularly women and those with disabilities. Kelly was quick to acknowledge the support she received from Sport NI and particularly the Sports Institute in her preparations and at events.

My Department's strategy for sport aims to realise a 6% increase in participation rates among people with a disability by 2019. There are indications that we are making good progress towards meeting that target. However, to help achieve it, we need to work with other Departments, councils and sporting bodies. Disability Sports NI (DSNI) has outlined to me its plans to maximise the legacy of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The plans suggest new a disability active partnership across local authorities and Departments. I have written to my Executive colleagues to explore opportunities for interdepartmental support, including funding to take forward the DSNI proposals.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her reply. Minister, you obviously share my view that, given the inspiration of Kelly and our Paralympians in London, we really need a legacy that we can build upon. I am glad to hear that you have started work on that but, for that legacy to be developed, we need immediate plans. You mentioned one partnership, but are there any other specific plans in place to develop this issue?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I met Disability Sport NI in February and I have regular meetings with that organisation, as perhaps the Member will be aware. It has looked at the targets that have been identified in the Sport Matters strategy and has set additional targets. As I mentioned in my original answer, I have written to Executive colleagues and I aim to follow that up with meetings. I am not just writing to them to tick a box; I am going to follow that up by having meetings and I am going to be very proactive.

I know that Sport NI has also been very proactive, particularly in looking at the role of

the sports institute. It is not just about working with some of the governing bodies on disability but with youth clubs and schools. Our Active8 programme, other programmes that resulted from the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games and, indeed, last year's World Police and Fire Games are all going to be brought into that.

I want to assure the Member that I will not be sitting still and resting on this; I am going to try to push it forward to get the maximum possible, because these people do not just deserve our support; it is our duty to make sure that they have it.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers so far. What other actions are taking place to improve participation in sport among those with disabilities and special needs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I do not want to repeat my answer to the previous question, but I will elaborate on it. The Active Communities programme, the Awards for Sport programme and other programmes resulting from the Paralympic and Olympic Games in 2012 are being brought forward. The Sports Forum and Disability Sports have come to us in a very proactive way to raise the profile of disability sport. We have done that, not only in the Department but through working with some of the governing bodies.

District councils have been very good, and with the encouragement and support of their chief officers, they have been involved in the Active Communities programmes. They have been looking at countryside access and activities and working with schools to make sure that those with disabilities and special needs are not missing out on opportunities to participate in sport. As I said to Mr Cree, I will not just write to each of the Departments but I will follow up with meetings and persist until we get a better, joined-up way of working with people who, up to now, feel that they have not received the investment and support that they are entitled to.

Irish Language Strategy

8. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the progress of the Irish language strategy. (AQO 6027/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Irish language strategy has been

revised and strengthened following a comprehensive public consultation exercise and has also been informed by engagement with other Executive Ministers. The crucial role of Irish language stakeholders and the community has been more fully reflected in the strategy.

The strategy sets out a framework for the next 20 years in areas such as public services, education, the home and community, the media and economic life to enhance, protect and develop the Irish language. A strategy delivery group will progress the strategy by agreeing detailed action plans with each Department. In line with the 2011-15 Programme for Government, my intention is to shortly publish a strategy to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language and a strategy to enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. Dúirt an tAire go bhfuil sí ar tí an straitéis a fhoilsiú. Arbh fhéidir liom a fhiafraí di an dtig léi bheith níos beaichte faoi dháta an fhoilsithe? I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she be more precise about the publication date of the strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have a date here, but I assure the Member that I intend to do this before the summer recess commences. As I am sure he will appreciate, I am still waiting for some responses from Departments, but if the Departments do not respond by a certain time, I am going to publish the strategy anyway. A lot of work has been put into both strategies by the Ulster-Scots Agency and by many groups in the Irish language sector. They have taken a lot of time to respond to the consultation document. In my view, that consultation is all the better for those responses, so in fairness to them I am going to give Executive colleagues time to respond. If they do not do so, I am going to publish it before the summer recess.

2.30 pm

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

Museums: DCAL Support

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has talked to other relevant Ministers to see how we can have a strategic approach to promoting our museums

in Northern Ireland, given that, even though the Minister and the Executive have continually talked about stimulating the economy by promoting the creative industries and tourism, National Museums Northern Ireland has seen a £6.6 million reduction in its funding over the past few years and, as I understand it, a drop in visitors of 200,000 last year. (AQT 1041/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I am not too sure where she got her facts, but they are wrong. In fairness to the Member, she needs to go back, because, whatever information she has been given, she has not been given the full picture. I give the Member the assurance that I will go and check the information she has asked me for and give it back to her, but let me say this: museums, sports and arts received a slight reduction in their budgets in order to keep libraries open. That is something that I was happy to do. It was to make sure not only that libraries stayed open but that people, particularly in rural areas and from deprived communities, had the opportunity to avail themselves of libraries. Even within that, museums received an uplift in budget, and told me that the numbers have increased, so I am concerned by what the Member has said in relation to the numbers dropping.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her answer. The 200,000 drop was told to me by the chief executive of National Museums Northern Ireland. I had a meeting with him just about two or three weeks ago, so I think those are up-to-date figures. I think we should all be concerned about a drop, particularly as this is the year we mark the 50th anniversary of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Ms Lo: Yes. The question is, in relation to this, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum is going to have a massive programme promoting the anniversary, and is the Minister going to attend? Is the Minister going to help with funding for the various programmes?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that I have visited, and will continue to visit, all the different branches of the museums, including the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. I appreciate the Member clarifying where she received the information from, which is quite helpful. I will be able to go back to museums and chase that up. I understand that museums and arts and all the members of the DCAL family have a role to play in promoting tourism,

and not only that but certainly the decade of centenaries and many other opportunities that we have, particularly with our ongoing programmes around reconciliation. It is vital that we have good public services to help assist those processes. But again, as I said in reply to the Member's primary question, I will write to her with that information.

Gaelscoileanna/Altram: Collaboration

2. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm that Gaelscoileanna could provide effective collaboration with Altram in the North and to state whether there have been any discussions with both groups about a possible merger. (AQT 1042/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that the new core funding arrangements will commence on 1 July. Up until this morning — and I ask this on a daily basis — Altram has refused to engage with Gaelscoileanna around any potential mergers. I am concerned about this. I am concerned about the staff who are working in the organisation, the duty of care to those staff, and indeed the work to ensure that the skills and expertise, particularly in early years, are protected.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I am shocked to learn that Altram has not engaged in any discussion on the way forward. Notwithstanding that, can she assure us that the door still remains open for any discussion of a possible merger?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assure the Member, and other Members, that the door is open and will remain firmly open, because we believe that, particularly around early-years intervention, which is key to a child's development in education, the support is there. Altram has a duty of care to not just its staff but to all the other services that rely on its excellent expertise and support. The door is open, and I encourage it to walk through that door.

Portavoe Reservoir

3. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline what discussions her Department has had with NI Water on Portavoe reservoir. (AQT 1043/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In response to the Member and to other Members who have written to me on

this issue, I can say that we have had ongoing discussions with the owners of Portavoe reservoir and, indeed, with NI Water, about trying to keep the reservoir open. It had to undergo major repair works last year, and, as a result, I was not able to stock the reservoir, which is a popular angling location in the area. Discussions about restocking the reservoir once the work has been completed are ongoing and will be concluded fairly soon. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I cannot hear.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I heard you make the point; I did not mean to interrupt you. There is far too much noise from my right.

Ms Ní Chuilín: They are like owl dolls at bingo. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Campbell: Maybe a syringe is required.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Hazzard —

Ms Ruane: On a point of order — On a point of order — I just want to raise an issue. It is very offensive — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Campbell: No points of order in Question Time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We do not take a point of order during Question Time. I have already made the point. Let us listen to the questions and to the answers.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer thus far. Given NI Water's refusal to extend the lease of fishing rights to DCAL, can she outline NI Water's plans for the future?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is regrettable that NI Water has refused to give a longer lease to DCAL to prepare the waterway for angling. The waterway is very popular in that area, as well as among people visiting and looking for angling opportunities. We are having ongoing discussions with NI Water about the reservoir. So far, we have been told that the lease will be extended only on an annual basis, not on a five-year basis, as it was previously. Let me assure the Member that I will continue with those discussions until they are concluded. However, because the reservoir is not within the DCAL estate, there is little I can do other than what I am doing at the minute.

Budgets 2013

4. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline why she has not signed off the 2013 budgets. (AQT 1044/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assume that the Member is asking about the 2013 budgets for the Irish and Ulster-Scots language bodies. They have not been signed off because I refuse to implement cuts. The Irish Government are insisting on an additional 5% cut on top of what they asked both Finance Departments to agree. That would result in a cut of almost 10%, which I am refusing to implement. From 2013, and even for this year, both bodies — the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge — have received indicative budgets. It is regrettable that that is the position, but I am not installing cuts on behalf of the Irish Government or anyone else to two bodies that do very valuable work.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an bhfreagra sin. I thank the Minister for that response. I commend her for the action that she is taking, and I ask that she continues to desist and to ensure that the language bodies' budgets are not cut. I also ask that she continues to liaise with the Irish Government.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will continue to liaise with the Irish Government. I intend to raise the matter before the full meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. I also intend to raise it at that meeting if the discussions that were mentioned previously are not concluded. Let me assure the Member and other Members who have an interest in this that I will not agree to cuts to Foras na Gaeilge or to the Ulster-Scots Agency. I did not do it in 2013, and I will not in 2014, 2015 or 2016.

Reservoirs: DCAL/DRD Lease Arrangements

5. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for details of the nature of the contracts between her Department and the Department for Regional Development, which is responsible for the use of reservoirs by anglers. (AQT 1045/11-15)

It is nice to speak to the Minister again. She has touched on the question that I wanted to ask, but my question is broader in its approach.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no details of the contract, other than that it is a leasing arrangement. I have no details of the actual wording of the lease. The Member and other Members have

raised this on the basis that, wherever angling occurs in that constituency, it is very popular and is a sport that many people have been involved in and that many continue to engage in across generations.

I will have ongoing discussions, not just with DRD — although this is with NI Water rather than DRD — to have those lease arrangements concluded, not just for Portavoe but other reservoirs that may be affected.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for that. Bearing in mind that many of the reservoirs are not in use and, in fact, may be sold off, do you feel that that will have any direct effect on angling and the issuing of permits by your Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Not every reservoir has fishing rights. For those that have and that are not up for sale or for renewal of lease or that we do not stock — really there could be many out there that I am unaware of. I am only dealing with the reservoirs that I am going into a lease or contractual agreement with to stock with fish and work with angling clubs and sometimes local councils and other community stakeholders.

I can assure the Member that angling is one of the sports that has grown in popularity over the years among people of all abilities and across the generations. It is a good example of where you can make a small investment on an interdepartmental basis with other councils and communities to make sure that you have a good legacy for sport and physical activity. So, I am really keen to ensure that what we have we hold and that we certainly try to increase and advance future potential and opportunities.

Cliftonville FC/David Jeffrey: Congratulations

6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to join him in congratulating Cliftonville Football Club on its historic first back-to-back league title success and David Jeffrey on a phenomenally successful career as Linfield manager. (AQT 1046/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. David Jeffrey has given a lifetime to sport. I released a statement to congratulate David on his achievements, and I have written to him to thank him for his personal contribution to sport.

Cliftonville won back-to-back, two years in a row; my local team, in my constituency. I think that they have done very well. Again, when you

see sport of that nature on television, you see young girls and young lads out kicking footballs, jumpers on the ground and people getting involved in soccer. That is a good thing. That is a good side of Irish League football that we need more of and certainly need to celebrate more of, particularly in the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Nesbitt for his complimentary supplementary.

Mr Nesbitt: Let me think about that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister. Does she have any plans to host a reception at Stormont, perhaps jointly for Cliftonville and David Jeffrey and Linfield?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have certainly written to David Jeffrey and would like to have a meeting with him to thank him for what he has done for sport. You are about the third person between yesterday and today who has asked me about a reception, and I am certainly looking at opportunities to hold another reception for Cliftonville Football Club. Certainly the contribution that David Jeffrey has made to sport needs to be recognised and the contribution that Cliftonville has made, including all the staff and everybody involved, also needs to be recognised. Everybody needs to have an opportunity to get involved in that, too.

Irish League: Funding

7. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she has had with the Finance Minister to release the £36.2 million for Irish League clubs to upgrade their grounds. (AQT 1047/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The discussions I have had with the Finance Minister have primarily been about the regional stadia developments. However, he is certainly well aware that once we get Windsor Park under way we will have an opportunity to start the subregional programme. I have the skills and capability in DCAL to do that, so there is a seamless link for that. Once we get Windsor Park and Casement Park up and running, the subregional programme for football will be the next step, and the subregional programmes for Gaelic games and rugby will come soon after that. So, the discussions I have had with the Finance Minister were just about the budgets for this mandate. However, I have certainly flagged up potential for the next mandate.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the sooner we can get that

money down to local clubs, such as Bangor Football Club, which came second in the Championship at the weekend, the sooner we can upgrade their grounds and encourage more people to watch the matches?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The sooner we can get the subregional programme started the better. I could not comment on facilities for Bangor, but I take the opportunity to wish them well.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Education

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 3 have been withdrawn.

Welfare Reform: Financial Penalties

2. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education to outline the impact the removal of £30 million from his budget, because of the failure to implement Welfare Reform, will have on the delivery of education. (AQO 6035/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Executive have not yet come to an agreed position on welfare reform, neither have they agreed to remove £30 million from the education budget.

2.45 pm

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that very short answer. It has been well publicised and anticipated that the Minister of Finance is suggesting that £30 million could be removed from the education budget. Given the circumstances in which that might happen, has the Minister had any thoughts about what parts of education will suffer the loss of £30 million?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that our energies would be much better used in dealing with the British Government and relaying to them the detrimental impact that welfare reform will have on our society and community than anticipating or speculating on figures that may or may not come out of my budget or any other departmental budget. I assure the Member that I will continue to manage my budget efficiently and effectively and will deliver education services across the board. Along with my colleagues, I will continue to resist the current welfare reforms and to ensure that we get a fairer deal for the most vulnerable people in our society.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for

his answers so far. Given the clear link between disadvantage and poor educational outcomes, will he comment on the potential impact of the proposed Welfare Reform Bill on our young people?

