

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 9 September 2014
Volume 97, No 2

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 September 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It relates to the debate yesterday on the 'Spotlight' programme. I do not wish to reopen any debating points that were made, but I have a copy of yesterday's Hansard, and, during a contribution by my friend the Member for North Down Mr Weir, Mrs Dolores Kelly from the SDLP made the following intervention:

"I was wondering, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, whether the Member opposite was referring to Gregory Campbell, when he was the Minister for Social Development." — [Official Report, Vol 97, No 1, p55, col 1].

I was never Minister for Social Development. I thank you for the opportunity to correct one of a number of inexactitudes.

Mr Speaker: First of all, I thank the Member for the point of order. Can I inform the Member that that has now been corrected and the record put straight in Hansard?

Private Members' Business

Ardoyne Fleadh

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. Fifteen minutes have been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each 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.

Before we begin, the House should note that the amendments are mutually exclusive. If amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. As a valid petition of concern was presented on Monday 8

September in relation to the motion, the vote will be on a cross-community basis.

Mr McCausland: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with grave concern the remarks made by the Druids and the leading of young people in pro-IRA chanting at the recent Ardoyne Fleadh; and calls for all public funding to be withdrawn from the Ardoyne Fleadh event.

The Ardoyne Fleadh is an event that has been running for a number of years, and, over that period, it has received very substantial public funding. Indeed, if one goes back to the era of direct rule, one sees that it was one of a small number of festivals that received very substantial public funding. There were issues about the inequality of the funding mechanism at that time that some of us raised.

This year, in particular, the fleadh has come very much to the fore and has received extensive headline coverage in our newspapers, particularly because of some comments that were made on the final night of the event by one of the participants. Those comments were then posted on YouTube. For those who are not regular attenders there, the final night of the Ardoyne Fleadh is very much the culmination and climax of the event at the end of the week. It is usually described by the organisers as "the Irish rebel night" or, as one committee member was quoted describing it in a newspaper, "chucky night", which is obviously a reference to the pro-IRA phrase "tíocfaidh ár lá". So it is interesting that the nature of the night is indisputable: it is about support for Irish republicanism, particularly militant, violent republicanism.

It is an extremely popular event. We can see that by the size of the crowd that turns up each year to the grounds of the Holy Cross Primary School. Its pitches are used for the event. It is a popular event that draws people from a wide area. Even if you do not go to it, you can hear it quite easily. If you live in large parts of the Woodvale and Shankill area, in Ballysillan or in

upper Ardoyne at Glenbryn, you can sit in your house and hear the event because of the level of amplification. As I said, this year, it reached a wider audience because it is now on YouTube.

Let us start by looking at the comments that were made by that individual. The group are the Druids, from Kildare. They claim to be Ireland's number-one live rebel band: I will not argue with that. Their lead singer, Mick O'Brien, told the Ardoyne crowd — I will abbreviate some of his terminology, although he did not abbreviate; he used the full form of it — that it is about time that the British Army and their Orange comrades all effed away back to England. His statement was racist and sectarian, and so was the action of the crowd. Their reaction was to cheer those comments and to roar out their approval of what he had said. After that, the crowd sang a song that begins with the line:

"Go on home British soliders, go on home.

Have you got no" —

I have removed the next word —

"homes of your own?"

Clearly, it is a group that specialises in high-quality literature and lyrics. It also includes such memorable lines as:

"So" —

I have removed the next word again —

"your Union Jack, we want our country back."

I think we get a picture of the sort of music, lyrics and songs.

If you are not familiar with the group, you can also sample on YouTube one of the other songs in its repertoire, 'The Sniper's Promise', which is about an IRA man picking up his Armalite rifle and shooting a British soldier. The reason why I mention that is that we are not talking here about songs about 1916 or songs that go back to the 17th century, the 18th century or 100 years ago; we are talking about songs that relate to the recent Troubles and to the terrorist campaign inflicted on this land by the IRA. One of the other bands, Fianna, were the authors or co-writers of a song called 'New Lodge Pride' about the Provisional IRA in the New Lodge area. Of course, they would be well known to members of Sinn Féin because they advertise themselves as having appeared at the

party's ard fheis to perform those sorts of songs. They also say that they appear regularly at Sinn Féin events. It is clear that audience participation is a key element in this. One can pick up in the media, on YouTube and so on people shouting things like "Ooh aah, up the Ra" and other similar sentiments. So, we are clear about the type of event that we are talking about.

If that is the case, is it the sort of event that should be funded by DCAL? Should it be funded by the Community Relations Council? Is this what public money should be spent on? I suggest that Irish rebel music of the type that was performed that night promotes sectarianism, endorses violence and romanticises the IRA. That is what it is about. The issue is not the comments of one individual, which lasted for a matter of minutes, but the entire programme on that night. It is the climax, the culmination, the final event of the night. In fact, for many people, it is the most important part of the fleadh. It is certainly integral to the fleadh. It is advertised in the programme. It is organised by the organising committee that books the acts. The committee knows what it is booking and what it is getting. They have heard these people before. Yet, there it is, in receipt of public money. It is not something extraneous. It is not something peripheral. It is central; it is core; it is essential to the fleadh. Therein lies the problem when it comes to giving public money to that type of event.

I want to pick up on a comment made in response to that evening by the Culture Minister, Ms Ní Chuilín. There was a dissident republican shooting a short distance away on the night. She said that it was terrible that there had been a dissident republican shooting, because people were at the concert enjoying their culture. I suggest that there is a connection between the two. It is the culture of such songs and the ethos of that sort of event that help to encourage people into the ranks of the dissidents. Such songs validate the use of the gun and the use of murder. Therefore, how can you, on the one hand, say, "That's great. That's the culture to be celebrated" and, on the other hand, condemn people a short distance away for doing almost the very thing that the groups there are singing about?

There are three issues. First, there is an issue and a question for the fleadh committee and a question, too, for nationalist and republican politicians from the SDLP and Sinn Féin. This is the sort of thing that one might expect from Sinn Féin, but the SDLP has backed the fleadh. I assume that some Members from the SDLP

have signed the petition of concern; there certainly are not enough Members from Sinn Féin to do that on their own, so somebody other than Sinn Féin has signed the petition of concern. Is it not time for the fleadh to move on? Is it not time for Northern Ireland to move on? If Northern Ireland is moving on, is it right that this sort of event should be supported with public money? That is the question for the fleadh committee and nationalist politicians: is it not time to move on?

There are also questions for the funders, such as DCAL and the Community Relations Council, and the sponsors. Those questions need to be pursued with those individuals over the next number of months until we get to the bottom of exactly what was applied for, what conditions were attached to the grants and sponsorship, whether those people think that there have been any breaches of those conditions and whether there should be any future funding for this type of event. That is a question for DCAL, the Community Relations Council and the sponsors, including Ladbrokes.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that questions also have to be answered by CCMS and the trustees of Holy Cross boys' school? I do not think that any comment has been made about the continuation of that school facility being used for such hate-filled events.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question, which is indeed the third point that I am going to make. The rebel night takes place on the Holy Cross boys' school pitch. Therefore, there is this question for the school governors: is this in keeping with the ethos of your school premises? Roman Catholic schools — maintained schools — have a Catholic ethos. Is this sort of thing in keeping with that ethos? If it is not, it should not happen on pitches that are the property of the school. The question for them is this: will you continue to make your school property available for such rebel nights? There are questions for the organisers and the politicians, questions for the funders —

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

Mr McCausland: — and questions for the school. Those questions deserve an answer. I encourage the Assembly to back the motion and pursue the matter. If we are to move Northern Ireland forward, this is not the way to do it.

10.45 am

Mr Allister: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Insert after first "Fleadh;":

"deplores the lack of action by the investigative and prosecuting authorities in respect of the criminal offence of incitement to hatred;"

I concur largely if not entirely — I think, in fact, that I concur entirely — with what the proposer of the motion said about this matter. It was quite a shocking incident. It may be acceptable to some who for years have wallowed in that sort of "Brits out" approach, with all the attendant force and violence that they gave to that message, but, across Northern Ireland, I think that many right-thinking people were aghast when they viewed it on YouTube. They were aghast at the virulence of the wording, at how it was delivered and at the deliberate whipping-up of the young crowd into a frenzy. That being so, I found it amazing that the police and the prosecuting authorities took such a sanguine attitude and that, within days of the complaint by Councillor Jolene Bunting and others, they had dismissed the matter, sought to sweep it under the carpet and decreed that there would be no prosecution. It begs the question: what is the law of the land supposed to be on these issues? The law of the land on these issues is supposed to be set out in the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, which states:

"A person who uses threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour ... is guilty of an offence if—

(a)he intends thereby to stir up hatred or arouse fear; or

(b)having regard to all the circumstances hatred is likely to be stirred up or fear is likely to be aroused thereby."

That is often characterised as incitement to hatred, which, of course, had its origins in a 1970 Act.

Let us think about those words. Think about the words that were used by a member of the Druids:

"It's about time that they got all their Orange comrades together."

That is an all-embracing classification of anyone of the Orange tradition. He also said:

"It's about time that they loaded up the bus, and it's about time that they all effed off back to England where they came from."