Mr O'Dowd: It has been widely reported that the proposals under welfare reform will have a major impact, particularly on the most vulnerable in our society and those on the lowest income levels. That includes the working poor and those who are not working for a variety of reasons.

A number of surveys have been carried out, including by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. It concluded that, by 2020-21, as a result of the tax and benefit changes that include those proposed under the welfare reform agenda, relative and absolute child poverty here are projected to rise by 7.5% and 10.4 percentage points respectively. That in itself will have an impact on the educational well-being of young people in our society and the educational outcomes for our entire society. It is only right and proper that serious concerns are being raised about welfare reform, not only its immediate impact but its long-term impact on our young people.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's comments to date. You referred to our most marginalised people and to those in receipt of unemployment benefit. I am sure that you will also acknowledge the fact that there are rising levels of poverty among the working poor. Will you continue your efforts to ensure that funding is secured so that schools not only provide education but help with the well-being of their young people and help with affordable childcare through breakfast clubs and after-school clubs?

Mr O'Dowd: I referred to poverty and deprivation, and a growing number of people are working and unable to pay many of the bills that are bearing down on them. I have lowered the level required for entitlement to free school meals. I will continue to examine other ways to assist not only those who are unemployed but those who are on benefits such as family tax credits to ensure that they access greater support from our schools. Many of our schools are benefiting from programmes such as the extended schools programme. Many run breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and so on, and my recent changes to the common funding scheme will allow schools, particularly in socially deprived areas, to increase those programmes of work.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he assure us that, should

the predictions of doom emanating from some of his Executive colleagues prove to be correct, the most disadvantaged pupils in our education system will not end up paying the price?

Mr O'Dowd: It is quite clear that, even from the report that I read out, the most disadvantaged in our society will suffer if we introduce the current welfare reform legislation. That is the reality of the situation. Those are independent figures, and anyone who wishes to examine what is happening in England as a result of welfare reform will know only too well what the detrimental impact will be. My view is, instead of speculating on what may or may not be taken from budgets, that we approach the British Government as an Executive, in a united form, and press them to alleviate the most damaging parts of the Welfare Reform Bill, therefore ensuring that our society has a secure basis on which to move forward.

Post-primary Withdrawals

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education what assessment his Department has made of the numbers of young people withdrawing from years 13 and 14 of post-primary education. (AQO 6037/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The proportion of pupils who leave year 14 without completing their courses or exams is small. In 2012-13, 231, which is 1.7%, of the 13,766 pupils who were studying post-16 qualifications withdrew from school during year 14. Year 13 comprises a range of pupils, including those who are completing GCSEs or equivalent qualifications and those who are in the first year of their post-16 qualifications. It is not currently possible for the Department to identify the numbers of young people who begin and then withdraw from a course of study during year 13. Work is under way to develop new data sources that will provide that information in future. Available data shows that over half of those — 57% — leaving school at the end of year 13 take up places in further education (FE) colleges with a further 27% moving on to training or employment.

Young people who see their time in education as relevant to their future and who have access to courses that interest and motivate them are more likely to remain engaged with their education and achieve their full potential. That is why I have introduced the requirements of the entitlement framework. Effective and timely careers guidance is also important. When they are supported by timely, high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance,

young people are more likely to make informed choices. When they can see exactly where their courses can take them and lead to, that will help them to decide on and commit to finishing courses.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response and encourage him to expedite the data sources to give him the information about the number of pupils who leave or withdraw during year 13. I have spoken to my further education college, and the evidence is that it is having to pick up a number of pupils who leave during year 13. Given that there seems to be an issue, what consideration is being given to provide additional support to schools so that, once they complete their GCSEs, children are properly placed in the right academic work that they wish to continue with.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for that question. From speaking to the further and higher education sector, I am also aware of anecdotal evidence on children — they are young adults at that stage — dropping out of year 13. I assure him that we are working towards gathering that data in a more uniform manner. The key is to ensure that the proper careers advice is being given at the correct time in a young person's educational pathway.

Recently, the Minister for Employment and Learning and I launched a careers review to assist us in ensuring that we have the right advice at the right time for young people so that they choose the right career pathway, whether academic or otherwise, and know where their courses will lead. That will ensure that we retain more and more young people in our education system and ensure that they qualify in future.

Mrs Overend: The Minister has more or less answered my question. I will just develop that. I believe that there needs to be a robust system of scrutiny to track why year 13s especially and year 14s are withdrawing from education. Does the Minister agree that work needs to be done in earlier school years to try to bring forward the idea of where the young people need to go and how education can help them to develop their career?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with you. Careers advice should not be a one-off event. It should be part of a young person's educational pathway and development as they progress through post-primary school and choices are coming up for them, particularly as they advance towards GCSEs and decide what subjects to study. The careers review that we launched along with

Minister Farry is independent and has a wide remit. I hope that it comes back to us with imaginative suggestions and that it learns from best practice, whether here or in other jurisdictions, to ensure that young people are given the correct advice at the correct time during their educational pathway.

Educational Attainment Gaps

5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the educational attainment gaps identified recently in the Community Relations Council third peace monitoring report. (AQO 6038/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have said many times that our education system continues to fail too many young people. The attainment gaps are simply unacceptable, and I am working hard to tackle that inequality. In 2011-12, a total of 1,151 Protestant young people entitled to free school meals left our schools. Of those, 853 did not attain the benchmark of five or more GCSEs at grade A* to C or equivalent, including English and maths. That represents 74.1% of that cohort.

A total of 2,524 Catholic young people with free school meals entitlement left in 2011-12. Of those, 1,552 left without the benchmark. That represents 61.5% of that cohort.

The evidence shows that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have greater obstacles to overcome. Their schools need additional resources to help them do that, and, last month, I announced changes to the way in which schools are funded in order to target additional resources at schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged pupils.

I have kept a clear focus on improving outcomes. I have continued to implement policies and provide funding for a range of additional interventions, with a focus on improving standards and tackling educational underachievement. Despite improving outcomes at all stages, the gap between those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and other pupils remains.

The message from international evidence is clear: a socially balanced education system enables all pupils to perform better. While some of our schools persist in the use of academic selection, we will be unable to eradicate this social division.

Inequality in outcomes is a societal issue and one that education authorities and schools

cannot tackle on their own. The challenge of tackling inequalities, be they educational, health or economic, is one that we all face, and success will depend on all stakeholders working together in order to achieve greater equity in society.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response. Can the Minister give the House an idea of specific interventions that he is bringing forward to tackle economic and cultural barriers to higher education achievement, particularly amongst Protestant working-class boys? Is he willing to meet the east Belfast education working group, which is endeavouring to bring principals, parents, the community and voluntary sector and elected representatives together to coordinate a better approach to education in the area?

Mr O'Dowd: In my response, I mentioned one of the most significant interventions I have made, and that is changing the common funding formula and diverting more money towards those schools in socially disadvantaged areas than is being diverted to schools that are not in socially disadvantaged areas. The Member may recall the lack of support in the House for that measure and the fierce resistance I met with from certain political parties and individuals on that matter. Indeed, I was threatened by the DUP with being brought to court if I proceeded with the process.

Mr Storey: You might still be.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member pre-empted me. I am aware that it may still be considering bringing me to court for diverting more money — *[Laughter.]* — as we stop the laughter and joking from the other side as we talk about social disadvantage in Protestant communities.

It may still be contemplating bringing me to court to prevent more money going to socially deprived schools. So, square that circle. How do I as Education Minister move forward in ensuring that policies that are required to eradicate barriers to good education in socially deprived communities can be moved forward in those circumstances?

On the other measures I have put in place, I have ensured that the entitlement framework is brought to the fore within our schools. The entitlement framework allows children from all abilities and backgrounds to access relevant courses that they will enjoy, which they can contribute to and from which they can see a career pathways outcome. As I mentioned in response to a previous question on extended

schools funding, I have also ensured that extended schools funding continues. No one event will solve this problem. It has to be multidimensional and multifunctional, and we require the support of parents, pupils —

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

Mr O'Dowd: — teachers and communities to eradicate educational underachievement.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I make no apologies for opposing the common funding formula on the basis of the number of schools that were going to be disadvantaged through it. He knows that that opposition did not come from just the DUP Benches; other political parties opposed it. My question is this: how much money are you going to invest to address this problem, which is a problem that has been identified in report after report after report and, indeed, requires an answer on specific investment?

You also made a comment about how the entitlement framework —

3.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You must be brief.

Mr Newton: — was part of your solution. Is it not the case that you are actually going to reduce the amount of money available under the entitlement framework?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members must be brief with their supplementaries. I do not wish to repeat that.

Mr O'Dowd: Where does the Member suggest I get the money? I have a global budget that I have to use to the best of my ability and direct where I believe is necessary. I could use the money to continue the status quo, as the Member's party suggested, even though it would result in greater disadvantage in socially deprived communities, or I could change how I use the money and redirect funds towards schools that most need it. That is what I did. I carried out a consultation. The Member's constituency of East Belfast benefited from the common funding formula. Schools significantly benefited in your constituency as a result of the changes that I made and you opposed. I made the changes and you opposed them. Schools in your constituency benefited.

The entitlement framework was also opposed by the DUP. However, the entitlement framework is seen as key in ensuring that all young people have access to a wide range of courses that meet and challenge their abilities. The entitlement framework is key, especially to young people who are not academically gifted but gifted in other ways. If I had followed the DUP's advice on that, I would not have introduced the entitlement framework, but I did. Schools and communities that you serve are benefiting from it.

I face a very difficult budget. I have committed funding of £4.5 million to the entitlement framework in the time ahead. I will continue to review my budget. If I can secure funding for the entitlement framework, I will.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He slightly ducked the question from Mr Lyttle. What multidimensional approaches are there? Is the Minister looking at any pilot schemes to put into areas in which education is particularly struggling? Is he liaising with OFMDFM on any projects that it might be doing on the same?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not accept that I dodged Mr Lyttle's question, although I did not respond to the point about meeting the east Belfast partnership. I am more than happy to meet the east Belfast partnership on that matter. Community involvement in education is vital if we are to succeed. I have no difficulty in doing that whatsoever.

As for pilot projects, OFMDFM is funding a number of programmes along with the Department of Education. We have the nurture unit project, for instance, in primary schools. Somewhere in the region of 300 newly qualified teachers have been injected into our schools as a result of collaboration between the Department of Education and OFMDFM. That is a sign that, when the Executive work well together, they work well for our society. That might be a wee lesson for the Executive.

There is no secret to success. What you need to do is known. We need strong leadership in our schools, and we need to support that. That includes boards of governors and senior management teams. We need good teachers in the classroom. We need to allow good community and parental involvement in schools. We also need to eradicate academic selection. It is socially divisive. It separates young people on the basis of a very iffy educational basis, if there is any educational basis whatsoever. It is more of a socio-economic basis on which our children are

separated. Successful education systems around the world have all done away with academic selection. Why did they do that? They recognised that schools with a socio-economic mix and an all-ability mix do much better than selective schools anywhere.

[Interruption.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Rural Schools: Enrolment

6. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education to outline the impact that the minimum enrolment threshold is having on rural primary schools. (AQO 6039/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The minimum enrolment threshold outlined in the sustainable schools policy is just one of six criteria used to assess a school's sustainability. Sustainability is based on quality educational experience; stable enrolment trends; strong financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. Therefore, the minimum enrolment threshold alone does not have an impact on rural primary schools. The enrolment of a school is not a trigger for automatic closure but rather for review of the school's sustainability. The sustainable schools policy recognises the particular needs of rural communities. This is reflected in the minimum enrolment threshold of 105 pupils for rural primary schools and in the accessibility criterion that provides guidance on home-to-school travel times.

The focus of the area planning process that is under way is to develop a network of viable and sustainable schools capable of delivering high quality education to our children and young people. The focus is not, as often asserted, to close rural primary schools. I have repeatedly said that I will not close schools just because they fall below the minimum enrolment threshold.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an bhfreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. Can he be specific and respond by advising whether he will introduce a small schools policy that will help address the needs of some of our smaller rural communities?

Mr O'Dowd: I will keep the matter under review, but I am of the view that the sustainable schools policy is protection for small rural schools moving forward. It sets out clearly specific criteria for rural primary schools that

urban primary schools do not enjoy. It is worth noting that the definition of "rural" in the sustainable schools policy is everything outside Belfast City Council area and Derry City Council area. So, the definition of rural communities is very wide.

The Member may want to avoid having to make decisions about schools in the future. He may want to avoid having to make a decision that sees a school that is unsustainable and that cannot deliver educational well-being to the young people close down. It is never a nice decision to have to make, but it is the right decision to make. Surely the Member agrees that young people in rural communities should have the same right to high quality education as young people in urban communities. Whatever policy you come up with to enshrine educational quality, you have to set criteria on the basis of which school is sustainable moving forward. The only basis upon which a policy should be set is that it is there to enshrine high quality education. Where a school falls below the ability to deliver high quality education, the only right and proper thing to do is to close that school.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Could the Minister tell us what steps his Department has taken to ensure that the needs of rural communities are fully met from within its remit?

Mr O'Dowd: As regards rural proofing, DE consulted with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in developing the sustainable schools policy. The policy was also assessed against the Rural Development Council's rural-proofing checklist that was set out in its 'Striking the Balance' report. No adverse impact was identified. Staff in DE's area planning team attended a rural-proofing training course in December 2013 to help further inform the consideration of decisions about rural schools in relation to area plans and their outworkings. I have no policy to close rural primary schools. I have a policy to ensure that high quality education provision is delivered to rural and urban communities.

Mr Storey: One could be convinced that the Education Minister wants to blame everybody else and is ducking the issue. When will he tell the House how many rural schools have been closed under his watch and how many he plans to close in the next number of months, particularly in light of the review of his transport policy, which is based on distance to school and not on educational quality? Will the Minister come clean and tell that to the many

rural schools that are sitting worried about the future of the small schools factor in the common funding formula, the small schools policy and their long-term viability rather than ducking and diving and trying to blame others?

Mr O'Dowd: Let me spell it out quite clearly for the Member: I do not blame anybody else. I am the Minister of Education. I have responsibility for making decisions, and I make decisions. Unlike the Member and his party, who do not make decisions and avoid and run away from decisions, I make decisions.

Information on the number of schools that have been closed under my watch is accessible. In fact, I will provide the Member with the information. I have no plans to close a number of schools going into the future. School closures come about only as a result of the managing authority, whether that is the education and library board, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) or, in the case of a voluntary school, the board of governors, making a development proposal seeking the closure of the school. I then go into a two-month consultation period with all interested parties. I gather verbal and written evidence from communities that are to be affected, and only then do I make a decision about whether a school should or should not close. However, if I am not convinced that a school can continue to provide high-quality education to the young people it serves, as Minister of Education, I am duty-bound to make the decision to close it.

Enniskillen Collegiate/Portora Royal: Amalgamation

7. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education how much funding has been agreed for the new school build for the proposed amalgamation of Enniskillen Collegiate Grammar School and Portora Royal School. (AQO 6040/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The provision of a new school to facilitate the amalgamation of Portora Royal Academy and Enniskillen Collegiate was one of the 22 projects announced in January 2013 to be advanced in planning. Funding for the project cannot be confirmed until an approved economic appraisal is in place. Work on an economic appraisal cannot begin until the size of the new school building has been confirmed. The development proposal process will confirm the size of the new building. The Western Education and Library Board has advised that consultation on the development proposal process has commenced.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. Can the Minister give me any assurance that there will be no further work on the amalgamation until there is certainty over a newbuild and that the proposal for a newbuild will have commenced to a significant degree before the amalgamation can or would take place?

Mr O'Dowd: As I outlined to the Member, following that pathway would mean that nothing happens. There has to be a development proposal process for me to be able to move into the economic appraisal process. The development proposal will tell me how many pupils will be attending the school and what size it will be. We would then move forward to an economic appraisal process on the cost of providing such a school, if agreed. We will allow the Western Education and Library Board to carry out its work. If and when it moves to the publication of a development proposal, it will become my responsibility, and I will listen to the concerns and views in support of or against whatever the development proposal is at that stage. I will then make a decision. If I make a decision to move forward with a newbuild, there will be a responsibility on me to secure that newbuild. As difficult the times that we live in are, we are now in a rolling programme of new school builds moving into the future. In the context of giving surety on a new building programme for Enniskillen or elsewhere, despite the difficulties that we face, I assure you that a rolling programme of new school build programmes is continuing.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí go dtí seo. The Minister will be aware of the changing demographics in the controlled sector in Fermanagh and the need for changes to take place, particularly to keep Devenish College sustainable. So, can the Minister give us an indication of what approvals are required before the development proposal can be published?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. As I said, the relevant managing authorities, which in this case is the Western Education and Library Board, have to do a pre-consultation process. If after that pre-consultation process it is satisfied, it can move forward to the publication of a development proposal. It is quite clear to any observer that decisions need to be made in the Fermanagh area, including the Enniskillen area, on the entire controlled education sector. For far too long, there has been a focus on one side of that sector and on the needs of a number of schools in it instead of people looking at the entire

needs of pupils who wish to attend schools in the controlled sector in Fermanagh. It goes back to the earlier debate that we were having on educational achievement and educational well-being in Protestant working-class communities. If you focus on only a small section of society, obviously a significant part of that society will drop behind. So, the Western Education and Library Board has to make a decision. I think that there is a responsibility on elected representatives in the area to encourage it to come forward with a development proposal, whatever it may be, that secures the educational well-being of all the young people in Fermanagh in the controlled sector.

3.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends questions for oral answer to the Minister; we now move on to topical questions.

Poverty/Educational Attainment

1. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Education what steps, in light of the recent Community Relations Council report, he is taking to break the link between poverty and poor educational attainment. (AQT 1051/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. As outlined in responses to other questions, I have changed the common funding formula to direct more funding towards schools dealing with higher levels of social deprivation. Although money on its own is not the only answer, it is quite clear that schools facing such challenges require extra resources to provide more opportunities for their young people.

In the implementation of the entitlement framework, I mentioned greater funding for community projects for the first time. Over the past number of years, the Department of Education has been concentrating more on what is happening outside the school gates. I believe that the policies within schools are right, but we now need to ensure that communities and parents are supported to ensure that their young people can achieve their full educational potential.

Mr Milne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. How much of an impact does the continuing use of academic selection have on exacerbating the kind of inadequacies featured in the report?

Mr O'Dowd: As uncomfortable as it is for some in this House and beyond to hear, it is the single biggest factor, in my opinion, holding back our education system. It is an inequality that needs to be challenged by not only educationalists but anyone with an interest in equality matters in our society. Whether it be the trade union movements, the churches or civic society, they need to come out and take a firm position and campaign to end one of the last social inequalities in our society, which divides 11-year-old children not on the basis of their educational ability but largely on the basis of their socio-economic background.

In no other function in public services do we divide people in such a manner. When people go into our hospitals or seek services from any other Department, we do not establish their socio-economic background. In education, we do, and it is a disgrace that, in the 21st century, we are continuing this practice, which has been left behind by the vast majority of modern education systems throughout the world.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions should be directed through the Chair. Members should listen rather than mutter when the answer is being given. I am fed up having to repeat that information. People understand the rules of this House and let us abide by them.

Education: North/South Progress

2. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education for an update on areas of North/South progress following his address at the INTO conference in Kilkenny. (AQT 1052/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an chomhalta as an cheist. I welcome the work that has been taken forward by the Department and the Department of Education and Skills to examine new and innovative ways to address educational underachievement. Both Departments face similar challenges: significant impact of socio-economic factors on educational outcomes; multi-generational and cultural obstacles to realising the value of education; and the need for long-term and strategic impact.

Both Departments are working across a wide range of areas. Just to mention a few, work between both Departments' inspectorates has been progressing for many years and is paying dividends for both education systems. The work of the Middletown Centre for Autism has broken through the political suspicions around that programme, and it is delivering highly

respected autism services on both sides of the border. Some of the other programmes of work that we are involved in are just weekly projects, for instance, Maths Week Ireland and Children's Books Ireland.

However, I am pleased with the level of progress and cooperation between both Departments. I believe that it is paying dividends for children on either side of the border.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that, particularly his comments about the work that is done between the inspectorates, North and South. I am pleased that there is progress with the Middletown Centre for Autism, and I am simply asking him for guarantees that the centre is now on track and delivering high-quality programmes and initiatives for people dealing with autism.

Mr O'Dowd: Middletown is now an integral part of our education system. It is delivering to thousands of families on either side of the border annually. As I said, its services are highly respected, and both Departments have long-term plans to ensure that that continues.

St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen

4. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education whether he agrees that the provision of a newbuild for St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen, should not be contingent on or tied in any way to whatever happens in Newry city. (AQT 1054/11-15)

Ba mhaith liomsa ceist a chur ar an Aire, an aontaíonn sé liom nár chóir soláthar foirgnimh nua do Scoil Naomh Iósaf i gCrois Mhic Lionnáin a cheangal le cúrsaí faoi mar atá siad in lúr Cinn Trá?

Mr O'Dowd: What the Member is really saying is, "Minister, build us a new school in Crossmaglen, and I won't have to stand up to the grammar schools in Newry". I go back to the question from the previous Member. The SDLP's policy is to oppose academic selection.

Mr Storey: Here we go again.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: There is a clear example of there being a detrimental impact on an area that goes wider than Newry. I can draw a line from

Banbridge to St Joseph's in Crossmaglen and show you the impact that Newry is having on schools. The SDLP has a responsibility to live up to its policy commitment and stand up against academic selection.

I am on record as saying that St Joseph's requires a newbuild. I am also on record as saying that the number of schools requiring newbuilds does not match up to my budget. I am working my way through proposals from the education and library boards, the voluntary grammar schools, the CCMS, the integrated sector and the Irish-medium sector on a number of newbuilds. I hope to be in a position to make announcements on newbuilds in the very near future. However, the elections and purdah may get in the way of my making those announcements, I am still in discussions with my officials about that.

I have yet to finalise the list. However, I assure the Member that, when it is finalised, I will inform the schools that have qualified. As I said to previous Members during Question Time, we are now in a rolling programme of building new schools. They are no longer one-off events or events every couple of years. We will make regular announcements and move them forward.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister very much for his answer. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Aire. I refute his suggestion that it is in some way the SDLP's fault that he has not yet moved to build a new school in Crossmaglen. I welcome him saying that he will make an announcement at some time, possibly after the election, and I hope that St Joseph's, Crossmaglen, will be on that list.

Mr O'Dowd: Let me reassure the Member that I am not blaming him for a new school not being built in Crossmaglen. I am blaming him for his party not moving forward on our policy, which would assist in championing an end to inequality and social exclusion and would ensure that all schools in our society are on a level playing field. I assure the Member that I am working my way through the lists that have come in from various bodies, and I will make my announcement as soon as possible.

Ann Maguire

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education what implications the tragic death of Ann Maguire in a school in Leeds has for our schools and what advice he would give them, given that he, along with other Members of the

House, will have been appalled by the incident. (AQT 1055/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: First, I offer my deepest sympathy to the family, colleagues and friends of Ann Maguire and, indeed, to the entire teaching profession. It was an absolute tragedy, and a horrific way for anyone to lose their life, particularly a teacher in a school, who was, by all accounts, a very highly regarded teacher who worked for all her pupils.

The full circumstances will come out in due course. However, I do not want to be alarmist — I am not suggesting that the Member is — about those matters. It is only the second such killing in Britain in a 20-year period; I think that Dunblane was the last such example. We want to do everything in our power to ensure the safety of all our teaching and school staff when they are on school premises. Each school will have its own health and safety measures in place, and our schools remain very safe places. There are, occasionally, violent incidents against teachers or other pupils. Sometimes, verbal exchanges go way beyond acceptability and put significant pressure on teaching and support staff. Nevertheless, our schools remain very safe places.

Mr Dallat: I concur entirely with the Minister that our schools are safe places and should remain open places. However, the Minister will be aware that, in addition to two people losing their life in Britain, 1,000 teachers were attacked and 550 pupils have been expelled since 2011. Although I draw no parallel with Northern Ireland, does the Minister agree that teachers need reassurance that the school is a safe place?

Mr O'Dowd: I assure the Member that I continue to work with teachers' unions and representative bodies in discussing any concerns that they may have relating to particular circumstances or developing trends in our schools. Of those violent incidents and suspensions, there will be an individual story behind every one of them. Our schools are, at times, a reflection of what is happening in our society. The problems of society, families and individual children are not left at the school gates; they bring them into the schools with them. The vast majority of the time, our schools act as comfort zones for troubled young people. Unfortunately, in these circumstances, that went extremely and horrifically wrong. I assure the Member that I continue to work with teachers' representatives to ensure that our schools remain safe places.

Shared Education Campuses

6. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the shared education campus programme under the Executive's Together: Building a United Community initiative. (AQT 1056/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. The call for expressions of interest closed on 31 March. We had 15 expressions of interest from various quarters, all of which have to be assessed against the criteria. I hope to make an announcement later in the summer as to which has been successful. We will then move on to the next phase.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he provide an update on progress on the flagship shared education project at Lisanelly?

Mr O'Dowd: As Members will be aware, the demolition of the old buildings on the site is well advanced. We are now clearing the site in preparation for construction of the Arvalee special needs school, which will move on to the site and be the first school to be completed on the shared education campus.

My Department and the management bodies continue to engage on the way forward for the planning of the school estate on the Lisanelly campus. At this stage, I am content with the pace at which we are moving forward. It is a significant capital investment, and a significant infrastructure is being built on the site. That will present challenges as we move along. However, I am content that, at this stage, we are moving along at proper pace.

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Comments were made during Question Time to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure following a complaint by the Minister that she could not hear. Mr Gregory Campbell said, very audibly, that she should syringe her ears. Is it possible for you to look at the Hansard report and take appropriate action?

3.30 pm

Mr Campbell: Further to that point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am quite content to leave it to you and the Speaker to assess what was said in Hansard, which is not what the honourable Member has just said. I am quite happy if the matter comes back to the Floor of

the Chamber, where I will stand over every word said, seated or standing.

Ms Ruane: Further to that point of order, methinks he doth protest too much. I heard, and I have no doubt that Hansard heard, "syringe her ears". It was very, very rude, and not what is becoming of the House.
[Interruption.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I think the behaviour of Members during Question Time, particularly from one side of the House, was unacceptable. I intend, in any event, to refer this to the Speaker. With regard to the particular remarks that were made, we will examine exactly what was recorded by Hansard, and we will make a report to the Chamber in that respect.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Is it further to this point of order?

Mr D Bradley: It is less controversial, you will be pleased to hear. I want to apologise to you and the House for not being in my seat when I was called recently to ask a question for oral answer. Thank you very much.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I appreciate that you had the courtesy to come to the House. Thank you.

The House will take its ease for a moment.

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

Private Members' Business

Marriage Equality

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes that other jurisdictions on these islands have moved forward with equal marriage rights for same-sex couples; believes that all couples, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, should have the same legal entitlement to marry and to the protections, rights, obligations and benefits afforded by the legal institution of marriage; supports freedom of religion by allowing religious institutions to define, observe and practise marriage according to their beliefs, granting them the freedom whether or not to conduct same-sex marriages; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to introduce legislation to guarantee that couples of any sex or gender identity receive equal benefit; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that all legislation adheres to the Executive's commitments to protect equality for all. — [Ms Ruane.]

Mr Lyttle: This will be the second time that I have spoken on the issue in the Assembly. I previously voted in favour of an amended motion on 29 April 2013, and my contribution will be similar to before. I will speak in support of the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party.

It is the vision of the Alliance Party to build a shared society based on religious and civil liberty and equality for all citizens, regardless of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. It is Alliance Party policy to support the extension of civil marriage to same-sex couples and legislative protection for the religious freedom of faith groups and people of faith to define and observe marriage as they determine. I therefore welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. My party and I believe that respectful and meaningful dialogue is clearly needed if we are to address the concerns of Members of the Assembly and the public about the issue.

I have carefully considered a wide range of sincerely and strongly held views on the issue. Some people oppose the proposal because they believe that equality is afforded to same-sex couples via civil partnerships; others oppose it because they believe that it is against their Christian faith or conscience; some support it because of their Christian faith or

conscience; and some believe that it is the duty of the state to treat all citizens fairly and equally before the law. I believe that the democratic principles of freedom of religion, freedom from religion and equality before the law for all citizens is the best framework for government by the people, and that they can guide us on this particular issue.