I have to say this, Mr Speaker: I did not come from England, and many people who would be categorised as "Orange comrades" by these nefarious folk did not come from England. We were born here, live here and are entitled and determined to stay here. The suggestion that we should eff off back to England is not just "insulting", which is one of the words of the Act, but threatening and abusive. I think that the first test of whether the words used were "threatening, abusive or insulting" is demonstrably met when you think of those words.

The second limb of the test is whether, having regard to the circumstances, hatred was likely to be stirred up. I think that you got the answer to that when you watched on YouTube the whipped-up frenzy of those to whom the words were addressed — those who were wallowing and rejoicing in the hatred that those words stirred up.

I have to say that I find it amazing that the police, faced with a complaint, simply wanted to wipe it under the carpet, whereas their obligation was to investigate the complaint. How can you investigate a complaint of incitement to hatred, when the words were so demonstrably abusive, threatening and insulting, without seeking to interview those who had uttered those words?

Immediately, there was reasonable suspicion of the commission of an offence — obviously, there had to be reasonable suspicion of the commission of an offence. Immediately that arose, there was a duty and an obligation to arrest and to interview. It is by interviewing that you then put to the test somewhat whether there was intent to stir up hatred. It is beyond doubt that someone who used words of that nature required to be taxed in interview about what they thought they were doing, what they intended by what they were saying and what they thought the likely consequences were.

It is not the easiest offence in the world to get a conviction on, given the requirement for intent to stir up hatred, but it no longer is just that. The law also provides that, if, having regard to all the circumstances, hatred is likely to be stirred up, that is enough. I find it astounding that the police did not even interview and did not even seek to arrest but rushed to say, "No action on this matter".

As for the Chief Constable, when there was a little controversy, he said, "Oh, we can very quickly put a file together and send it to the DPP". No, they cannot. A file properly constructed on this issue would require an arrest, an interview and the inclusion of that interview. It cannot simply be wrapped up and thrown into the DPP to give us the answer that we are looking for.

I think that this rankles so much with so many people in, to use their language, "the Orange community" because, in recent times, many in the loyalist community have witnessed the enthusiasm — the relentless enthusiasm — with which, for example, some flag protesters were pursued. Take some of the people prominent in that. Take the case of William Frazer: he may not be everyone's cup of tea in the House but he is a citizen with the same rights as everyone else. He was arrested and charged under the Serious Crime Act 2007, held for weeks in custody, then given bail and arrested twice for an alleged breach of his bail conditions, once upon returning from this Building after attending a debate. He was pursued relentlessly by the PSNI until, 15 months' later, shamefaced, the police had to drop every last charge of a public order nature. Anyone who knows anything about the law knew that the offences were always incapable of sticking in those circumstances.

So where was the parity of approach when it came to dealing with William Frazer, for example, as opposed to the indecent haste with which the Chief Constable and the director wanted to sweep this matter under the carpet? It is because of such contrasting approaches that there is a growing gulf of disrespect, sadly, amongst many in the loyalist community for police and police actions. I have to say that the police have stoked that situation by —

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

Mr Allister: — their approach to this matter. It is deplorable that there was a failure to take adequate investigative and prosecutory steps.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after first "Fleadh;" and insert:

"denounces sectarianism of any kind; and calls on the Executive to work to ensure that all publicly funded events remain free from sectarianism or hatred of any kind and to implement measures to ensure such events remain open and shared for everyone."

I regret that it is necessary for us to devote such a length of time of Assembly attention to the actions of one individual, albeit that they were extremely sectarian, ignorant and misguided, especially when the Assembly has so much serious work on social and economic issues to be getting on with to demonstrate clearly that it is fit for purpose for the public and the wider community in Northern Ireland.

It is, however, an important opportunity for us to send out a clear and united condemnation in response to these actions. Sectarianism or discrimination of any kind is a poison that divides and blights our community. We believe that our amendment presents an opportunity for the Assembly to make a clear, united condemnation of these particular actions.

Indeed, it is also an opportunity for us to acknowledge the widespread and real anger across our community from people of all different backgrounds at the sheer recklessness of the sectarian language that the Druids band used at Ardoyne Fleadh, especially in that particular context, where community tension is heightened. This has the potential to cause real damage to community relations in the area. It has also, unfortunately, given somewhat due cause to those who would perpetuate fears, which I would not agree with, around cultural war being waged. Unfortunately, it has also caused real confusion about how the offending words did not constitute an offence of using words or actions with the intent of inciting hatred.

On those grounds, I sought assurances from the PSNI that it would rigorously pursue all alleged hate crime without fear or favour of anyone. Indeed, I welcome that the PSNI has submitted a file to the PPS and DPP to respond to. Hopefully, we will get an adequate explanation of whether this meets the test for prosecution. I think that it is regrettable that Mr Allister has used this situation to table an inaccurate amendment that does not accurately reflect the PSNI's actions on this issue. Indeed, it is a deplorable act to bring into any disrepute the impartiality of the PSNI in upholding the rule of law in our community.

I think that it is also regrettable —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Yes, I will.

Mr A Maginness: I am quite surprised by Mr Allister's remarks today, but they parallel the remarks made by Mr Poots, and we all note the

very vigorous reaction by the Lord Chief Justice.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think that the clear message is that we respect the impartiality of the PSNI and the judiciary and the role that they have to play in upholding the rule of law and order in our community as a bedrock for us to build on community relations here.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I will give way briefly.

Mr Allister: Is the Member seriously contending that either the judiciary or the PSNI are above criticism? Has it not always been the case that, in any democratic society, there is a right of citizens to criticise the decisions of the judiciary and the PSNI, which is quite different from challenging the validity of the institutions?

Mr Lyttle: Yes. I absolutely recognise the right to criticise, but with that right comes a responsibility to be accurate in that criticism. Unfortunately, Mr Allister's amendment does not, in my opinion, accurately reflect the actions of the PSNI in this case.

I also think that it is unfortunate that we have an imbalanced condemnation — it is pick-and-mix condemnation at times — of acts of sectarianism. Indeed, a quote from Herbert Butterfield that was brought to my attention comes to mind for some of these situations. He said that the greatest menace to our community is the conflict between large groups of self-righteousness, each only too glad that the sins of the other give it pretext for still deeper hatred. I also heard someone saying recently that sectarianism thrives when people are actually alike, as people need to manufacture difference for their own ends.

11.00 am

I fear that we are getting into that territory in relation to some of these cases. It is about time that we focused on a sensible response to these issues. Yes, I agree, as Mr McCausland put forward, that we have to examine what the preconditions were in relation to public funding for events where these types of sectarianism occur. We need to see whether there have been breaches and, absolutely, people need to be held to account.

Indeed, I welcome comments from the organisers, who wholeheartedly —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I will just finish this point quickly — who wholeheartedly clarified that those actions did not reflect their vision or aspirations for their community festival. That is helpful. We need to examine the preconditions to see whether breaches were made.

That is what Mr McCausland said. Unfortunately, however, his motion goes further than his contribution today. It suggests that all public funding should be withdrawn for the entire event, penalising everyone with good intentions to promote positive cultural expression. That goes too far, and our amendment presents an opportunity to correct that.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Given what was said by the Druids, after a long list, as Mr McCausland said, of speeches like that being made on the final night, the rebel night, of this fleadh, does the Alliance Party believe that there were serious breaches that CRC, DCAL and other funders need to look at?

Mr Lyttle: That is exactly what I just said. I have made it clear that it is wholeheartedly to be condemned. The words were reckless, sectarian, ignorant and misguided. I do not think that I can be clearer than that, and there absolutely is a task for people to examine how that may or may not have breached conditions.

However, the Assembly, the Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister need to take responsibility in order to tackle the root causes of sectarianism in our community. Where is the Together: Building a United Community strategy? What impact and actions does that have? What investments are being rolled out?

In that area of north Belfast an exciting, effective, cross-community project has been taking place between Holy Cross and Edenderry nurseries called a buddy system, which is bringing young children, and men and women, from interface communities, together in a real and meaningful way. The project is bridging divides, tackling sectarianism and promoting a shared future in that area, yet it is struggling for funding, despite buddy systems being an explicit target of the Together: Building a United Community strategy. No funding and no clear message from OFMDFM as to how such an effective programme is to be continued.

That, for me, is the real travesty that we should be talking about today. Those are the types of issues that the Assembly should be working on. Those are the types of issues that the media and the biggest show in the country should be giving airtime to: to the people who are working at grassroots level to improve community relations and who are struggling for long-term, sustainable funding to have a meaningful impact to ensure that this type of isolated, ignorant sectarianism is a thing of the past.

We absolutely agree that measures should be implemented to robustly tackle this type of sectarianism, but we must also take responsibility to ensure that the context is there for a truly safe and shared society to be built in order for all events to be open and welcoming for all. I will give way.

Mr Beggs: The Member indicated that he could not support Mr Allister's amendment because of its inaccuracies. Can you explain in what way it is inaccurate? Would he not agree that, if such an investigation were carried out, it would prevent further actions from occurring elsewhere?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. Again, however, I think that I made that clear already. Assurances were sought from the PSNI and the Chief Constable that all alleged hate crime would be rigorously and robustly investigated. We received assurances that that has been the case and that a file will be submitted to the PPS.

It is unlike Mr Allister to commit this type of error where, clearly, the amendment was submitted prior to those assurances being received. The honourable thing would have been to retire the amendment, but Mr Allister has used this opportunity to put forward his views, which are well known to the community.