As a Christian, I value greatly the freedom of religion that I have in a democracy to live and communicate my faith and my belief that marriage is the voluntary lifelong union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others under God.

I therefore believe that the religious freedom of people and groups of faith to define and observe their understanding of marriage should be upheld.

However, I take very seriously my responsibility as a democratically elected representative to uphold not only the principle of freedom of religion but freedom from religion, and equality before the law for all citizens. It is my assessment that the law on marriage in Northern Ireland, as set out in the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, distinguishes between religious marriage and civil marriage, and that the law makes it a legal requirement that civil marriage be conducted with no religious or spiritual basis. The proposal before us is that state-provided civil marriage be extended to same-sex couples, with legislative protection for faith groups and people of faith to define and observe marriage as they determine. I therefore find it reasonable that a couple of same-sex orientation — a legal sexual orientation in Northern Ireland — under these principles and provisions, should expect to have access to state-provided civil marriage, with legislative protection for faith groups and people of faith to define and observe marriage as they determine.

We heard quite a few points here today about marriage being undermined or abolished, thin edges of wedges and far-reaching consequences. It is my sincere belief that people and groups of faith who have the freedom to define and observe religious marriage as they determine can ensure that the aspects of marriage that they hold dear and value greatly for themselves and for society can survive and thrive within this framework.

For all those reasons, and in line with Alliance Party policy and our vision for a shared society for everyone in Northern Ireland, I support the motion.

Mr Givan: The Assembly has voted conclusively on two previous occasions — I trust that it will do so again today — to uphold the institution of marriage as the union between one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. That definition of marriage has been the foundation of our society, predating Governments. However, over time, Governments have recognised that union, because of its undeniable benefits, as opposed to creating the institution.

Sinn Féin uses this issue as a weapon to attack those in our society who disagree with its perverse interpretation of equality. Given its track record as a sister organisation of the Provisional IRA, which was responsible for gross human rights violations, it is hardly in a position to present itself as a paragon of virtue when it comes to rights.

The motion is fundamentally flawed in that it calls for marriage equality for same-sex couples. Marriage being between a man and a woman is not discriminatory; it is the recognition of the natural truths that men and women are different and complementary, and the biological fact that reproduction depends on a man and a woman. But, when it comes to children, those who advance same-sex rights ignore all the evidence and place the demands of adults over the needs of children.

The motion is also flawed in that if you accept — I patently do not — that marriage should be redefined and extended to same-sex couples on the basis of a loving, committed relationship, why discriminate against people in multiple relationships? Some in the Chamber believe that the state should recognise polygamy, but why stop there? Why discriminate against brothers and sisters who have a brotherly and sisterly love towards each other and are in a lifelong committed relationship? Surely they should have the same legal and financial entitlements if marriage is to be defined as being a loving, committed relationship. That can be the only logical position of those who argue for redefining marriage to include homosexuals.

Some in the gay rights lobby aggressively attack anybody who takes a contrary opinion and go out of their way to be offended. Yet, those who hold to a biblical position or just a logical position, recognising the fundamental physics of procreation and how best to support that reality in the interests of society, are labelled as bigots and homophobic.

The Roman Catholic cardinal Timothy Dolan, of New York, responded to those who make such accusations, when he said:

"Unjust discrimination against any person is always wrong. But [this law] is not 'unjust discrimination'; rather, it merely affirms and protects the time-tested and unalterable meaning of marriage. The suggestion that this definition amounts to 'discrimination' is grossly false and represents an affront to millions of citizens."

I could not agree more.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has recognised that the demand for gay marriage is not a matter of equality. Importantly, the European Court of Human Rights has accepted that it is a matter for member states, under article 9 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states:

"The right to marry and the right to found a family shall be guaranteed in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of these rights."

I believe in devolution because it allows the people of Northern Ireland to take their own position on all of the issues devolved to us. Marriage is a devolved matter, and, within the constitutional arrangements of the United Kingdom, it is for the Northern Ireland Assembly to legislate on the issue, as it was Westminster for England and Wales and the Parliament in Holyrood for the people in Scotland. Notably, it was not the courts that changed the law in any of those United Kingdom jurisdictions. It cannot be for the courts in Northern Ireland, whom some will seek to use to bypass this democratic institution, to change the law. The courts should not usurp the legitimate role of the Northern Ireland Assembly to take decisions on sensitive social policy that will have far-reaching consequences for the fabric of our society.

Increasingly, senior members of civic society have expressed their concerns to me at the commentary on these areas, not just from judicial figures in Northern Ireland but from members of the UK Supreme Court. Reassuringly, however, when I met the vice-president of the European Court of Justice recently, we discussed how European courts recognise different laws on social policies within devolved regions of member states, and he was emphatic in his response that they do. So, those who call for the same law within the United Kingdom on this issue are, again, mistaken.

I trust that not only will politicians and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission respect the Assembly's responsibility for this matter, but so, too, will the courts in Belfast, as any form of judicial activism on this issue would be a gross abuse of that office and a serious and fatal blow to the democratic legitimacy of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I urge the House to reject the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Daithí McKay, I encourage Members to please stay within the remit of the motion that is before the House.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I think that a lot of progress has been made on this issue since it first came to the House. Marriage equality will be introduced and, in years to come, many in this and other societies will look back and ask, "What was all the fuss about?", similar to the decriminalisation of homosexuality, which was opposed by the opposite same-sex Bench as we have today. It has happened in a number of other issues as well.

People, of course, have the freedom to disagree with same-sex marriage on the basis of their individual religious views. However, as legislators, we have to legislate for everybody. The legislation we are proposing will not cover religious groups; it is civil marriage. The argument today from the other Bench has been pretty poor. They say that marriage is sanctity, but marriage is what you make of it. Marriage is unique to each and every one of us. The argument used about the institution of marriage could be used against adultery or divorce, but I do not see any legislation coming from those opposing the motion in regard to those particular areas.

This is being rolled out across Europe. It is being rolled out in Britain and will be shortly in the South of Ireland as well. The North will be left behind and will be an embarrassment because of the DUP and others, which, of course, is no surprise. We hear nonsense from those on the Benches opposite. I sometimes think that they are obsessed with sex, because that is all they talk about when it comes to arguments in regard to this issue.

Since this was introduced in England and Wales, I would just like to confirm that there has been no plague of locusts in London; the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have not ridden into Cardiff; and the sky has not fallen in on Liverpool — although that is perhaps open to interpretation.

All that has happened is that people who love each other have got married. In England and Wales, that has not lessened anybody else's marriage in any way. In England and Wales, in Scotland and in the South, this will be introduced. Of course, that being the case, and given the proximity of all those jurisdictions, gay people living in the North will go and get married anyway. So, it is an absolutely —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: I will, yes.

Mr Allister: The Member says that this is all about allowing people who are in love to get married. Can I test just how far he takes that facile argument? If a man says, "I am in love with two women", is he entitled to be polygamous? Does the Member's view of equality — a perversion of equality just as this is a perversion of marriage — embrace polygamy?

Is he going to say that we have to provide for everyone because that is their right?

3.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind Members that interventions are supposed to be concise and to the point. Continue.

Mr McKay: If the Member wants to get married to two women, that is his business. It has nothing to do with this particular argument.

Mr Allister: What does the state say?

Mr McKay: It is a heterosexual argument and not a homosexual argument. OK?

Mr Allister: What does the state say? What do you say?

Mr McKay: The Member, as we all know, opposed the decriminalisation of homosexuality —

Mr Allister: Answer the question.

Mr McKay: He might not want Members to be reminded of this, but when it was discussed in 1982, he wanted the British Government at that time to derogate from the relevant article of the European Convention on Human Rights. That is what his agenda is.

Mr Allister: Answer the question.

Mr McKay: It is not anything about polygamy. It has nothing to do with it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry. I have the Floor at the moment.

I remind Members that Mr McKay has the Floor, so I encourage other Members to please remain quiet and listen to what is being said. Continue.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr McKay: Yes.

Ms Ruane: Under civil law, can heterosexual people marry two wives?

Mr McKay: Under the law at the moment, members of the public have married more than once. There are Members in this House who have married more than one woman or who have married more than one man, I am sure. So, that is a totally separate argument to what we are debating here today.

At the end of the day, there is a very serious aspect to this through how people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) community are treated in Ireland and further afield. Unfortunately, homophobia is fuelling the political representation in much of the debate here today. This is about gay people being treated as less than everyone else. Gay men and women are deserving of the same rights that I have and of the same rights that you have, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Two people who love each other and who have their love recognised through marriage pose no threat to anybody. I urge the House today to do the right thing and to think about the consequences of this in the prejudice, bullying and suicides that occur, as that is a big issue in the LGBT community. So, do the right thing and vote in favour of the motion.

Lord Morrow: Marriage is the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. It has been the bedrock of society for generations and has enabled communities to prosper. The Sinn Féin motion is titled "Marriage Equality", but it is, in fact, not about equality at all. It is about redefining marriage. It is about removing the traditional

and biblical definition of marriage and replacing it with a new definition. It is about redefining marriage, thereby bringing about a societal change in the understanding of what marriage is. This would be a radical redefinition of society's most fundamental institution and a radical deconstruction of the institution of marriage.

The terms "husband" and "wife", and, indeed, "father" and "mother", would become meaningless. Of course, some advocates of so-called same-sex marriage argue that this would not interfere in any way with the rights of those who hold to a traditional understanding of marriage. However, that is simply not true. Marriage would be redefined for everyone, and our historic understanding of marriage as the union of one man and one woman would be replaced by a new paradigm for marriage as the union of two people, regardless of gender.

This is about imposing a new, genderless definition and a new genderless version of marriage on the whole of society. Thereby, this new, redefined version of marriage as a genderless institution would be the only legalised definition of marriage in Northern Ireland. That new definition of marriage would become the norm and would be taught in our schools as being the norm, even to young children, thereby interfering with parents' rights to pass on their own values to their children.

The true nature of marriage cannot be changed by Parliaments or Assemblies, but rewriting the definition of marriage would lead to confusion and would erode and downgrade the status of marriage in society. Advocates of this same-sex marriage say that there can be a distinction between civil marriage and religious marriage and that they want to redefine civil marriage, leaving religious marriage alone. That is impossible. There can be only one definition of marriage in society. Whether the wedding is in the form of a civil ceremony or a religious ceremony, the outcome is the same: the joining together of a man and a woman in marriage. The ceremonies and the settings may be different, but the institution is the same.

Redefining marriage as a genderless institution would mean merging two things that are radically dissimilar under the single word "marriage". A same-sex relationship and a traditional marriage would be recognised and promoted by the state as being the same thing. This legal redefinition would abolish the traditional definition of marriage.

I am pro-marriage and pro-family, and I believe that we would go down a very wrong road today

if we were to redefine such a fundamental institution. I implore the House to reject the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Sinn Féin is committed to the equality agenda, and we believe that all citizens, regardless of race, religion or sexuality, should be treated as equals in the eyes of the law. Human rights should be enjoyed by everyone without discrimination.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

"Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

In addition, the declaration states that everyone is:

"entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution."

Article 18 states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

It is important to make it clear that this right also extends to religious groups and organisations, which have the right to freedom of religion. Overall, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes it clear that, no matter who we are, what we look like or where we come from, we are entitled to equality and human rights.

I recognise and respect that there are deeply held religious, cultural and personal views, but we must respect and appreciate the views of each individual with regard to this very important issue. Sinn Féin advocates the right to social, economic, gender and cultural equality. The rights of the LGBT community and human rights are not separate; they are one and the same. You cannot support equality and be a racist, nor can you support equality and perpetuate sexual discrimination. You cannot support equality and be homophobic.

All MLAs represent every section of our community, including our LGBT members. The motion is about ensuring marriage equality for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation. A growing number of states allow same-sex marriages. Along with France and the UK, other countries, including Spain, Canada, the

Netherlands and Argentina, and nine US states have extended marriage rights.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. She mentioned some of the states that have changed their laws to allow for same-sex marriages, as did Caitríona Ruane. Will she confirm that none of those states has gone on to legalise polygamy and, equally, that none has challenged the Churches' right to define marriage as they see fit?

Ms McGahan: You are right on that one. It is stating the obvious, but I thank you for the intervention.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms McGahan: No, there is really no point.

The constitutional convention in Dublin voted in favour of extending marriage rights to same-sex couples. Seventy-nine per cent of convention members voted to recommend that the constitution be amended to allow for same-sex marriage. The convention's recommendations will, hopefully, be viewed by the Government quite soon. Every citizen should enjoy the same rights and entitlements under state law, and that includes those in relation to marriage. What the Churches do is a matter for them, but the state needs to treat everyone with equality. It is important to note that the motion supports religious institutions to define, observe and practise marriage according to their beliefs.

All family forms should be given equal respect and value in law. The traditional family form based on marriage should not be given higher status in law or practice than any other family form. Law and social policy should recognise the diversity of family life in Ireland. All families, including unmarried families, have the same rights to respect, care, support, protection and recognition. The equality regulations and sex discrimination regulations state that it is unlawful for service providers to discriminate against a person because of his or her sexual orientation in the provision of services and public functions.

Surveys have shown that negative perceptions about lesbian, gay and bisexual people were getting progressively worse in the North of Ireland, and a report on mental health showed that a quarter of young gay or bisexual men in the North of Ireland have attempted suicide. There is no doubt that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are valued and are seen as participating members of society, although there remain

prejudice and barriers to accessing equality of opportunities.

Fermanagh man Dwaine Vance, who is in the Public Gallery, wrote an article in last week's 'Impartial Reporter'. He comes from a unionist point of view and would prefer equal marriage to be brought through Stormont rather than through the Supreme Court in London.

Finally, the Assembly, by supporting the motion, can give a strong message that prejudice, discrimination and intolerance must be rejected.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the proposers for bringing this important motion forward, albeit it seems somewhat pointless because there is a petition of concern. Nevertheless, it is still important that the Assembly debates the motion and recognises that a lot of people in our community would love to see this motion pass today — in fact, recent polls would say, a majority. What those figures show is that an increasing number of people, year on year, support this policy. I think that that has been lost in all of this. Society's opinions on these issues have changed, because of people's own experiences, their family's experiences and their community's experiences. They have changed for the better.