There is an opportunity for the Assembly to make a clear, united response condemning a seriously sectarian action and to support a united way of moving forward.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt in aghaidh an phríomh-rúin. I will be speaking against the motion and amendment No 1, but we are prepared to support amendment No 2 from the Alliance Party.

It might be worth starting off by saying what I think we can all agree on: the remarks about Orangemen were not only wrong but offensive and insulting, and they should not have

happened. I, as a republican, have spent a lifetime trying to get British soldiers out of Ireland, so I will not be hypocritical on that aspect of it. I would be less than honest if I did that. However, let me emphasise that I would not articulate it in the same way as the individual did on that night.

It is important to say that the person who spoke for the Druids on the stage does not speak for anyone but themselves. In a statement made almost immediately after, the chair of the fleadh said:

"We regret any offence caused by this incident. It was wrong, regrettable, disappointing and should not have happened. These comments do not reflect the views of the organisers or the people of Ardoyne."

He went on to say:

"The organising committee will be reviewing guidelines in relation to performers and acts to ensure this does not happen again."

So, action was taken immediately.

Nelson McCausland said that the fleadh has been going on a long time. It has been going on something like 24 years. I think that it is worth saying that it is there to celebrate culture in a positive way. That is what it was set up for, and that is what it continues to do. It is there as an alternative to bonfires, for instance, and the negativity and antisocial behaviour that they produce. I have to say that it has been very successful in doing that. Of course, we have just come through one of the most peaceful summers that any of us can remember. I think that, to put this in context, we need to remember all of that. This is a very successful alternative to what we have faced in previous summers.

The Ardoyne people are a very proud and law-abiding people, and, of course, the fleadh is a cross-community grouping. Nelson McCausland, who was here earlier, was one of the first unionist politicians whom I remember sitting with me on a panel on the Ardoyne Fleadh to debate these things. The fleadh has always reached out and tried to bring in other people from outside the area to hear their points of view, and that continued this year.

The motion calls for a collective punishment. People across the Chamber have got up many times and argued against collective punishment, collective condemnation and all of that, yet the motion is full of that. I think that we

have to be careful that we do not get too high on the horse.

Are unionists here going to argue that the money for bonfires should be taken away because of the sectarianism that we see at some of them, or even that those particular bonfires should be banned on that basis? There is funding that goes to bonfires as well. Are they arguing that, if bands sing sectarian songs, all the funding should be taken away from bands, or even from those particular bands? I have never heard that from the unionists before. Are they going to take funding away from those particular bands because of what someone may have said? There are plenty of sectarian comments made in bands. Are they arguing for collective punishment for that?

Orange Order figures have made sectarian remarks. Should the whole of the Orange Order be punished because of someone who says such things? I would hope that some of the people across the Floor would condemn some of the remarks made on those occasions.

So, it is the issue of communal punishment that I entirely disagree with. Of course, the examples that I have given are not even comparable with the Druids. The Druids are a band that were invited here. The organisers are going to review guidelines. The Druids had nothing to do with organising the fleadh and are not involved on —

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

Mr G Kelly: — the fleadh's committee. I would argue that we should not do that and that people should take a more sensible approach to this. Yes, it was wrong. Yes, it should not have happened. The fleadh serves the people well on a cross-community basis.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr G Kelly: William Humphrey will know that the Hammer and the youth club in Ardoyne do many things together.

Mr A Maginness: First of all, it is a bit rich for Nelson McCausland to be criticising sectarianism. There have been many instances in north Belfast when there have been acts of sectarianism on the part of the Orange and on the part of loyalists that have either been ignored by Mr McCausland or, indeed, have resulted in equivocal comments. I think that it is

a bit rich, and I think that the people of Ardoyne and north Belfast will recognise that.

I think that Mr Allister should know better, particularly in relation to his remark that the police and the PPS have swept this issue under the carpet. That is an unacceptable comment by him and it undermines faith and confidence in the PPS and the PSNI. I believe that all of us have a duty to support the PSNI and the PPS. I do not suggest at all that it should be done in a slavish way; there is room for robust criticism but not for undermining the institutions of the PPS and the PSNI in the exercise of their duties. I believe that they carried out a proper investigation into this matter. If there is to be any change —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I will take you in a moment.

If there is to be any change in relation to this investigation, let it be and we will deal with the consequence of that.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree that, clearly, when the police prepared the first file that went to the PPS, what he said was done was simply not done? I have doubts that it was done on the second occasion.

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

Mr A Maginness: Thank you very much. I do not know the detail of the file that was presented. I do not know the ins and outs of that, but I know that the police, in coming to their decision not to prosecute in this instance, took the advice of the PPS. That is clearly stated by the PSNI and the PPS. Indeed, in a public statement, the Director of Public Prosecutions said that it did not meet the threshold for prosecution. We have to accept that the director carries out his duties in an impartial fashion, and we have to accept that the police carry out their duties in an impartial fashion. If we do not accept that, where are we? We verge on anarchy.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I am not going to accept you. You made your point twice. The Member should reconsider what he said and, in fact, withdraw it because I think it causes serious damage for a public representative and learned counsel to make the statement that he made.

I agree entirely with the forthright statement made by the fleadh organising committee. Remember that they are volunteers and people who work for nothing. They work for the community because they see a value —
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr A Maginness: They see a value in developing and enriching the community and helping young people, and part of their function is to create a cross-community interaction. Many young people from the Shankill Road, for example, have been invited to fleadh events. In June, there was a sleepover by young people in the open air to highlight the problems of homelessness in Belfast. That was a very positive thing and is the type of thing that they do. It is done on a cross-community basis. The fleadh committee have said, in a very forthright manner, that they did not accept the remarks. They said they regretted any offence caused by a sectarian comment made at the concert on Sunday night:

"It was wrong, regrettable, disappointing and should not have happened."

11.15 am

There could not be a more forthright condemnation by the fleadh committee, and I think that it is important for Members to take that on board. They further said:

"These comments do not reflect the views of the organisers or the people of Ardoyne".

I believe that that is an accurate statement. I also believe that the fleadh committee have taken on board the challenges that have arisen out of this incident. They said that they will be:

"reviewing guidelines in relation to performers and acts to ensure this does not happen again."

Finally, withdrawing all public funding for this series of events — this valuable community enterprise — would effectively punish everybody. It is a punitive step. It is disproportionate —

Mr Speaker: The Members should bring his remarks to a close.

Mr A Maginness: — and it should not happen. I believe that the people who organise this event should be encouraged and not

condemned. They have taken the right steps to remedy something that was wrong.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Ross Hussey.

Mr Hussey: Permission to remain seated, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Mr Hussey: Thank you. Living as we do in the United Kingdom, we are fortunate to be allowed what in some countries would be regarded as the luxury of the right to free speech. We can criticise the Government, we can criticise politicians and we can expect the law to represent us all without fear or favour. I believe that Mr Allister got it right in proposing his amendment, which:

"deplores the lack of action by the investigative and prosecuting authorities in respect of the criminal offence of incitement to hatred",

because we are entitled to protection under the law.

With that right to free speech we must also accept that there is a limit to what we can say publicly. In our society, we cannot decide to launch attacks on somebody simply because of their political affiliation, their religion, their race, their nationality or their gender. We have a duty as politicians to criticise those who launch offensive statements in public, because nobody is above the law.

I can trace my Irish roots back many generations through my mother's family and have no problem calling myself Irish. I was born in Omagh, and I am as Irish as anyone on this island. But I am a British citizen, the proud son of a Welshman — an ex-serviceman who fought for his country during the Second World War — and the grandson of a Ballybay-born British soldier who served from 1905 until 1926. There are many alive today because of the fine work of British soldiers who served here throughout the Troubles and because of the bravery of soldiers stationed here, who have responded to emergency calls when suspect devices have been abandoned by dissidents and bombs have been brought into towns and cities by those cowards.

My preamble is important because of the odious remarks made by an odious man who sings with an Irish republican group known as the Druids. I had not heard of that group before

the fleadh, but I know of it now. The lead singer of the group uttered the words:

"there are still over 5,000 British soldiers parading around the streets of Ireland ... It's about time they took down their little Union Jacks, it's about time they got all their Orange comrades together, it's about time they loaded up the bus and it's about time they all"

— returned —

"back to England where they came from."

He did not use the word "returned" but another word, which I do not intend to use because you might regard it as unparliamentary.

I am an Orangeman, I am a British citizen and, as I have said, I have the right to live peacefully in Northern Ireland, a state that is recognised in international law. The comments made by that lead singer were racist, sectarian and offensive, and the person who uttered them and his colleagues certainly did not benefit from one black penny of public money.

Some have said that the people of Ardoyne did not support those comments. The roars, cheers and yahoos that went up following those statements are an indication of what the people who were there thought. Had those comments been responded to by stony silence, you could say that the people of Ardoyne did not support them. They were not met with stony silence. They were met with cheers and roars of approval. Sectarianism, racism and sexism are all wrong, but those people shamed the fleadh and its organisers.

My understanding of the Irish language is virtually non-existent, but I understand that "fleadh" means "festival". They are very much part of the Irish culture and, generally, are warmly received in the community, but the Druids brought shame on themselves and on Ardoyne with this vitriolic outburst.