I was very proud, when I was mayor of the city of Derry, to lead, along with other public representatives, the first Foyle Pride march in our city. You would not believe the number of people who were out in our community supporting that festival. That has happened right across the North. It has happened right across this country, and that is a very positive step. It shows that this community is moving forward and is prepared to view members of the LGBT community as a full and equal part of our society.

I understand that people have a difficulty with this. I understand that people have a deeply held religious view on this, and I have no difficulty with that. That is what democracy is about; that is what a modern democracy is supposed to be able to accommodate. However, if I can respect that point of view, people need to respect the fact that many people in our society from the LGBT community feel left out; feel left behind; feel as if this Assembly has a lot of work to do to make them feel full members and full citizens of this country. That is a lesson that we all need to learn.

Lots of figures have been given today about the number of young people who struggle with depression and difficulties in coming to terms

with these issues. The Assembly has a duty of care to them, and we have a duty of care, I believe, to say that this is not about diminishing marriage; it is about strengthening it. It is about ensuring that more people can have access to this great institution.

I am not against marriage — I got married in December. I do not know whether that was a good idea or not, but I believe very strongly — *[Interruption.]* Hopefully she is not watching. I believe very strongly in the institution of marriage. I believe that two people — let us not all get upset now — who love each other and who are prepared to commit to each other in a loving relationship should be afforded recognition by the state.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the importance of marriage, and the number of people getting married has been going down. Does he agree that people who are willing to campaign for the right to marry show a great commitment to that institution?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

4.00 pm

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for his intervention, and he makes a very good point. We are all saying that we believe very strongly in the institution of marriage. It is an institution that people are not exactly queuing round the block to get involved in or to stay committed to. These are people who want to be married, who want to do all —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: I will surely. Go ahead.

Mr Wells: It may interest the Member that, since 2005, 66,529 marriages have occurred in Northern Ireland and only 727 civil partnerships. So, it looks like traditional marriage is pretty popular in Northern Ireland.

Mr Eastwood: That is good to hear. Unfortunately, a lot of people do not have the option of getting married, and that is what this is about. I hope that Members opposite join us, get rid of their petition of concern and recognise that there are many unionist people who would love to be married as well. This is not a nationalist/unionist issue, though, unfortunately, it is portrayed as such.

Marriage is an institution that has evolved over time. One hundred and fifty years ago,

Catholics and Protestants in Ireland could not be married at all; now they can. Marriage used to be a property transaction rather than an institution in which two people loved each other and wanted to commit to each other. It used to be the case that, if a man was accused of rape, it would be all right if the victim was his wife. That is how far we have come in society. Adultery used to be a criminal offence. Divorce in Ireland was not legal. It was only in 1981, because of the Dudgeon case, that homosexuality was decriminalised.

So, I do not despair. I am very, very confident that, in time, whether in this House or in a court of law somewhere, this part of Britain or Ireland — however you want to describe it — will catch up with the rest of these islands and with the way the rest of the western world is going. I am very confident that those people, on whom we have turned our backs and whom we have not shown that they are proper, true and equal members of society, will finally one day be entitled to access the great institution that is marriage.

Mr Copeland: I do not wish to tread on the faith sensibilities of anyone, but simply to speak for myself, from my personal experiences and on behalf of people I have known through my constituency work.

As is patently obvious, I am neither a lawyer nor a theologian. I am just over 60 years of age, closer in many ways to the last chapter than the first in my own journey, and the world has changed immeasurably in the 60 years that I have been in it. Things that were beyond comprehension 10, 20, 30 or 40 years ago are now viewed differently. In my constituency work and within my family, I have seen the disastrous implications that flow from the prejudice that is felt by those who know themselves to be different by reasons of gender, where their feelings and affections are viewed by society as being in some way corrupt or incapable of being spoken about in polite society. I have had young people in my office driven almost to the point of suicide, including a young woman, born within the shadow of this Building, who was confined to her room for about six months and continual attempts were made to exorcise — whatever that means — this demon that was allegedly possessing her.

Marriage has been held up as an institution, I know. I have been married for 32 years, I think. I did some research, incidentally, just to introduce a degree of laxity, prior to the previous vote. I met a guy on the Newtownards Road outside a public house who had obviously had several beers. I asked him his opinion

about what I should do in the vote on equal marriage. His gruff Belfast reply was, "Is that the gay thing?" I said yes. He said, "Wait till I tell you, Michael, I have been married to a woman for 30 years, and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. If gay people want to get married and be as miserable as me, it is up to them." There is a truth that runs through that, which says live and let live.

The institution of marriage has a legal position that has changed throughout the years. I was going to say "as recently as 1782", but it actually was in 1782 that Presbyterian weddings were adjudicated to be unlawful. The Presbyterian form of worship was adjudicated to be unlawful to such a degree that thousands of people had to row from Donaghadee to Scotland to be afforded freedom of worship according to their choice. The children of those marriages were considered to be illegitimate and the marriages null and void unless they were re-performed in a Church of Ireland parish and a stipend was paid to the minister. That changed.

I do not know the moral rights and wrongs of this, but I know that the words that we use in the Chamber will echo to reinforce prejudice, or not to reinforce prejudice. We must bear in mind that the ultimate judgement on issues of morality are with a much higher authority than is exercised in the House. I do not consider myself to be a worthy person to sit in judgement, moral or otherwise, on the emotions of other human beings.

Mr B McCrea: I must say that I am surprised by the argument that has been made by Members on the Benches opposite that go under the title of unionists. When England and Wales and Scotland — the rest of the United Kingdom — think that it is a good idea and, in fact, the Prime Minister said that it sends out a "powerful message" to the rest of the world, I am surprised that they have distanced themselves from it. I am also conscious that the message that we send out from the Chamber is also powerful. I am disappointed that Members have, yet again, felt the need to table a petition of concern. That means that, no matter what vote we have, nothing will happen. We then get into the situation of asking why we are having the debate.

Members who spoke earlier talked about homophobia, the bullying that comes from it, the suicides and the victimisation. I think that people on other Benches who profess that they do not worry about gay activity are not telling us the real truth. There is actually a reaction against that. You can dress it up any way that

you like and say, "Oh, no. I do not want to do that." Whatever. That is not the truth.

I think that it was Mr Kennedy who said that he has a deep personal conviction. I think that it is really wrong that we allow personal morals to influence what should be a legislative assembly. I do not think that this should be a free vote. I think that it should be a proper whipped vote, because this —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, I will not take it. I do not have enough time. There is an issue here about people recognising that there is a debate that has to be had. I have to say to you that, at some stage, we will need to confront this properly. Members who are present might consider bringing forward a private Member's Bill through which we can deal with these issues. Of course, I understand that Members opposite will oppose it. At least, on that particular position, I know that that is their standing. I can also admit that there is deep disquiet in our society from certain quarters that must be respected.

One of the things that attracted me to the motion was that it states that there will be no imposition on Churches or people of faith to do things that are not in their philosophy. That is the standard that has to prevail. I heard Members refer to what Catholic bishops or archbishops said. As I understand it, there is a prohibition in the Roman Catholic Church on divorce, yet I do not see any legal challenges to force second marriages in a Catholic church. These things are scurrilous. They do not happen. They are red herrings.

An issue was brought up — I have been waiting for Mr Allister to interject — on the issue of polygamy, which was a great challenge that he put out. The real issue is that I have three tests about any legislation. First, does the activity that you are talking about do any harm? Whatever that activity is, does it do any harm? Secondly, would legislation be effective and make things better or worse? Finally, does it affect a lot of people? I would be against polygamy, because the evidence is that they are not real wives, and you are getting into servitude and other issues — *[Interruption.]* That was the Supreme Court.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Allister: The Member says that he would be against polygamy and that one of the tests would be whether it causes any harm. Is that not a moral judgement? If he is entitled to make a moral judgement as the touchstone as to whether you legislate on something, why are the rest of us not entitled to make a moral judgement on whether you legislate for same-sex marriage? He cannot have it both ways. If a moral judgement is apt for him, it is apt for everyone else.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: The one thing that I will say about Mr Allister is that when I give him the courtesy of taking an intervention, he should be a little bit more succinct in his argument.

The issue is this: I am not giving him the moral right to decide any of these things. I am saying that this is a legislative body that has to legislate for everybody. We are not attacking the institution of marriage. It is an honourable institution. However, there are many people in our society who live different lifestyles. That is what we have to try to legislate for.

I remember a great campaign that started something like "Save Ulster from sodomy". Well, look where that got us. Our society is moving forward. It is a wonderful, diverse society made up of lots of different individuals, and our job is to try to find a way to make sure that all people can live together —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, I do not have time, Mr Kennedy.

Our job is to do that. Let me put out a challenge to the xenophobes, homophobes and people who think that bullying is OK: that is not the right way to go forward. Let us have a proper debate. Let us not put forward petitions of concern, and let us not have a debate that is constrained to one and a half hours. Why can we not have proper discussions back and forth? I would like to engage with Mr Kennedy, and I apologise for not being able to let him in, but I am short of time.

This is a signal opportunity for all parties in the House to say what they want to do, and I have to say to those parties that espouse equality that I think that all their Members should be voting for their party policy along with NI21.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Speaker rule on whether language around xenophobia and homophobia used in the context of those who signed a petition of concern is appropriate to be used in the Assembly Chamber on a very sensitive and emotive issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member will agree that moderate language is very appropriate at all times. Indeed, there are times when no language is appropriate. There was too much shouting across the Chamber. I hope that the Minister will be given greater courtesy than some Members got.

Mr Clarke: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, is the Deputy Speaker going to refer that to the Speaker to look at the language used by the previous Member when he was making his contribution?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will give it careful consideration, but I repeat what I said: Members should choose their language wisely when they are engaging in a debate.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): A motion on same-sex marriage was debated by the Assembly on 29 April 2013. On that occasion, I spoke on behalf of my party to oppose the motion. As I said at that time, the opposition was not grounded on opposition to what a person is or how a person chooses to live his or her life, but rather on support for the traditional, longstanding, centuries-old definition of marriage.

I have listened with great care and interest to the points that Members made during this further debate today. However, my support for the traditional approach to marriage has not waned, and I cannot, therefore, support the motion. I will not, as the motion asks me to, bring legislation to the House to legalise same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

The motion suggests that:

"other jurisdictions on these islands have moved forward with equal marriage rights for same-sex couples".

I assume that this is a reference to the British Isles, which includes Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and our offshore islands. The jury is still out in the Republic of Ireland, and I suspect that there are quite a few in that jurisdiction who would be quite happy to align themselves with the position that the Assembly has adopted on previous occasions.

Likewise, the Isle of Man has not introduced same-sex marriage.

Legal developments in other jurisdictions may be of interest, but they are not determinative of the law in this jurisdiction, and it is wrong to suggest that they should be. Differing laws in different jurisdictions is the very essence of devolution. It is for this Assembly and this Assembly alone to determine. It is not for any other Parliament or Assembly in these islands, and certainly not for any judge in a court, to determine the law of Northern Ireland.

When we decide what the law of this land ought to be, we should do so by reference to principled and informed debate, rather than by automatic adoption. We should not make our minds up on the basis of who shouts the loudest, although I have to say that this is not an issue that especially exercises my constituents, who seem much more interested in jobs, the economy and the health service, and nor should we decide simply because some argue on the grounds of discrimination, without testing whether an issue of inequality exists.

4.15 pm

The latest motion seeks to emphasise the concept of equality and implies that same-sex couples do not receive equal benefits. When the Assembly first debated same-sex marriage, my colleague Michelle McIlveen said:

"It is time to tear down the smokescreen that this is about discrimination." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 77, p317, col 1].

It is regrettable that some in the Assembly are still maintaining that smokescreen. People in Northern Ireland have an equal opportunity to enter into a committed relationship with all the benefits that that entails. Opposite-sex couples can do that through marriage, and same-sex couples can do it through civil partnerships. It has been acknowledged that a same-sex marriage in England and Wales confers the same benefits as a same-sex civil partnership. Equality per se is not, therefore, the issue.

Article 16 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as upheld by the UN Human Rights Committee, defends the traditional view of marriage. In European law, article 12 of the European Convention on Human Rights also upholds that definition, and the European Court of Human Rights has deemed the definition of marriage not a matter of equality but a matter for individual state law.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has highlighted the international treaties that protect the right to marry but has conceded that:

"The restriction of marriage to opposite-sex couples does not violate the international standards and this is clear from both the International treaties and the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the United Nations Human Rights Committee."

It is clear, therefore, that the United Nations, Europe and our own Human Rights Commission all agree that this is not an issue of equality.

The key questions that we should be asking ourselves are these: "Is the balance of our current law right?"; and, "Has the range of interests that fail to be accommodated been afforded equal respect?" In my view, the answer to both those questions is an unequivocal yes.

Our law already affords same-sex couples legal recognition of their relationship and, at the same time, respects freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Supporters of same-sex marriage are quick to point to the so-called protections that have been built in to the various pieces of legislation in Great Britain. However, leading lawyers have queried how effective those protections will be. Moreover, the protections are largely designed to protect the clergy and to prevent any claim that a member of the clergy is obliged to conduct a same-sex marriage. They do not protect the religious beliefs of others, such as teachers or registrars, and it is entirely possible that faith organisations in Great Britain will be precluded from accessing public funding, services or public buildings because they object to same-sex marriage. I, for one, would not want that to happen here.

Furthermore, I am in no doubt that the same individuals who offer up tokenistic protection for Churches today would, if same-sex marriage were legal in Northern Ireland, be the first to jump on a future bandwagon when the inevitable lobby begins for Churches to be required to permit same-sex marriages on their property.

There will always be those who call for more and who want their personal interests to be prioritised above all else. However, I have to place those calls alongside the many other calls for legal reform and must ultimately decide the priority actions. I have done so and have

determined that there are other more important issues that need to be addressed. Those issues are of concern to people across Northern Ireland rather than of concern to one small but very vocal lobbying group.

The current law on civil partnership is in place and is operating effectively. I see no need to revisit it at all. In adopting that position, I am neither demeaning nor discriminating against people. Rather, I am ensuring that there are appropriate protections for all and that the current balance of the law is maintained. I want to make it clear that, whilst there is obvious disagreement in the House on this issue, that should be no excuse for us to be intemperate.