I am not from England; I am from Tyrone. No republican has the right to suggest that I leave my birthplace because I choose British citizenship. Again, it must be remembered that the 5,000 soldiers referred to are here because we are part of the United Kingdom. That we are part of the United Kingdom is accepted by everybody in the Chamber, so we have the right to have British soldiers stationed in this part of the United Kingdom. As I said, those soldiers have provided a service. They have been present and have defused bombs left in

republican areas by dissident republicans. Who would do that, if the British soldiers all went home and took their Union flags with them? Finally, I am disappointed that some have decided to sign a petition of concern. We have had very many debates in this place about petitions of concern. I am concerned that, by signing a petition of concern, the Assembly can be seen as supporting the caustic remarks of this band. They were wrong —

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

Mr Hussey: There is no justification for blocking the House from making a reasonable conclusion. There should be a penalty for them as a lesson to others to ensure that any act that they book complies with common decency.

Mr Easton: Many Members of the Assembly and the wider public have been left shocked, hurt and bewildered by the comments made at the Ardoyne Fleadh on Sunday 24 August by a member of the Druids who said to the audience that British soldiers in Ireland should get together with their orange comrades and go back to England. I do not want to use the other word that was included. In fact, I could not believe what I heard, and I actually had to play the YouTube video three times just to make sure that I heard what I heard. Those comments are a disgrace. As a member of the Orange Order, am I being told that I have to go and live in England? If you are one of the 5,000 soldiers based in Northern Ireland, are you seriously being told that, even though many of those soldiers are bomb disposal officers who are busy on a daily basis risking their life to deal with real bombs and hoaxes left by so-called dissident republicans? I do not believe that that is right. If I were to make comments of a similar nature about the Ancient Order of Hibernians or Irish citizens, Members from the Benches across the way would be calling for my head, and I believe that I would be prosecuted for those comments.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. Just on that point, the Member will recall that, a number of months ago, we took a lecture from the deputy First Minister around how issues in east Belfast had been handled — in essence, issues about people saying that foreign nationals should go home. Would you agree, Mr Easton, that the deputy First Minister should come to the Chamber and explain why he is being so hypocritical in allowing his signature to go on a petition of concern that effectively blocks a motion that is about the same thing?

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. I wholeheartedly agree with his comments. Maybe the deputy First Minister needs to come and explain himself.

The Community Relations Council supported this year's Ardoyne Fleadh by means of a £5,000 grant towards infrastructure costs and marketing. The grant was subject to conditions, one of which was that it should be used to support the values and aims of the Community Relations Council. The CRC will be following its usual process in these circumstances by asking the event organisers to respond to the reports to determine whether the conditions of the grant have been complied with.

The purpose of the pathfinder project scheme is to be a mechanism that can respond to needs and address urgent community relations issues. The scheme is aimed primarily at projects that seek to address difficult and contentious issues that require an immediate or innovative response. The scheme can provide support to young people where there is a significant impact on the prevention of community conflict, particularly during key times of community tension. The grant criteria are as follows: to enable groups to provide emergency diversionary activities that reduce the potential for community conflict; to support initiatives that enable immediate dialogue and discussion to take place to address contentious community relations issues; to support programmes that seek to engage with hard-to-reach groups and involve them in community relations activities; to support mediation initiatives that are aimed at addressing key community relations issues that arise unexpectedly; to support information exchange networks between community activists involved in addressing and reducing the potential for community conflict at times of heightened conflict; and to support community safety initiatives aimed to reduce the potential for community violence as a result of civil unrest. They were not to lead young people in bigoted, pro-IRA chanting and the incitement of sectarianism at a music festival.

It was also reported that the event could be heard from the Shankill and that the volume was turned up considerably at around midnight. People could clearly hear the pro-IRA songs and chanting in their homes. That was not only provocative but particularly distressing for the elderly residents and people who live in those areas. The fact that these comments were made in an interface area where people are trying to build cross-community relationships has made this even more difficult.

In my opinion, the PPS has let us down greatly by failing to prosecute for these words. The DPP should also be ashamed for defending the "no prosecutions" ruling. We are supposed to be living in a country of peace with a shared future and equality. I am beginning to have doubts that we are. I fail to see the equality that is said to exist in this country when a band makes comments about soldiers going home and Orange members going to live in England.

I feel that the decision needs to be reviewed and future funding withdrawn from sectarian-fuelled events such as the Ardoyne Fleadh, which simply promotes hatred towards the Protestant, unionist and loyalist people. The funders were the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Ireland, DCAL, the Community Relations Council, Atlantic Philanthropies, Flax Trust and Ladbrokes. I will be personally writing to them to bring to their attention what was said at the fleadh and ask whether they are happy to have their money spent in this way.

What future do our young people have when they are being brought up and taught to hate in this way through the actions of this band? I was born in Northern Ireland, and nobody is going to tell me to move to England. I am here to stay, and so is my community.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt in aghaidh an phríomh-rúin agus an chéad leasaithe agus ar son an dara ceann. I will speak against the motion and the first amendment but for the second amendment.

Fleadh Ard Eoin is like many other community festivals that have taken place over many years, often in very challenging circumstances. Indeed, Fleadh Ard Eoin has been going for 24 years now. It has attracted thousands of people from every community over the years and has enjoyed participation from all hues of political and religious opinion and none. The programme contained over 70 events that took place over the five days of the fleadh.

What happened this year at one particular performance was the subject of an investigation. Sectarian and racist comments at any event are wrong. Sectarianism at any musical or cultural event has no place.

Mr Clarke: You say that sectarianism is wrong. Would you then say that the comments of the act at that event were sectarian and were wrong?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I was going to get to that further on, if you had waited.

The implication that the Orange Order, with its unique origins on this island, should go home contains the same implication as the so-called 'Famine Song' contains, which says that many Scottish people of Irish origin should return to this island forthwith. Both are wrong. That said, republicans have a right to strive for a united Ireland and the peaceful removal of over 5,000 British Army personnel from this island. This can now be done peacefully and democratically.

The motion calls for the removal of funding from the fleadh because of this unfortunate and widely condemned incident. It was widely condemned by the Minister and by the organisers. Will those who tabled the motion also call for funded loyalist bands to halt playing provocative tunes outside places of worship or breaking Parades Commission determinations?

Over 20 years ago, I was in Germany — East Germany, to be exact — and I was out with a group of German friends of mine. We turned a wrong corner and were met by some graffiti that read, "Deutschland ist Deutschland. Ausländer 'raus". Roughly translated, it means, "Germany is Germany. Outsiders out".

I saw my friends' hearts drop. I saw the disappointment, anger and concern in their faces, because they belong to a generation whose parents came through the worst excesses of the Third Reich. I had that same feeling years ago, when I saw, in this city and across parts of this island, signs such as "Poles out" or "blacks out". I put that in the same category as seeing "kill all Taigs" or "kill all Huns". I abhor that and think that the burning of national flags, of whatever colour, religious symbols or political materials, including election posters, is wrong. I condemn it and wish that others would do the same.

11.30 am

In south Derry, we saw a coded message come across that contained the numbers five, seven, one, one. It took some time to work out —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will know that I give some latitude in and around the business of the House, but I am afraid that the Member just might be moving away from the motion.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was trying to make the point that there are many places across this island, and particularly in the North, where there are issues with symbolic flags, parades and offensive language. I do not want to single out any, but some that I experienced this summer included Carrick, Coleraine, Limavady, Larne and elsewhere. We were told all summer that Derry was different, and, to a certain extent, it was. However, we saw the ritual burning of flags, symbols and emblems at a number of events in Derry, and there was no condemnation. To use a biblical reference: there are some who look for a speck in others' eyes while missing the beam in their own.

Nelson McCausland said that it was time to move on, but that requires leadership on all our parts. The motion also states that it is time to stop funding. I just wonder what criteria could be applied to that. I therefore refute the motion and the first amendment and call for support for the second amendment.

Mr Wells: Imagine a state-controlled school being used for a loyalist band concert and several thousand people, perhaps some a bit the worse for drink, listened to speeches calling for all the Hibernians and all the Irish to get out of Northern Ireland and go back to where they came from, to go and live in the Irish Republic. No one would regard that as an acceptable comment. There would be an outcry. The police would be in like a shot. There would be an investigation. The DPP would rush to scrutinise the file and ensure that those responsible were prosecuted.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. I am glad that he used that analogy, which was accurate and to the point here, because people are talking about music being played where it should not be. This was an attack and assertion that people should leave where they were born and where they live, and it was used in the context of a hate-filled speech. Does the Member agree with me that not only is the analogy that he paints correct but the condemnation, welcome as it is, needs to be followed now by action to ensure that it does not happen again?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Wells: Of course, the only way that that action can mean anything is if public money is withdrawn from this so-called cross-community Ardoyne festival.

There would have been an immediate reaction. Let us be honest with everyone here today —

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. As someone who can hear from his home the bile and hate that comes from the last night — the rebel night — at the fleadh, I assure him and the House that the last night at the Ardoyne Fleadh is in no way a cross-community event. No one could seriously argue that that is the case.

Mr Wells: Indeed, the honourable Member for North Belfast is absolutely correct. What let the cat out of the bag on this occasion was the electronic media. This has been going on for years, but there has never been the evidence to prove it. Unfortunately, the Druids, who, I understand, are from the Irish Republic, rather misjudged the situation and put on their website material that they put to people in that school. Therefore, the cat was out of the bag, and we got a real sense of what the Ardoyne festival is.

Let us look at this so-called cross-community event. It was launched in a GAA club. Well, that is bound to have attracted a lot of the area's minority Protestant community. It was launched in a GAA club and lauded by 'An Phoblacht', the IRA newspaper. It had that well-known cross-community band, the Wolfe Tones, which, when they came to Downpatrick, performed one of the most disgraceful concerts ever held in the leisure centre. It was nothing but a front for republican terrorism. So the Wolfe Tones have form. Then, of course, we have the Druids. What did the organisers think that they were doing when they booked the Druids? All you had to do was to go to their website and read it long before the event was held to see exactly what the Druids' *raison d'être* is. They are a republican nationalist band; they make no bones about it, so you book them for the main event at a so-called cross-community event. The reality is that it has all the similarities of what was going on in west Belfast when a certain lady from south Down used to run it. It was a waste of public money; it was an absolute waste of £5,000 of Community Relations Council money and, of course, DCAL money.

The issue that has not been dealt with adequately this morning is this: what was it doing in a school funded by the taxpayer? I have never been to Holy Cross Boys' Primary School, but why on earth was a concert of that nature held in a state-funded primary school? Can you imagine if that happened in any state-controlled school? There would be pandemonium. The board would have an emergency meeting, those responsible would

be told never to let it happen again, and there would be an immediate investigation. Immediately after the event, the honourable Member for North Antrim Mr Mervyn Storey called for the CCMS to investigate. What is happening there? Where is the condemnation from that authority? What is going on? Where was the board of governors? Where was the principal? Where were the staff, when they knew full well what the event was going to be like? There was nothing cross-community that night. There is a minority Protestant community in the Ardoyne, and I am sure that not one of them was at the event. Had they attended, they would have had to leave very quickly because of the bile and hatred being heaped on the Protestant minority in that way.

What is the SDLP playing at? The SDLP, quite rightly, condemn what went on, but it is not prepared to back a motion that has teeth and says, "If you're going to behave like this, you will not receive a penny of public money".

Mr Copeland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mr Copeland: The word "money" has repeatedly raised its head. I understand that the organising committee derives public funds and that it spends them engaging that particular group, which is based in the Irish Republic. I presume that that group did not travel here for free; the group will have received public money. Can we have an assurance or an examination so that, despite what they have done, any public money they received is taxed either in Northern Ireland or in the South? Or was it money paid in a brown paper bag? We do not know.

Mr Wells: Yes. There is, indeed, a need for a full investigation as to where every penny of public money went into that so-called cross-community festival.

Also, Ladbrokes has shops —

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

Mr Wells: — in many parts of Northern Ireland. Is it going to continue to fund what is clearly a sectarian Ardoyne festival, or is it going to pull its money as well? I hope that it does.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the comments made by my colleagues Gerry Kelly, Cathal Ó hOisín and Alban Maginness, and I distance myself from

any comments that are sectarian. As an Irish republican, the Irish republic that I am working to build is an Irish republic of Catholic, Protestant, Dissenter and the new communities that have come to make their homes on our lovely island.

I note the leadership shown by the fleadh committee, and I pay tribute to it. It is very publicly challenging the comments made. I also note the comments from the Benches opposite. It is slightly hypocritical because this is an old agenda. Jim Wells referred to me as the lady from south Down; he did not say my name. Jim Wells and other Members will know that I was the director of Féile an Phobail for a number of years. I was also the chair of the Belfast St Patrick's Carnival. For the years I was involved in both of those, I saw the agenda that many of the people opposite were personally involved in, including Nelson McCausland, as a Belfast city councillor, and other former Ministers from the DUP and the UUP. I noted how often and how consistently they voted against funding for children's festivals if they had an Irish name like Draíocht. I noticed how often they voted against funding for the summer festivals, not just in Ardoyne but in west Belfast, south Belfast, north Belfast, New Lodge — Lóiste Nua — and all the different parts of the city. So let us not pretend that this is not an old, tired agenda.

I join Gerry Kelly, Alban Maginness and Cathal Ó hOisín in stating that good work is done in some of the most disadvantaged areas in the city. The reason that many of those festivals and féilte came into being was to avoid very difficult situations that arose from precisely the toxic mixture of drink, soldiers armed to the teeth, the old RUC, and children and others getting killed by plastic bullets. So, what happened? These festivals changed the dynamic in the city, and the least that I ask people on the opposite Benches to do is to understand that in the same way as I want to support grass-roots festivals in all areas of the city. Indeed, during my time as director of Féile an Phobail, I went out of my way to reach out to the Shankill Festival and all festivals. Also, it is important to put on record that all the festivals are reaching out, trying to work together and trying to deal with some very difficult issues. So, let us get real about the funding of féilte and festivals throughout the North of Ireland, and let us understand —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will. I will give way to my colleague from South Down.

Mr Wells: I apologise for calling the honourable Member a lady. Will she accept that, for many years, this concert had form? This is not the first time that the concluding concert at the Ardoyne festival was used to heap militant republican bile upon the Protestant community. It is not the first time; let us hope that it will be the last.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Ms Ruane: I hear the Member's comments, but I have to say that he also has form: making attacks on things to do with Irish culture and language. I think that we all need to understand that we live in a very divided society, so we now need to respect each other's right and celebrate diversity and difference. Also, while we are doing that, remember that many people from different countries, about whom my colleague Cathal Ó hOisín spoke eloquently, are making their home here, and, together, we need to send out messages of welcome and support; not messages of racism and hate. I pledge to work with all of you to build much more intercultural communities in which all feel safe.

Beidh mé ag labhairt in aghaidh an phríomhrúin agus leasaithe uimhir a haon, ach beidh mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta don leasú ón Alliance Party. I will vote against the motion and amendment No 1, but I will support the Alliance amendment.

Mr Attwood: Mr Wells asked:

"What is the SDLP playing at?"

I want to answer that question by, first, acknowledging that I have no doubt that unionism's hurt and upset at what happened are genuine, because the hurt and upset in nationalism at what happened are genuine. I want to put on the record that I accept that Mr Wells is upset, as I was upset and as everybody should be upset. However, the answer to Mr Wells's question is in his speech: he takes this incident and goes down the traditional route of the politics of demonisation. He named the fleadh, the GAA and the CCMS, which is responsible for the school, and demonised each and all of them on the basis of what was not just a reckless remark — I think that it was a deliberate remark by the man in that band — made in response to the people in that hall.

That is what is wrong, Mr Wells, and that is why the SDLP is right. You do not take the

comments of that individual and the response of that audience and then demonise those in the fleadh who are well intentioned, or the people in the GAA, the schools estate and the CCMS. That is why we are taking the position that we are taking. You do not demonise the good because of the actions of the bad. That is what is wrong with this debate.

11.45 am

What is also wrong with this debate is that it says to nationalism and republicanism that, when unionism takes offence, its response is disproportionate, calling for withdrawal of funding. It also says that its response is selective, because it does not apply the same standards to other expressions of cultural identity, and it draws the conclusion that all your cultural expression is right and proper and that that of others is somehow in error.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will let you in in a second.

That is what Mr Nelson McCausland said. He talked about the recent Troubles inflicted on the country by the IRA — not by the loyalists or by the state; just by the IRA. He talked about the culture of songs and that sort of event, referring to the Druids, without talking about the culture of songs, other events, murals and the sectarianism of other parts of this society. You cannot have the politics of demonisation on one hand and be selective on the other. I will give way.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. I thought that some of our contributions on this side were trying to show the extent of any similar analogy on the loyalist side, but the Member seems to have missed that. Is this not a rightful condemnation of people who say that the other side should "get out"? That is effectively what the speaker in the Druids band said from the stage — that we, people from Ulster, should leave Ulster and go to England. If anybody says that about people in the Irish Republic, it is equally wrong and to be condemned, and if any action can be taken by the police and the prosecution service, they should do that. Does the Member not see the equality there?

Mr Attwood: Yes, I will accept that equality, but if you read the Hansard report, especially Mr McCausland's contribution and especially, unfortunately, that of Mr Wells, you will see demonisation, selective commentary and an

incomplete analysis of what the problem was on that night.

What was the problem on that night? One thing that Mr McCausland said, which I partially agreed with, was that it romanticised violence. I accept and agree with that point. That is because, unfortunately, what was said that night and the way that some people responded may be their view of politics and history on this island, but it is not the view of history of the vast majority of people on this island. That is because the violence of the IRA was anti-national and anti-democratic, it was used when there was a constitutional alternative, it divided the people of Ireland more than they ever had been before, and it carried an enormous personal and human cost.

What we need to do in this society is not just walk away from the politics of demonisation and selective condemnation but move away from the politics of revisionism that glorifies the violence of anybody in any uniform who inflicted violence against the wishes of the people of this island. My offence at the event of that night was much less about the man from the Druids and what he said. It was that young people and generations were again being taught that somehow the violence of the few, which was endorsed by 2% of the people and inflicted against the wishes of the people of this island for 40 years, destroyed lives and the ambition of the people of this island, divided the people of this island one from the other and put back unity by many a generation —

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

Mr Attwood: — was legitimate and valid. Those who cheered that night are being led down a false narrative of our history. That is what we should defeat.