Just as no one has the right to abuse anyone physically, mentally or verbally because of their sexuality, so too is it unacceptable to belittle or besmirch someone simply because they possess a different view from you.

It is not appropriate to brand those who oppose same-sex marriage as being bigoted or backward. Good people — people of the Protestant faith, people of the Catholic faith and people of no faith — oppose same-sex marriage, and they should not be lambasted because they do so.

For saying what I have said today, I will no doubt be damned by some as a bigot and as being intolerant. Nothing could be further from the truth. I do not expect some who support same-sex marriage to accept that, because of the personal stance that I have taken on the matter, but it is the truth nonetheless.

All I seek to do today is to state my view, which I believe is the mainstream view in Northern Ireland. We all need to be careful with our language, be considerate in our choice of words, treat each other with respect and accept that there are differences. As I have said in the House previously, I was always taught that you show tolerance when you disagree with people, but you respect their right to have a different position from you. Today, unfortunately, it would seem that, for some, when you fail to fall in line with their thinking, you are the intolerant one.

I place on record my admiration for Members who will display great courage today in the face of the personal pressure that they have been placed under from inside and outside their parties. Their resolve stands in stark contrast to others who defy the teachings of the Church of which they have been senior members for years, or others who are not brave enough to

vote the way they want to and are, oddly, absent today.

Some Members can choose to ignore the deeply held views of the majority of people in Northern Ireland if they wish. I will not. I oppose the motion.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and thank and acknowledge everyone for participating in what was, for the most part, a fairly temperate debate. It is an honour for me to be able to speak in favour of extending the right of civil marriage to those who are LGB and T.

Today, we have the DUP saying that this is not an equality issue. I get it that the notion of equality might go over your heads, because I think that we have over 20 unionist men in the Chamber discussing an equality issue. It is absolute nonsense to say that this is not an equality issue. Equality is an all-or-nothing concept. You cannot be a little bit equal to someone else. That is not how it works, so civil partnerships are not enough. Equality is not a concept that we should be striving for either; it is an absolute necessity.

Of course, in the overall fight for LGBT equality, we should recognise that the issue of marriage is just one of the many battles that need to be fought. In the past few months, we have seen the disgraceful squandering of public money in the pursuit of a personal agenda against unmarried and same-sex couples by our very own Minister of Health who, ironically, is trying to limit how many people can perform the simple life-saving act of giving blood. It is nothing short of shameful that people face discrimination every day of their lives because of nothing more than their sexual orientation.

Caitríona Ruane referred to the fact that hate crime is on the rise. We should absolutely condemn that. I think that it was Michael Copeland who said that our voices are going to echo from the Chamber, so we should not perpetuate negative views.

Thankfully, the Minister's appeals on family and adoption rights were rejected. The old narrative that a child needs a man and a woman to be raised properly is totally incorrect. Paul Givan referred to that. In reality, all a child needs is a loving home and environment in which to grow up, and it is insulting to single-parent families everywhere to say that a child needs a mother and a father to have a wholesome upbringing. I understand that some people choose to hold sincere religious beliefs and that they are very

important to a lot of people, but they should not be foisted on others, and they absolutely should not impact on the law that affects everyone.

It is important to note that there are lingering unaddressed inequalities facing those who have undergone gender reassignment. Someone who is married must have a divorce to undergo gender reassignment or have their civil partnership dissolved before they can have a gender reassignment certificate. That is important because, all too often in these debates on LGBT issues, the transgender community is forgotten.

Mervyn Storey spoke about his fear of a social revolution and the "LGB agenda", as he put it. Maybe you need to wake up a bit, because there is no revolution; that is just the way the world is. Gay people are not looking for any more or any different rights from those that straight people already have. They just want equality under the law.

For the record, in case anyone is in any doubt, this has absolutely nothing to do with polygamy. You cannot marry more than one person under civil law at present. It is a completely spurious argument — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I direct my attention to one particular Member who has frequently shouted across the Chamber. I ask that Member not to do it again. Continue.

Ms Fearon: The single most important part of the debate today is the message that we are going to send out to young people, particularly young LGBT people, who are struggling. There are people out there who would rather not live than be openly who they are because of the intimidation or discrimination that they would face because they do not conform to the notion of hetero-normativity or they do not stick to distinct gender roles. That is unacceptable. I say to those today who talked about their own outdated views — I am using moderate language so that I do not upset anyone — that I wonder whether you would be able to repeat what you said to the faces of a family who have lost a loved one to suicide because they were gay. It is one thing to do it to a hall full of schoolchildren.

We are dealing with real people with real personal struggles and real relationships. To that end, I will use this opportunity to give as many people as possible a voice inside the Chamber. Yesterday, I started a hashtag on Twitter to facilitate this. Instead of going over what has been said in here, I will air some of

what is being said out there. I will go over some of the tweets that I was sent.

The hashtag was #IWantMarriageEqualityBecause. Leona said that every single person is equal and should not be treated differently because of who they love. Hollie Morrison said that she did not think that we should have to vote in the first place; she said that everyone should be able to get married and be happy. Daire Hughes said that civil partnerships are not the same as marriage and LGBT groups deserve equality. Catherine Seeley questioned whether we voted on your marriage. Sinead Henry stated that the church did not invent marriage, and so questioned why it should define who is fit for it. Ellen said that it is 2014 and we are still fighting for LGBT rights; it is time that we realised that gender and sexuality are social constructs. Dwaine Vance said that he wanted to be given the right to marry and consecrate his relationship with his soul mate, as straight couples do. Lauren said that people do not choose who they love and we should choose to respect that. She said that civil partnerships are not enough. Maeve Burns said that love is love and religion should have no place in politics. Dáire Toner said that he should have the same rights and access to marriage and that he should not be treated as a lesser person than a heterosexual. Andrea Nash said that it is the right thing to do; it is a disgrace that, in 2014, discrimination against the LGBT community is still rife. Abigail Foran said that denying marriage to two individuals who love each other is to deny them a fundamental freedom. Mary Ellen Campbell said that everyone should be equal under the law and, quite simply, it is the right thing to do. Barra O'Murrai said that he believes that no one can quantify or judge true love. Louise Reilly said that we do not want gay rights; we just want equality: the same laws and rights for all. Jess Magowan said that she and her partner would take their lives and business further afield. She said that it would drive them away, and wondered who else. Aodhan Hamill said that it is not a religious issue; it is an equality issue. He said that no one should be denied that basic civil right. Naomh Gallagher said that it is progress and that we, as a society, need always to strive to be better. She questioned how anyone could be against love. Willie Quinn said that equality cannot be handpicked, the same way that rights should not be. He said that we should let people who love together be together. Johnny McGibbon said that there is no almost equal; there is equality or no equality.

The battle for LGBT rights is the equivalent of the civil rights movement for my generation. There is a global momentum building towards

LGBT equality. Stephen Fry was talking about this debate on social media. It is time that the Assembly got its act together, caught up and made its way into the 21st century. That does not just mean endorsing motions or saying that you support something. We cannot stop until we have achieved full legislative equality, extending the same rights, privileges and protections to all. The words "diversity" and "inclusivity" should be our cornerstone as we work to build a truly shared future for everyone. I encourage everyone today to do the right thing and support the motion. Despite the abuse or use of the petition of concern, we can at least have a moral victory if people choose to vote for the motion and not abstain.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 51.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr Copeland, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea.

OTHER:

Mr Agnew, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Fearon and Ms Ruane.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr

Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

OTHER:

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Lunn.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

Total Votes 94 Total Ayes 43 [45.7%]

Nationalist Votes 34 Nationalist Ayes 34 [100.0%]

Unionist Votes 53 Unionist Ayes 4 [7.5%]

Other Votes 7 Other Ayes 5 [71.4%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Downe Hospital: Minor Injuries Unit

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

Mr Hazzard: I start today by thanking the Business Office for accepting this topic for debate. I hope that today's proceedings can contribute to the increasing efforts of those who continue to rally to the cause of the Downe Hospital and local health service in the wider south Down area.

I also take this opportunity to thank those who work day and night throughout our health system. Their professionalism and altruistic dedication to our community is not only the bedrock on which the success of the health service is built but is evident for all to see as they continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with campaigners against the current policy of cuts, centralisation and, indeed, privatisation. Finally, I would like to put on record my thanks to the wider south Down community who have mobilised in their thousands behind the Save Downe campaign.

Since the news broke at Christmas that the future of emergency care at the Downe looked bleak, an active and coherent community campaign has been to the fore in mobilising opposition. Approximately 1,000 people attended three public meetings in Downpatrick, Ballynahinch and Newcastle, where, by and large, political representatives spoke in unison against the cuts. Indeed, in the past couple of weeks, the Minister was presented with a petition of more than 20,000 signatures of those local people who are opposed to the current status of emergency care and to the direction of travel of the trust's vision for the future of emergency care at the Downe Hospital.

4.45 pm

Minister, last month, you stood in the House and spoke of your anger and deep disappointment that the trust had taken a decision to downgrade the status of emergency care at the Downe. You gave assurances that you would challenge the trust, the Health and

Social Care Board and, indeed, the Department. You outlined that you would challenge the trust to manage the consequences of such closures and said that the South Eastern Trust had, indeed, given you assurances that the additional numbers at the Ulster Hospital would be managed successfully. Yet the Ulster Hospital continually fails to meet patient admissions targets, with more than one in four patients forced to wait for more than 12 hours. If the Ulster Hospital cannot manage current numbers, why should the people of Down accept that they will receive the appropriate care in the future? Indeed, when we look at the experiences of changes at the Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey accident and emergency departments, we see that those led to serious problems at Antrim and Causeway hospitals as a consequence.

Secondly, you outlined that fresh efforts would be made to secure medical staff for the Downe. Those efforts have, of course, proved fruitless. Or have they? Many of us contend that the process is designed not to secure additional permanent doctors. Indeed, when you consider that the recruitment agency that is used for such a venture is called Locumotion, surely it is questionable whether the motivation for securing full-time permanent doctors exists at all.

At the last public meeting in Newcastle, we listened to a recruitment expert describe the process of sourcing professional doctors throughout Europe. He talked of the cultural challenges in adapting to a new workplace that are easily overcome and said how, with the appropriate support and guidance, emergency doctors from around Europe or further afield can integrate into our local hospitals. Indeed, the same recruitment expert had just hired more than 40 full-time doctors from Romania for positions in hospitals in the Midlands and Drogheda. Minister, if those doctors are good enough for the people of Drogheda, why are they not good enough for the people of Downpatrick?

Moreover, during recent debates on recruitment, the Minister and his colleague Mr Wells have bemoaned the fact that so many of our young graduate doctors leave Irish shores for a sunnier climate in Australia. Yet we have heard nothing about attempts by our local health system to engage with those same doctors so that, after a short period of work abroad, they may be tempted by the prospect of work at home. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide us with his thoughts on that and outline any plans that he has to find a solution to the problem.

Finally, you tasked the trust and the Health and Social Care Board with bringing forward detailed plans for the future of emergency care at the Downe, coupled with an implementation plan. You said that such a plan would:

"secure confidence in the community that the best possible steps are being taken."

Minister, the people of Down are still waiting not just for sight of the plan but to be an active part in its formation. It is the best part of six months since the current crisis transpired in the weeks before Christmas. We need to see productive engagement on the road ahead. Just as the Education Minister put out to public consultation plans to reform the schools funding formula or the ongoing area planning process, so, too, any plans to reform or alter healthcare provision in Down should be open to public consultation and engagement.

Our health and care services must be fully accountable to the public and fully transparent in all that they do. As Minister, you must enable staff, patients and the wider public to scrutinise any and all plans to reform their health service. Space must be created for honest and productive dialogue between those who use and work in the health service and those who are responsible for its delivery.

So, I ask the Minister today whether he will ensure that, no matter what the final destination of travel, the people of Down are afforded the right to determine what health services are appropriate for Down. Moreover, any such reforms must be subject to the appropriate equality impact assessments. The absence of such screening thus far has been a failing of the trust and, indeed, your leadership as Minister to deliver equitable health services across the North.

One of the fundamental aims of the health service must be to eliminate health inequalities and, in turn, to contribute to reducing social and economic inequality throughout our society. Although the people of Down undoubtedly acknowledge that specialised services cannot be provided in every town in the district, we expect appropriate emergency care services to be available at the Downe Hospital.

As the Minister is no doubt aware, local patients and families continue to experience difficulties in the process of repatriation from the Ulster Hospital back to the Downe. In light of that, I hope that the Minister will also provide an update on the ongoing review into repatriation processes and protocols.

Linked to the issue of health inequalities and the repatriation problems is, of course, the rural demographics of the local area. As has been outlined in previous debates, we do not have a single inch of carriageway, and existing public transport links to centralised services in the greater Belfast area are simply not what they should be. Compounding such inequalities, we also suffer the effect of over-stretched ambulance cover — cover that needs to be seriously enhanced and supported for rural areas.

Again, I use education as a parallel. The Minister's own colleagues today argued vehemently for special treatment for rural schools and said that, no matter the cost or the hurdles, those rural communities were entitled to the same educational services as their urban neighbours. Why then should it be any different for health services? Why should the people of Down settle for less than the people of Dundonald? I am afraid, Minister, that we will not settle for any less than we deserve. Despite the best wishes of your officials and figures within the trust, the people have been galvanised by the onset of the reductions and the downgrading of our emergency care services. We did not ask for a minor injuries unit, and we will not settle for a minor injuries unit. You yourself asked that appropriate A&E services be restored at the Downe, and we will certainly hold you to that commitment in the months ahead.

Mr Wells: Mr Hazzard, Mr Rogers and I attended an emergency meeting of Down District Council just before Christmas. At that meeting, trust officials went to great lengths to explain the situation that we are in in Downe Hospital. It is not a lack of will by the Minister or the trust to have a fully fledged A&E service in Downpatrick. It is not a lack of money, unusually; there is enough money to provide for the posts that are needed. What was explained to us that night, and what Mr Hazzard and many others have to accept — they accept it privately but not publicly — is that the only reason for the situation that we are in is a lack of middle-grade doctors to staff A&E out-of-hours in Downpatrick. The facts are very simple; three issues have come together to create a perfect storm, which has made the decision of the South Eastern Trust on this absolutely inevitable.