Mr Elliott: We have heard quite a lot today about things that are not relevant to the north Belfast fleadh. We have heard about murals, signs and provocative issues. They are all around Northern Ireland — of course they are — and they have been for generations.

Let me make it clear from the start that I accept that not everything in Northern Ireland is totally integrated. People have their own thoughts and views on issues and have their own particular aspects to celebrate. The fleadh, by and large, would be regarded — I am open to somebody telling me that I am wrong — by the unionist community as a broadly nationalist event just as Orange Order events are accepted as broadly

Orange/Protestant/unionist events. Let us be clear about that and have an acceptance of that.

Let us get back to the crux of the particular event in north Belfast at Ardoyne. I have heard here that there has been condemnation from the committee of the fleadh organisers. Let us see how strong that condemnation is. Has the committee withheld the payment that the Druids were due for their appearance? Taking that action would show a real commitment. It would show a real commitment if they guaranteed that the band would not come back to the festival. There is much more that could be done than the condemnation and regret story that the committee has come out with. It must go much deeper than that, because if it does not there will be no confidence from the unionist community — I am trying to be as fair as possible — for any further support or funding.

As Mr Wells indicated, there have probably been actions like this in the past that have not been broadcast. The one thing that I would disagree with Mr Wells on is his view that it was "misjudged". That is a test, because I am not so sure that it was misjudged. How much of it was misjudged and how much of it was deliberate. How much of it was misjudged or deliberate from the Druids? How much of a misjudgement was it for the organisers of the event to invite the Druids, because I am sure that they knew what they were likely to get?

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: Yes, I am happy to.

Mr A Maginness: I quote from the concluding remarks of the public statement by the chair of the committee:

"The organising committee of the Fleadh will be reviewing our guidelines in relation to performers and acts to ensure that this does not happen again."

That is an indication of the intent of the organising committee to take effective action.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that clarification. However, it does not go far enough: it does not say that they have taken any action against the Druids, it does not say that they will not invite them again, and it does not say that they will ensure that they will not invite bands of a similar nature back to the event. That is why there are a lot of unanswered questions.

I have already put in freedom of information requests to the Community Relations Council and DCAL, asking for information on the applications for funding and on what criteria had to be met. None of that information has yet been forthcoming, but I hope that I will get it in the near future to see whether any criteria were broken. That is a very important issue: if funding is going to an event or an organisation, they need to ensure that they meet the criteria.

Very quickly, I want to move on to Mr Allister's amendment.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate the efforts that he is making to be fair and rational in his contribution. Does he acknowledge that the original motion prejudices the process of the organisations reviewing whether those conditions have been breached. Is he considering supporting the motion?

Mr Elliott: Of course I am considering supporting the motion, but the reality is that, if there can be a proof otherwise, it is up to the organisers of the event next year to prove it. The burden of proof must go on to the organisers, not the funding body.

I move on quickly to Mr Allister's amendment. It is unfortunate that the police and the Public Prosecution Service made an assessment of only one particular clause in legislation. I have met the Public Prosecution Service, so I have that at first hand. I have explained that I do not believe that they gave a wide enough remit, look and assessment of the legislation itself. We were able to point out a number of potential breaches of legislation. That is up to the Public Prosecution Service and the police to do, if they want to take those points on board. I am pleased that the police have now indicated that there will be a wider investigation and review.

Mr McNarry: I actually received an invitation to this event. Fortunately, I had a prior engagement, but imagine how I would have felt being there, trapped in a crowd belting out hatred against me whilst I sat alongside them. From the footage of the audience participation it is clear to anyone that the audience needed no encouragement to demonstrate hatred. The hatred was obvious, and it came out naturally. It was naked sectarianism — anti-British bile roared with approval by an audience that enjoyed every minute of the abuse directed at soldiers and members of the Orange Order. How on earth was that scene on film anything to do with community relations, when, as a result and as is abundantly clear from this debate, it has set back relations? Funding an

outward expression of hatred cannot be the role of the Community Relations Council or any other funder.

I am one of the Orangemen whom the crowd begged to be sent back to England where we came from. Yes, I am a proud unionist, and I recognise the effects, in life lost and limb risked here in my name by those serving in Her Majesty's armed forces — the same Her Majesty whom Martin McGuinness desperately wanted to shake hands with. Let me say that I am going nowhere. I did not come from England, but I have Orange colleagues who do. I also have many colleagues who live in England, Scotland, Wales and across the free world and belong to the Orange Institution. There is no doubt that the apologists — we have heard them — for the "Kick the Orange" and "Kick the army" bands will defend that audience. Tell me this: what is the defence? Do the excusers mean that calls to kick the Orange and kick the army were offensive or regrettable but not incitement? Draw the line, Members, between the difference: offensive, highly regrettable but not incitement. Please, do not try to insult us by pretending that it was all just a bit of fun. There is no pretence. It was sick fun at other people's expense, and, much more, it was meant.

I am the only leader of a local party in the House who is a member of the Orange Institution. I am proud to be so and proud to be a past assistant Grand Master of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. I will and do stand up for Orangeism. There is not an ounce of hatred in my head or in my heart, not a smidgen of inciting anyone nor a desire to cause offence in the practice of my belonging to the Orange Institution. There is no slippage on my part from adhering to the qualifications of being an Orangeman. I am, in all that, a typical, ordinary Orangeman, and the very idea that a publicly funded body would cover the expense of an event mired in disgrace over its choice of entertainment affronts me as I am sure it does Mr Hussey, who I will give way to.

12.00 noon

Mr Hussey: Thank you. Reference has been made several times to the British Army. Indeed, Ms Ruane made reference to it as well. Do you agree that many soldiers who serve bravely in the British Army are actually from the Irish Republic? Where are they going to go home to?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McNarry: I take that point. It is well made. I agree that there is a long history of Irishmen, before this state was founded, serving loyally and that that continues to this day.

I heard a reference to Irish culture at the end of Ms Ruane's piece. The offence to me and many like me at the event actually showed the door to me for Irish culture. It said, "Don't come in. You are not welcome. If you happen to trespass in here, this is what we want to sing about you". Irish culture may be very fine, but let us share it and recognise our own culture as well.

Mr Lunn: I support our amendment. We will oppose the motion and amendment No 1. I am pleased to see that Sinn Féin and the SDLP are prepared to support our amendment. That is positive.

The motion has come about because of sectarian comments made by a member of a band from Kildare that, somebody said, has form in this area. That is putting it mildly. It has considerable form in this area, and the organisers of the Ardoyne Fleadh would have known what they were getting for what Mr McCausland referred to as Irish rebel night on the last night of an otherwise relatively uneventful and successful event.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Go on then.

Mr Wells: Does the Member agree that not only did the Druids have form, but the event had form for many years. With anything billed as an Irish rebel night, there is something in that description that might give you a clue as to what is going on. That should have no part in a cross-community festival.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: I thought that I probably would achieve an extra minute, Mr Speaker.

The band went back to Kildare after causing mayhem and apologised. I use that word in its loosest sense. They apparently said that the remarks were taken out of context and they did not intend any offence. How you can take out of context a request or demand that the legitimate population or a section of it from Northern Ireland should eff off back to England where they belong and say that that is capable of interpretation is beyond me. It is pretty explicit. I utterly condemn what the band has said, but I also acknowledge that the organisers

of the Ardoyne Fleadh have been unequivocal in their condemnation of what was said —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No — as has everybody else involved right round the House today. I listened initially to Mr Maginness's remarks on the radio on the day after the event, and the condemnation was absolutely clear. The band's apology was entirely mischievous. They knew exactly what they were doing and knew what the reaction would be. I imagine that the band members are sitting down in Kildare now probably with a pint and enjoying themselves hugely, especially at the fact that they have created the situation where the Assembly has to debate something that, to some people, is not quite as important or worthy of our attention as it is to other people.

I want to talk about Mr Allister's amendment. I think that there is a misunderstanding here. The PSNI has looked at the situation and discussed it with the DPP and the PPS, and the initial impression that it got was that it was not worth pursuing a prosecution.

Following further complaints — particularly, I think, from people around us here — the police have had to go through the full procedure and prepare a file that will be passed to the appropriate authorities. A decision will be made on whether there is grounds for prosecution. To me, that does not constitute lack of action. It is unfortunate that they had to be prodded to do the right thing, but they are doing it. For that reason, we cannot accept Mr Allister's amendment.

The motion talks about withdrawal of all public funding from this event. I wonder where we go with that. This is one event. Effectively, it is one evening of one event, an event that has been running for 24 years. I believe that it has largely been uneventful, if I can say so. I am looking at Mr Wells, who would probably not agree. It is a well-established, mainly cultural event. Are we going to seriously think about withdrawing funding from any events that I might call "single-identity events", where there might be a sectarian display of some kind or sectarian comments or singing? Are we talking about bonfires or posters on bonfires? An awful lot of events are sponsored by Departments in this country, including the West Belfast Festival, which has been commented on today. I would include the various attempts at Orangefest, Orange outreach and Orange and loyalist bands. You cannot really look at them one by

one, then pick one out and say that, on the basis of one misdemeanour, we will not —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes, go on.