The first is that, on average, 50 qualified doctors leave Northern Ireland for greater experience and, indeed, greater pay and better conditions in Australia and other countries, and we could not have predicted that eight or 10 years ago. That is not unique to Northern

Ireland. It happens in the Irish Republic. It is happening throughout the United Kingdom and western Europe. Mr Hazzard said that they had left the shores of Ireland; no, they have left the shores of Northern Ireland — I would never use that other phrase. However, it is worth commenting on the fact that other smaller hospitals in places such as Roscommon are experiencing exactly the same situation. There are not enough middle-grade doctors to man hospitals in the British Isles, full stop. It is no good saying that you should go out and advertise; you cannot go out and advertise if they are not there in the first place. Even though there are more middle-grade doctors working in Northern Ireland than there were three years ago, we still have a shortage and we cannot get them.

Secondly, there is the issue of the feminisation of the health service, and we welcome that. It is great news, because it has allowed us to have a pool of very highly qualified, able women coming out of medical school. Indeed, the majority of those coming out of medical school at the moment are women, and that is good. However, the problem is that women demand a different type of working rota from men. They demand, and quite rightly demand, flexible working, and they demand time off to look after children and for other caring responsibilities. They take career breaks, and the trusts are absolutely right to facilitate anyone who asks for that, whether they are male or female. However, the vast majority are female. That makes it much more difficult to ensure coverage at our A&E hospitals.

Thirdly, A&E cover at weekends and at night is becoming a very, very unattractive option for any grade of doctor, whether they are junior, middle grade or consultant, and we as a society have to accept that. As the facts have recently shown, 80% of those who present themselves at A&E in our hospitals at weekends in Northern Ireland are under the influence of alcohol. The abuse, the violence and the insults that our medical staff have to take, particularly on a Saturday and Sunday night, are absolutely dreadful. When middle-grade doctors have a choice, particularly if they are women, they make the choice that they prefer not to have the abuse, the insults and the violence; they prefer to work ordinary daytime shifts. Therefore, it is becoming much more difficult to get people to cover for those shifts.

Compounding that in the Downpatrick situation was the fact that one doctor from South Africa, who had worked a huge number of hours, decided, quite rightly, to go back to his home country for a well-earned rest. That was

granted, and the result was that the rota collapsed. Locums were not obtainable, and the staff were not there. So the South Eastern Trust had absolutely no option before Christmas but to close A&E at weekends. The fact is that, had it not done so, it would have been acting illegally.

At the time, the Minister said, quite rightly, that he was appalled by the situation and would do everything that he could to rectify it, but not even he can produce middle-grade doctors out of a hat. To turn that tank around, you would need to have started eight or nine years ago. Therefore —

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Yes.

Mr McCallister: I do not recall the Member being that sympathetic when Mr McGimpsey was forced to make decisions like that about the Mid Ulster Hospital

Mr Wells: If the honourable Member checks the record, he will see that I fully understood the position that the Minister was in with the Mid Ulster and Whiteabbey. He made it very clear that he did not have the staff. If the staff were not there, not even the most anti-Mr McGimpsey DUP Back-Bencher would criticise him for taking the steps that he had to take. We are in the same situation. The South Eastern Trust made the only decision that it could. Nobody — not the trust, board, Department or Minister — wants to be in this position. We want to rectify it, and we want to get the doctors that we need.

There are options, such as trying to attract doctors from Europe. I know that at least one professional in south Down is trying to pursue that option. However, there were difficulties with the previous attempt to do that. There were problems with language and experience. However, every effort is being made to resolve this position, and every attempt is being made to ensure that we can rectify it. I think that we all hope that this is temporary.

We have a wonderful new hospital in Downpatrick. It is a fantastic facility, but, unfortunately, since the day and hour that it opened, various forces have acted against it. I want to see that building completely utilised and packed to the rafters with patients enjoying first-rate care. Rather than simply making cheap party political points leading up to 22 May, as many political representatives in Down district are doing, you should understand the facts of

what is happening and rally together to help the Department to ensure that we get the staff that we need to keep the hospital up and running.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to Chris for securing an Adjournment debate on this topic.

The minor injuries unit was established to lessen the impact of the temporary weekend closure of the emergency department at the Downe Hospital. I would like to stress my admiration for the nurse practitioners who work at that unit. They offer a wealth of skills and experience and, at present, deliver an excellent service to the people of south Down. However, it cannot be ignored that that is no substitute for what is needed in the area: a fully operational accident and emergency unit. Unfortunately, the needs of local communities in south Down are not being met, and we cannot ignore that.

On 11 February, Mr Poots stated:

The first elements of the provision of health and social care are safety and quality ... If it falls short, it will be a matter of real concern to all of us. — [Official Report, Vol 91, No 8, p33, col 1].

We are all in this together, and we have been elected by our constituents to voice their concerns and raise the issues that affect them. I have been stopped in the street by a number of constituents regarding the need for A&E at the Downe Hospital. People of all ages have had their safety removed by the Department of Health's decision to close the accident and emergency unit at the Downe. It is in the interests of everyone that A&E is restored.

The BBC 'Spotlight' episode, 'The State of Emergency', shown on 12 February, flagged up too many warnings about the state of our A&E units, once again fuelling the public consensus that there needs to be an operational A&E in Downpatrick to lessen the stress on A&Es in Belfast.

The minor injuries unit came into effect on 1 March, and the service will be evaluated after three months. I speak on behalf of my constituents when I comment that I hope that the evaluation is not three months too late for anyone who has had to wait an unnecessary length of time on an ambulance trolley or in a hospital bed.

Minister, today's debate could be a rerun of an earlier Adjournment debate, but we need to start doing things differently. The problem has been well articulated: there are not enough middle-grade emergency doctors, and there is

no local solution that can remedy that within five years. The solution is that we need to recruit from Europe and further afield. There are suitable doctors out there with the right basic skills that could be enhanced to the required level, but they need training and development to operate effectively.

5.00 pm

There are recruitment businesses that can find suitable doctors abroad, but some exploratory work needs to be done. Precisely how many doctors do we need? What are their training needs? Who will train them? What retention strategies will be employed? What will the costs be? Minister, I urge you to take up the challenge: form a small project team that can carry out the scoping exercise, but, in the process, do not reinvent the wheel. Hand this over to an international medical recruitment specialist — Mr Wells mentioned that we have one in South Down — who can form this team. Scope it out, and I can guarantee you that, in three months' time, he will be back with solutions on your desk.

Minister, the answer to Downe A&E and, indeed, to A&E generally, lies in recruiting the right person in the right way with the right skills and having the processes to develop the team. If we or the trust imagine that only doctors from the UK and Ireland can grasp the role of an A&E doctor, we are deluding ourselves. We should be selling the whole package of living and working in Northern Ireland, in places such as St Patrick's country, with our schools, beautiful countryside and cheaper housing. We should be looking at alternative contracts that meet the needs of our people. We have the opportunity to work with well-trained doctors who may not have the desired UK experience but have the right basic skills and are able and willing to learn and be trained.

You are the Minister. You have said that you want A&E to be restored at the Downe. Minister, you lead from the front: take up my challenge of establishing this little project team, then we will all begin to think differently, and it will be better for us all.

Mr Nesbitt: I am grateful to the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. The Downe Hospital is not in my constituency, but many of my constituents use and cherish it and, indeed, are concerned that not all services are available to them 24/7. From the outset, therefore, I reiterate my position and that of my party that we oppose the downscaling of the emergency department, just like that at Lagan Valley.

Of course, it is hoped that the minor injuries unit, which opened at the start of last month, will mitigate the impact. However, the unit will still be open only from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm at weekends. So the point stands that, after 8.00 pm during the week and 5.00 pm at weekends, there is no service, emergency or minor injury. I am not opposed to change across our hospitals. Indeed, when my party held the Ministry, we took some difficult decisions. We completed the review of public administration. However, in these circumstances, we simply disagree.

The trust said that it was experiencing difficulties in maintaining sufficient medical staffing in the unit, but what efforts were really being made to sustain the existing services? I know that, when the trust is challenged, you get an almost stock response, "The trust continues in its efforts to recruit middle-grade doctors for the emergency departments in both Downe and Lagan Valley Hospitals". What does that mean? How many middle-grade doctors have now been identified and directed to those hospitals for employment? If doctors feel that working in emergency departments is not for them, as Mr Wells articulated, what is being done not only to rectify that but to retain, retrain and upskill nurses to fill the void?

I am sure that the Minister, in his remarks, will express his concerns about the reductions in the Downe and tell us that he hopes that they will be only temporary. However, let us look briefly at what happened in Lagan Valley Hospital, when emergency services there were first reduced to daytime and weekends in summer 2011. At the time, staffing concerns were given, and we were again assured by the Minister that the decision was only temporary. Nevertheless, and despite his public statements at the time, the opposite has happened, with the services being further reduced at the end of last year.

I have every confidence in the staff working in the minor injuries unit at the Downe. I am sure that they are doing their utmost to make it safe and to offer an efficient system, but I am also sure that even they would say that it still falls some way short of the previous full emergency service.

I note that the current system has been referred to as a "pilot". Again, I question the longevity of the new unit, because, if the trust and the Minister were really trying to restore a full service, the question is: why would a pilot really be necessary? Nevertheless, I hope that any issues that have been identified in the first nine weeks of the unit are being addressed.

I have been told previously that, following the downscaling of services and with the introduction of this minor injuries unit, the Downe Hospital will be linked more closely with the Ulster Hospital. The reduction in services was, conveniently for the Minister, announced in the mouth of Christmas and implemented days after new year, and it will have already placed greater pressures on the Ulster.

Let us not forget that the A&E department in that hospital was already under great strain. Although, fortunately, it appears to be coping slightly better than the Royal, I know, through talking to people in the hospital, that the pressure is immense. Indeed, the most recent report on waiting times, published only last Thursday, states that only 69% of patients attending it are being treated and discharged or admitted within the four-hour target. Of course, the Minister does not need to be reminded that the target is 95% not 69%. Were he in England, no doubt he would long ago have been hounded out of office.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that recent comments from a DUP councillor at a public meeting were unwelcome? That councillor, Billy Walker, asked for the closure of Lagan Valley to support the Downe Hospital. Does the Member agree that the future of the Downe Hospital and Lagan Valley Hospital is important to everyone in the community?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I was going to ask the Minister to address that point, because, at that public meeting that Mr Hazzard and I attended, Councillor Walker of the DUP called for the full closure of the Lagan Valley emergency department and the transfer of those resources to the Downe Hospital. Perhaps the Minister will clarify whether that is indeed a policy.

I have every confidence in the nurse practitioners working in the minor injuries unit, but I am concerned that there could be delays when it comes to their needing to confer with a doctor at the Ulster. People across south County Down deserve some honesty in this matter. That has been lacking for too long. Is it the Minister's preference and his expectation that the full emergency services will be reinstated at the Downe, or does he believe that the minor injuries unit is now a permanent step? What has really been happening over recent months in the recruitment of the required medical staff for the Downe? Specifically, how many doctors have been identified, how many contracts have been signed, and when does he

believe there will be the necessary complement of staff in order to allow it to re-open?

At another public meeting in Newtownards recently on the future of the Ulster Hospital, an experienced consultant made a compelling case with the argument that, if you reduce the offer in one area of a hospital, such as the emergency department, it will impact negatively on the whole, on the services and the willingness of specialists and professionals to serve. I look forward to hearing the Minister's vision for the future.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas le Chris as an díospóireacht seo a thabhairt go dtí an Teach. I thank Chris for bringing the debate to the Floor of the Assembly and for his sterling work in support of the Downe Hospital. I join Chris in recording our support for A&E in Lagan Valley.

We have seen a litany of cases where there has been no support for the Downe Hospital. We hear the excuses and we see the wringing of hands about there not being enough doctors or people attending when we know that one reason why is because of memorandums that were put in place about ambulances and various A&E departments in Belfast.

There have been ongoing changes to emergency care at the Downe Hospital without public consultation. There was no equality impact assessment and there was a complete and utter failure to plan for the future. We heard Mr Wells talk of the failure to recruit sufficient doctors, and, yes, Minister, you have failed to recruit doctors. You have failed. You can dress it up and you can pretend that somehow we cannot get doctors, but you are the boss. You are in charge. Can you imagine John O'Dowd or I when I was in Education not being able to recruit principals?

For young people, places to study medicine are rarer than hen's teeth. Young people want to go into medicine: what has the Minister done about that? If we do not have enough doctors, if he cannot get doctors, why does he not do something about the thousands of young people across this island who are doing aptitude tests and studying day and night so that they can enter medicine?

Our doctors and consultants are paid good money, and that is fine, but the Minister's job is to ensure that their contracts are such that they have to work in various hospitals. It is not good enough that doctors can say that they will work here but will not work there. It is the Minister's job to ensure that the system works, and,

frankly, Minister, this is not working under your watch.

Mr Wells talks about Roscommon. I know all about Roscommon; I grew up in the neighbouring county. I will be driving there this weekend, and I will see the critique of Fine Gael for closing an A&E in Roscommon on the billboards and posters, because its arguments are the exact same arguments. There has been a failure by government to deliver in the way that it should have delivered.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: Mr Wells had his time, so, maybe he will do me the dignity of listening to me.

So, you have a job of work to do. You need to do it. The Minister has over half the entire Executive Budget, but what is he doing? He is squandering it on unnecessary court cases. We had a debate about equality earlier. He is squandering it. He has no money for x, y and z, yet he has money to fight discriminatory court cases. This is not leadership. We are going from crisis to crisis, and there is a failure of leadership by this Minister. Really, he needs to take control, but he should not be taking control at the expense of the people in Down. That hospital was built because of a Sinn Féin Minister, and it was approved because of a Sinn Féin Minister, Bairbre de Brún, who stepped up to the plate. The people of Down are being failed by this current Minister, and it is not good enough.

I call on the Minister to reverse the decisions, because we do not want a minor injuries unit. The people of Downpatrick and the Down area want a fully functioning hospital with a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week A&E department. That is what is wanted in County Down. What you are doing is creating logjams in hospitals as you move in towards Belfast. You are creating difficulties; you are not just failing the people of County Down but the people of County Antrim, because the A&Es are clogged up. We have seen the fiasco of what has happened recently in those hospitals. I want to put on record my commendation of the staff and the wonderful work that they do; this is not their fault. This is a failure of leadership by this Minister.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate, and I thank Mr Hazzard for bringing it to the House. The SDLP's South Down representatives have been vocal on this issue for some time, joining in with and leading a political and public chorus for action.