Mr Beggs: As a member of the Orange Order, I ask him to explain how he compares Orange events with this fleadh and this outrage. I am offended.

Mr Lunn: I compare them in their attempts to reach out across the community. That is the comparison. The Ardoyne Fleadh has a cross-community aspect to it.

Mr Wells: Where is it?

Mr Lunn: Mr Kelly referred to it. Mr McCausland has participated in panel discussions. There have been cross-community events involving children during the fleadh, mainly around arts and crafts. At least it is an attempt to bring the community together.

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

Mr Lunn: I will finish with the petition of concern, Mr Speaker. It really does not matter a hoot, does it? It will not change the balance of votes in the House by one iota. Whatever the House thinks, it will vote. I really do not care that there is a petition of concern or otherwise.

Mr Allister: Most contributors have, in one way or another, agreed that the words used were, at least, abusive and insulting. Many suggest that they were much more besides. That is good. The surprising thing is that then, when it comes to the vote, some of the people who profess to take that stance will vote against any rebuke whatsoever in respect of the participants in the fleadh.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Allister: I will give way very quickly.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that maybe the Alliance Party's attempt here is to protect the chairman of the CRC, who is a former member, if not an existing member, of the Alliance Party? Is it not an attempt on its part to save his face?

Mr Allister: I cannot really comment on the machinations of that.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I might deal with your comments later, so perhaps then.

I want to pick up on the comments made by some Members. Mr Attwood rebuked unionists in the House, saying that the response to the remarks had been disproportionate. Mr Attwood fails to have any appreciation of the raw nerve that those remarks touch for many in the unionist community. Those remarks are an articulation of "Brits out". For decades in the Province, "Brits out" was delivered down the barrel of a gun. That is why unionists in this community are sensitive when they are told, "Brits out": we know what it is code for. We know what those who were chanting and dancing and exalting were supporting.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Attwood: I accept that the relentless validation by republicans of IRA terror is deeply alienating to unionism, as it is to us, which is the point that I was making at the end of my speech. My comment, as you will see if you check Hansard, was that it would be disproportionate to withdraw funding. It was not that the sense of offence was disproportionate; it was that to withdraw funding from the Ardoyne Fleadh would be disproportionate.

Mr Allister: Mr Attwood's answer to the offence caused by the fleadh is to do nothing. That, I think, is a commentary in itself. Doing nothing would be disproportionate to the offence caused.

Mr Maginness rebuked me for suggesting that the matter had been swept under the carpet by the prosecuting authorities. Has Mr Maginness or anyone else ever heard of a decision on a prosecutory matter being taken within seven days? Of course there was an attempt to sweep it under the carpet. Then it emerges that the DPP was consulted without even the presentation of a file. What does that speak to but an urgency to sweep it under the carpet? Now we are told by the Alliance Party, "Oh well, don't bother. Don't be disturbed about that. They are going to put that right". Are they? What did the Chief Constable say? His response was this: "Within a few hours we could put together a file". That is not a proper investigation. As I laboured during my earlier

remarks, once you have a reasonable suspicion that an incitement to hatred crime has been committed, the bounden obligation is to arrest and to question. That cannot be done within a few hours. So, even yet, in the words of the Chief Constable, there does not seem to be a manifestation of intent for a proper investigation. That is why the criticism in my amendment is more than justified, and why I urge it on the House.

Mr Maginness said that there had been a proper investigation. Then, in the next breath, he said that we did not know the detail of the file; in fact, we know that there was no file. How could it ever be a proper investigation? Patently it was not. Patently there was a great urgency to do exactly what I said: sweep it under the carpet. Some in the House want to sweep it under the carpet. That is why, for all the platitudes, many in the House will vote against the motion and against the first amendment.

Speaking of platitudes, Miss Ruane told us that she condemns all sectarianism. I have listened to Miss Ruane many times, and I have yet to hear her condemn the murderous sectarianism in the murders of the IRA. Not once has she condemned that manifestation of sectarianism. Rather, she continues to justify it. So much for the remarks of Miss Ruane.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member said that the Alliance Party was going to vote against any rebuke whatsoever in relation to this heinous sectarian comment. That is obviously inaccurate. We have also been accused of being linked to decision-making in relation to the Community Relations Council. A simple check —

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Allister's time is gone.

Mr Humphrey: I thank those who have contributed to the debate. Franklin Jones once observed:

"Nothing makes you more tolerant of a neighbour's noisy party than being there".

The recent performance by the Druids as part of the Ardoyne Fleadh showed that such a proposition would not be possible for a Protestant or unionist living in north Belfast in the vicinity of the event. Indeed, the performance on the stage made it clear that those so-called entertainers thought that the unionist community of that area, along with the soldiers and those who are Orange brethren,

should clear off and take their Union flag with them.

12.15 pm

Many Members made reference to the speech and the direct words used by the so-called entertainer. They were anti-Orange and anti-British; they were sectarian, hate-filled, racist, bile remarks, and they should be, and have been, condemned. Let me make it very clear: I am a proud Ulsterman; I am a proud Orangeman; I am British; I am from north Belfast; my community and I are going nowhere.

There are those who talk about Her Majesty's forces being in Northern Ireland. I have to say this: there is a certain irony in this whole thing when those people come from the Republic of Ireland. Her Majesty's forces are garrisoned in Northern Ireland, as they are across the kingdom — as they should be — to protect people from terrorism, the very terrorism that was being glorified at this event. I have spoken to the grand secretary of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, and I know that he is pursuing the issue because of the offensive remarks that were made towards those of us who are Orangemen. To think that my Orange culture is branded as being intolerant.

Since the comments became available online, the organisers of the event have been at pains to point out that they do not represent the views of the republican community, as articulated by Mr Maginness and Mr Kelly, in that area. As others have said, the enthusiastic cheering and hollering that took place as those remarks were being delivered in a school's grounds by the thousands of people surrounding the platform do not bear that out. The truth is that it is merely a symptom of the much wider, undiluted, unrestrained and unreconstructed hatred towards the Protestant community that emanates from certain sources within that community. It is chiefly directed at the Orange Institution by groups with dissident connections such as GARC.

Having listened to this debate, we have tacit endorsement from Sinn Féin and the SDLP for these actions, because there is refusal to have sanctions applied to those involved in organising it. Already, I can hear the holier-than-thou commentators and politicians asking how dare I make such comments about the community in north Belfast. Unlike most of those commentators and politicians, I live there. I happen to live in north Belfast and have done so all of my life. I know the reality of what it is like on the ground in the constituency. The hurt

that Mr Attwood talked about is absolutely palpable. People are coming into my office, and people are stopping me on the street. Members across the way can laugh, but that is the reality. If you are serious about building an Ireland of equals, you should listen to what I am saying.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: Surely.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Member agree that one does not have to live in north Belfast to share the same amount of resentment and anger in relation to the sectarian comments that were made from the platform?

Mr Humphrey: I will come to the Alliance Party in a moment. Emotions are extremely raw within the Protestant community in north Belfast, for a variety of reasons, ranging from the ludicrous determination of the Parades Commission through to the sectarian decision to remove the nation's flag from the City Hall, which you played a part in. The performance of the Druids was merely the latest in a long line of calculated insults on rebel night and acts of aggression to emanate from this particular quarter.

What message does it send to the people I represent? Mr Maginness talks about the chairman. Who is the chairman? Is Eddie Copeland the chairman? That is the same Eddie Copeland who unveiled a memorial plaque in Flax Street to the murderer of the nine people who were killed in the Shankill bombing.

Mr Wells: The Member will also be interested to hear that, in addition to the Druids, this year's fleadh had the Fianna Irish rebel band. I am sure we would love to see a video of what went on during that concert.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for that contribution. How are we on these Benches — those of us who live in or represent north Belfast, or anyone else for that matter — to take seriously the assertion that this is an event that is about building community spirit rather than directing hatred to Protestants and unionists, Orangemen and British soldiers when the organisers, point blank, refuse to condemn the attack on Her Majesty's forces who live here, many of whom are local people protecting communities?

Members of Belfast City Council's licensing committee asked the organisers who, incidentally, have held the event illegally,

without a licence, for years, if they were prepared to turn the sound down or to end the event earlier in the evening. What sort of message does it send out when Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance vote to agree the licence anyway? It is no surprise that Sinn Féin is backing Mr Copeland and his committee — birds of a feather flock together — but questions do have to be asked of the SDLP and Alliance.

Then again, I listened to Mr Lunn's summing-up speech for Alliance in which he said that it is a mainly cultural event and that this is not a big deal really. I will tell you that for the people whom I represent and the community in which I live, it is a big deal.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: No.

Those of us who live in north Belfast know that the SDLP has been, in recent years, seeking to out-green Sinn Féin, but what of Alliance? Why does a party that preens itself in public on its cross-community credentials vote in City Hall for such a thing to happen and agree the licence? I hope that the Alliance Party will review its decision when the licence is before the committee next year.

It is not for today to hear the usual sermonising from Alliance Members about both sides being as bad as each other. The fact is that the Druids would not have been on stage had Alliance and the SDLP not voted to give the licence. The response to the ensuing uproar over the Druids's comments from organisers and Sinn Féin was the classic political non-apology. They said sorry for the comments in so far as they related to Orangemen but defended them in so far as they related to Her Majesty's forces and soldiers. What about Orangemen who are soldiers? Does the apology apply to them? Why apologise for comments about Orangemen when the comments are actually much broader than that? What the performer actually said was, "Orange comrades". That is a much wider category of people than members of the Orange Institution. It encompasses Orangemen, the Orange family, their friends and supporters — 750,000 of whom are out on the streets across this country on 12 July. In other words, the entire Orange tradition in Northern Ireland.