I listened with interest to Mr Wells, if you like, diagnosing the whole situation. For months now, we have been saying that the issue needs to be resolved by, first, diagnosing the problem. Mr Wells gave us a range of problems. He said that there are three big ones linked to others as well, creating what he described as the perfect storm. There is the fact that 50 qualified doctors leave in a year. There is the feminisation, he said, of the health service, and the fact that A&E cover is unattractive and beleaguered with constant and ongoing alcohol-riddled problems. Then there are the additional issues of locums not being available and the issue of one particular member of staff. Apart from that one last issue, what links them all? I will tell you: they are all long-term problems that nothing was being done about.

So, Mr Wells, I thank you at last, from a DUP perspective, for giving us some picture of what is in your mind and how you analysed what the problems were, but what happened? Did the Department or the trust do anything about these long-term problems? They did not. They pitched up shortly before Christmas and shut the unit down.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Of course.

5.15 pm

Mr Wells: Is it not unusual that Dr Reilly in the Irish Republic, 153 other health trusts in the rest of the United Kingdom, and most of western Europe, are facing exactly the same perfect storm and exactly the same problems? Why is he pointing the finger of blame at this Department when this is universal throughout most of western Europe?

Mr McKinney: Because, at the start, we said that a lot of this erupted in what happened at the Royal A&E and said that these things were linked. We were told then, directly by the Minister — I will not quote precisely, but the indications were — that there was not a problem. This was a specific thing; it was a one-off. You have managed to tell us that there is a whole long tale, going right back. We thank you for that revelation.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: I will.

Mr Hazzard: Of course, as Mr Wells points out, the hospitals in the South are doing something

about it. I mentioned that 40 Romanian doctors have just been employed on a full-time permanent basis in Drogheda and Roscommon. If they are good enough for Roscommon and Drogheda, surely they are good enough for Downpatrick.

Mr McKinney: I am not sure whether it was in answer to you specifically, but I know that there was reference some months back to how some of these questions would be resolved in that context. I would like to know whether anything has been done about that. I am sure that the Minister will be able to inform us.

The issue is also about public confidence. Downe Hospital is an excellent facility with excellent staff. However, when an A&E unit has its services restricted in this way, it undermines confidence. It no longer becomes a tangible front door for services. The erosion of services at Downe is regrettable, and the introduction of a nurse-led unit, although welcome in the short term, will not answer all the problems. The Minister has admitted that because, on the day when he was presented with the 20,000 signatures, he explained that he would like to see different answers. At the time, he said that it was the wrong decision, just as, ultimately, he said the Northern Trust's shutting of nursing homes was wrong.

What we are saying is that there needs to be more strategic thinking around all these problems. I am delighted that the Member for South Down is able to bring some knowledge that at least there has been thinking around this and some analysis of what the problem is. However, we need longer-term strategic thinking at departmental and ministerial level to resolve these particular problems.

We have seen, for example, how stripping services from a hospital becomes a slippery slope, and we have seen it in Omagh. We have to hope that what happened there in the removal of services does not ultimately happen in Downe. I commend the work of the Down Community Health Committee, which has been so proactive in lobbying for the full restoration of A&E services at Downe Hospital. The will is there; the strategy is not.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Mr Hazzard for securing this Adjournment debate. I want to pick up on many of the points that have been made. Like colleagues from across the constituency, I have been involved in this campaign since I was elected to the Assembly in 2007— not only fighting to secure the hospital, but in the constant battle about what services are going to be in that hospital, and

about keeping them there. I am hearing today from both Mr McKinney and Mr Nesbitt a warning on the dangers, when you start to strip those services out, about what is left. I very much concur and agree with the point that Mr McKinney made: once you take away certain services, there is an element of draining the confidence from that hospital. Mr Nesbitt said that it can almost become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Once you take away certain services from that hospital, you change its very nature. You change what it was meant to be, which was an enhanced local hospital, move it away from that status and downgrade it. Ever since, literally, the day and hour it opened, the battle has been about maintaining services at the hospital. One of the biggest disappointments for me is that, nearly three years ago, there was a great debate about changing from a consultant-led A&E department and moving to a GP-led model. That was supposed to take the Downe Hospital off the radar in some of the cases in A&E. That would have safeguarded Downe, even throughout the whole Transforming your Care debate and the Minister's target of reducing the number of A&Es across Northern Ireland.

This was taking the Downe Hospital off the radar; it would secure it. That almost goes to the heart of why people across Down district, the South Down constituency, and, indeed, parts of the Strangford constituency, have lost confidence in the Minister and in the trust. They have lost confidence because they keep getting told: "It is a pilot scheme"; "It is temporary"; "This will not happen"; "We are just trying this"; and "If this is successful, it is going to secure it for the long term." We heard that and, two or three years on, we are back having the same debate again. They are back saying, "We cannot maintain it the way it is and we are going to downgrade it. We are going to close it at this part of the day and open it at that." There is no confidence left and that is the key problem.

Look at the location of the hospital. It is in a rural district, as colleagues have said, with no dual carriageway, motorway or prospect of a quick drive to Belfast. Journey times from places like Killough or Ardglass to Belfast can be pretty slow, even at off-peak times of the day.

I would welcome the Minister's comments on this question: what contact has he had with the ambulance trust? What reassurances can it give to people across the South Down constituency about ambulance response times,

ambulance availability and the danger of ambulances being tied up on longer, slower journeys to Belfast hospitals? That is becoming a real concern to me and other colleagues elected to here because, once you start to chip away and erode that confidence, people start to query the knock-on effect on services.

Look at the demographics of employment: two of the largest industries in south Down are fishing and farming. Can the Minister name two more dangerous professions? I know that he, like me, has a good knowledge of farming and is acutely aware of the dangers in agriculture. That is why it is imperative that we maintain services at the Downe Hospital.

Let me pick up on some of what Mr Wells said about the shortage of doctors. I, too, accept that there is a problem there; but, next month, this Minister will have been in post for three years. Are we any further on in developing proper workforce planning or in recruiting and retaining doctors? Are we any further on in looking at how we should rotate doctors and make sure that they keep up their skills?

A great argument for smaller hospitals is that you can keep up the doctors' skill sets by rotating them around different parts of the hospital. Can we even rotate doctors between trusts? Can we look at all the options to make this work and give people the confidence to buy into some of the changes? Quite frankly, confidence in the Minister and in the trust is at an all-time low. People are just not buying into it. We need to find out how we are going to address those problems.

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

Mr McCallister: How are we going to get on top of those issues and actually solve this problem, once and for all, not just for the Downe but for Lagan Valley Hospital as well? I dare say that the Minister has a very keen interest in preserving that hospital. However, we need to do this across Northern Ireland.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The temporary reduction in the opening hours of the emergency department at the Downe Hospital was the subject of an previous Adjournment debate on 14 January. I also made a written statement to the Assembly on 18 March, providing an update on the progress of actions in relation to emergency departments in Northern Ireland. That statement includes details of the steps I have taken to manage the consequences of the temporary changes in the

Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals, and the measures put in place by Health and Social Care to reduce the impact of the changes on neighbouring hospitals.

I have already told the House of my deep disappointment at the South Eastern Trust's decision to reduce the opening hours, but on examination of the facts, I accepted that, in the circumstances, there was no other option. Given the debate in January and my statement last month, the circumstances that led to the South Eastern Trust's decision and the action that has been taken since then have been made clear.

It was not down to money, as Mr Hazzard or Mr Rogers would have you believe, and it was not down to policy. Let us get the facts out and not try to mislead or deceive people. The fundamental reason that led to the South Eastern Trust's decision is that the trust was unable to recruit middle-grade doctors in emergency medicine or to source enough locums to sustain the rota. Therefore, the safety of the people in south Down would have been compromised. That is the reason — no other.

In view of this —

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: In view of this, and in the interests of ensuring patient safety, the trust had no alternative but to take action to manage that risk.

A recruitment drive in January by the South Eastern Trust for emergency department staff for all its hospitals attracted applications from consultants and emergency nurse practitioners but none for the middle-grade doctor posts that were needed for the Downe Hospital. The shortage of emergency medicine doctors is a regional one, not a local one. There is no quick fix for the shortage of those key medical staff. However, I have taken a number of steps, which I will say a bit more about later. Perhaps I might cover in that what Mr McKinney wants to ask about.

I referred to contingency arrangements being put in place to reduce the impact of the temporary changes on neighbouring emergency departments. It is equally important that steps are taken to minimise the impact on local people. Local arrangements were, therefore, put in place to minimise disruption to patients. For example, there were GP direct admissions to the Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals, thus avoiding the need for some patients — indeed,

quite a lot of patients — to go to an emergency department. There was also early repatriation of patients from other hospitals to the Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals. Additional ambulance provision — I hope that Mr McCallister is listening — was also put in place to improve emergency responses for life-threatening and critical cases. He can update himself with the Ambulance Service, which will be very accommodating at any time.

Another measure concerns the topic of this debate. That is the weekend minor injury service, which was introduced at the Downe Hospital from 1 March. No one is suggesting that the minor injury service at the Downe Hospital can replace an emergency department service. It is, by definition, a service that treats minor injuries and, therefore, cannot treat people suffering from serious injuries or critical illness. The South Eastern Trust has made it clear that the service has been introduced to help to mitigate the impact that the temporary weekend closure has had on local people. It is not providing a substitute for it.

It is an excellent service. I know that Mr Nesbitt made it clear that he did not want it, but it is an excellent service. Minor injury units play an important role in urgent and unscheduled care services, treating people with a variety of injuries that are not major or life-threatening. They are typically staffed by emergency nurse practitioners, who are experienced nurses with specialist training and experience that allow them to work independently to treat minor traumas.

There are seven minor injury units across Northern Ireland, excluding the weekend service at the Downe. They are particularly valuable in rural areas, where people might otherwise have to travel a considerable distance to an acute hospital emergency department. Examples are the Tyrone County Hospital's urgent care and treatment centre in Omagh and South Tyrone Hospital's minor injury unit in Dungannon.

In 2012-13, there were 83,000 attendances at minor injury units, representing 11.7% of all emergency care attendances. Almost 100% of patients who attended minor injury units were treated within four hours of arrival.

The minor injury service at the Downe has proved effective in its first month. In March, there were 210 new attendances. That represents 210 people who did not have to travel to one of the neighbouring emergency departments or wait until the Downe emergency department opened on Monday morning. On

average, there were 44 attendances each weekend in March, compared with 100 attendances when the emergency department was open at weekends.

So, I am sure that those 44 people each weekend were glad of the service, even if Mr Nesbitt did not want it.

5.30 pm

The opening hours of the minor injuries service in the Downe Hospital are based on the hours during which the majority of minor injury-type patients attended the emergency department when it was open at the weekends. Collected evidence suggests that the majority of patients attend during the daytime on Saturday and Sunday, with the majority of attendances relating to sports-related injuries, particularly on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Combine that with the enhanced arrangements for direct GP admissions when the emergency department is closed, which, on average, is around eight each weekend, and we can see that a substantial amount of emergency care activity is being retained in the Downe. The South Eastern Trust has indicated that the level of attendances is just under 80% of the volume before the temporary change.

It is important to recognise that this is about the people of Down, first and foremost, and almost 80% of the people are availing themselves of the service that is available to them in a satisfactory manner. That was important because I asked the trust to take interim measures while it sought to obtain more doctors, and a very clear effort has been made to deal with that.

Demand for emergency services tends to fluctuate, so monthly figures must, therefore, be used with caution. However, there were 1,467 attendances at the Downe Hospital emergency department in March 2014 compared with 1,675 in March 2013. That represents 200 fewer patients.

While I welcome the development, I continue to stand by my comments made during the debate on 14 January, when I said that I certainly want to have the best possible care available right across Northern Ireland, including for people who are living in the south Down area and those who are cared for in the Downe Hospital. I was deeply and profoundly disappointed when I received the news that there was a proposal to close the facility at weekends. That was not something that I supported, and I have made that very clear to the trust's chiefs. It is,

therefore, something that I wish that they would turn around, and I have made it very clear to them that I have an expectation that they will turn it around.

The weekend minor injuries service is not a substitute for the emergency department, and I have asked that fresh efforts are made to secure medical staff for the site. I understand that the South Eastern Trust intends to advertise again in the near future and that it is also continuing to work with recruitment agencies, and I recognise that increasing the number of emergency medicine doctors cannot be left solely to individual trusts. It requires a regional and national approach.

I have engaged with the College of Emergency Medicine to explore options to improve emergency medicine as a career choice. I have also met the British Medical Association to consider solutions to current medical staffing issues in emergency medicine. I have also corresponded with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Home Secretary on the impact of the delays in progressing immigration relating to international recruitment, because, in many instances, we have identified doctors who want to come to work here, but by the time the immigration process is completed, the vast majority will have found jobs and gone elsewhere.

Locally, my Department will be carrying out workforce planning activity at all levels for the medical workforce, including undergraduate intake levels. Specialties where there are currently shortages, such as emergency medicine, are being given priority. Negotiations are also under way nationally to agree a new junior doctor contract and a consultant contract. That is unlikely to solve the medical staffing issues in the emergency department, as the Downe relies on experienced middle-grade doctors, but it is essential that we work to ensure that, in the future, we have an appropriate level of emergency doctors at all levels.

I know that some people fear that changes to the emergency department might lead to the downgrading of the Downe Hospital. That is absolutely not my intention. The Downe Hospital is a prime example of how an enhanced local hospital can operate at the centre of a network of secondary, primary and community services. The Downe Hospital has links with specialist acute services in the Ulster Hospital and with primary and community care services in the Down area. It houses GP out of hours —

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

Mr Poots: Apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker — GP practices and community health. It is looking at new ways of working in line with Transforming Your Care, which envisages closer working relationships with secondary care.

As I said before, I do not want a reduction in emergency services at the Downe Hospital, and we will do what we can to recruit further doctors to ensure that we can provide the service that the people in Down want.

Adjourned at 5.35 pm.



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