In the context of a community like mine where Orangemen are, daily, being denied their legitimate rights, it does not take a fool to understand just how incendiary those remarks are. Having lost ground to the dissidents in

Ardoyne for some time, I suspect that senior members of Sinn Féin were actually pleased about the opportunity presented by the Druids. After all, they got to say offensive things about Her Majesty's forces that perhaps Sinn Féin has decided, politically, not to say in recent years.

Serious questions have to be asked and answered by DCAL, the Community Relations Council, the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Irish Republic and CCMS. The Community Relations Council's role in Northern Ireland is to promote a peaceful and fair society based on reconciliation and mutual trust. It was formed in 1990 and was set up:

"to promote better community relations between Protestants and Catholics ... and, equally, to promote recognition of cultural diversity."

Well, we will see what actions it takes in the coming days and weeks.

The fleadh's final night is something that I have witnessed and listened to for many, many years. The sectarian bile that comes from the so-called community festival is just disgusting. For years, grossly offensive, sectarian, racist speeches have peddled hatred and division against my community and wider society in Northern Ireland.

To conclude, this event has proven through repeated breaches of rules and through more recent events that it does not merit public funding, whether from council, Government here or, indeed, a foreign Government. I commend the motion to the House.

On behalf of the DUP, I have to say that we will accept Mr Allister's amendment, because, despite what Mr Maginness said, the debacle around the original file produced for the PPS was a disgrace. Only when pressure was applied from party colleagues of mine and others was a second file put forward to the PPS.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: Serious questions must be answered by the police and the PPS —

Mr Lyttle: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist. Order.

Mr Humphrey: — around the issue. A party delegation from the DUP will meet the Chief

Constable on Thursday, because confidence in the police and in the Public Prosecution Service has been undermined by this debacle. It is very clear and Members can live in an ideal world all they want, but, on the ground, —

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

Mr Humphrey: — that is the reality in north Belfast, across this city and across Northern Ireland. I commend the motion.

Mr Speaker: Once again, before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 42; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kinahan, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Allister and Mr McNarry

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Milne, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Ruane and Mr Ó hOisín

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

Mr Speaker: I have been advised by party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 27(1A)(b), there is an agreement that we can dispense with the three minutes and move straight to the Division.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 44; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Cochrane and Mr Dickson

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kinahan, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly notes with grave concern the remarks made by the Druids and the leading of young people in pro-IRA chanting at the recent Ardoyne Fleadh; denounces sectarianism of any kind; and calls on the

Executive to work to ensure that all publicly funded events remain free from sectarianism or hatred of any kind and to implement measures to ensure such events remain open and shared for everyone.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.47 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Anna Lo is not in her place.

Commercial Business Funding

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Social Development whether departmental funding can be used to establish a commercial business that would compete with private enterprise providing the same or similar service. (AQO 6506/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): You will be aware that, over recent years, my Department has invested significant amounts in order to support the regeneration of Enniskillen town centre and support local businesses. That funding has not been used to establish any commercial business. Approval for a branding, marketing and advertising campaign for Enniskillen town centre was endorsed unanimously by Fermanagh district councillors.

The development of the Enjoy Enniskillen website was one element of a package of actions aimed at highlighting Enniskillen's role as a tourist destination and market town. Key elements of the project included adding vitality and vibrancy to the town, strengthening the strong independent retail offering, promoting Enniskillen's unique identity as an inland town, and maximising the town's tourism potential in order to make the most of its physical assets and geographical location.

The development of the brand "Enniskillen — A Place Apart" required an online presence. That website showcases Enniskillen town centre and gives a flavour, through images, of what the town has to offer in terms of attractions, services, events, arts, culture, history and heritage. It is appropriate to include images of services such as shopping as they are a key part of what visitors to Enniskillen will want and need. It was not designed to compete with any existing business or shopping directories.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that answer. He strayed into the issues around Enniskillen

that were not in my question, but which are of significant help. Does the Minister have a specific policy that does not allow funding from his Department to compete directly with a commercial business?

Mr McCausland: That comes down to the question of what constitutes a commercial business and what constitutes competition. I am sure that the Member would agree that when Fermanagh District Council unanimously agreed, as a council, that having a website of this type was the right approach, the decision was taken to support them. That is the specific example that the Member raised previously.

As to whether there is competition, there will be various opinions. I am not aware of any specific policy, but then I am not sure and do not accept that there is competition in this case. I understand that the Member may not want to go fully into all the details of that particular case, but I think that there is a link between the two websites.

Budget Cuts: South Antrim

3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the effect his Department's budget cuts will have on South Antrim. (AQO 6507/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department is currently considering a number of options to manage the effect of the budget cuts. It is too early at this juncture to determine to what extent the present budget cuts will affect the south Antrim area in particular.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answer, although it is vague on detail for South Antrim. What effect will the ongoing problems with the Budget have on the totality of his Department?

Mr McCausland: The Member raises an issue that is very much on my mind and, I am sure, on the minds of a number of other Ministers. The fact is that a budget cut of 2.1% was imposed as a result of the June monitoring round, which represented a cut of £13.5 million for the Department.

Work is well advanced on the upcoming October monitoring round. Current indications are that that will produce a further 2.3% cut, therefore resulting in a total cut, over June and October, of £29 million for the year. That is bound to have an impact in South Antrim and, indeed, other constituencies. It will also have an impact in a whole range of areas.

I will mention here areas in South Antrim in which we have invested in the past year, 2013-14. In housing and urban renewal, for example, we invested £1.9 million in new social housing; £1.7 million in planned maintenance services; £1.3 million in urban generation; £54,000 in voluntary and community; and £42,000 in tackling disadvantage. So, over that period, you can see that we spent in the region of £6 million. However, we are now faced with a very substantial cut, right across the Department, of £13.5 million and, adding on from that, £29 million.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. I am glad to hear that £6 million was spent in South Antrim, although that still seems very little. Will the Minister accept that the cuts to departmental budgets that were applied in June monitoring were nothing to do with welfare reform and, in reality, were predominantly to pay for Executive commitments and the £20 million lifeline to health? Will he make sure that the public knows that?

Mr McCausland: As the Member well knows — as does his party colleague on the Executive, because he has been party to the discussions there and has been part of the welfare subcommittee in the Executive — we are facing into a further cut of £15.5 million. We already know what the total cost of not proceeding with welfare reform is going to be. It is not just the smaller figure that we are talking about at the moment, because we are getting to the point where meeting the penalties as a result of welfare reform will cost £200 million a year, on top of all the other costs.

Of course, there are people who think that you should just invent your own IT system. Sure, £1 billion to pay for something there — to buy over a legacy system and operate that — will not be a problem for some people. Or, £1.6 billion to create a new, bespoke system for Northern Ireland is not a problem for some people. The result is, in fact, that some Members are quite clearly financially illiterate.

Welfare Cuts Agenda

4. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the current welfare cuts agenda in relation to vulnerable people. (AQO 6508/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Perhaps the Member will consider the adverse effect of not introducing welfare reform in Northern Ireland, which is an area that I have already strayed into. It is important that we consider that in relation to

vulnerable people by considering my previous answer on the budget cuts that my Department will have to make, should we not have movement with the Welfare Reform Bill. DSD provides a range of services to vulnerable groups across Northern Ireland, and some of the most vulnerable in our society — people in areas of deprivation and suffering from individual and family vulnerabilities — will bear the brunt of this.

Welfare reform will control the level or rate of the increase in social security spending. It is estimated that, even after welfare reform, spending on social security benefits will be higher than it was in 2010-11, rising from around £5 billion in 2010-11 to over £6 billion by 2018-19. Protecting the vulnerable is a key priority and, although I have publicly expressed support for the reform of the welfare system, I have concerns with certain aspects of the welfare reform proposals as implemented in GB. I have listened to the debate in Great Britain about the impact on the most vulnerable. That is why I met Northern Ireland's four Church leaders to discuss welfare reform in Northern Ireland and why we have ongoing engagement with a range of stakeholders. I will continue to ensure that protecting the vulnerable is at the core of what I do.

The reality is that the welfare system needs to change to ensure that it is fair, affordable and sustainable. In fact, plans to reform the welfare system have been ongoing since 2009, when a Welfare Bill was considered. Since taking office, I have ensured that this Welfare Reform Bill has been progressed against my four principles which are central to the policy intent behind this legislation, namely: protect the vulnerable, get people into work or back to work, develop a system that is fair, and encourage personal and social responsibility.

As part of that, I have developed a package of measures, including a series of flexibilities and transitional protections designed to meet the needs of the people in Northern Ireland. That package of measures helps to simplify the system, and, more importantly, it ensures that the vulnerable are protected.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That was an important and detailed answer, but I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister made up his own question and answered a completely different question from the one I asked. In light of a recent report issued by Queen's University

that says that over a quarter of adults in the North live in multiple deprivation and in light of the fact that the UN is investigating Britain for human rights abuses against disabled people, will the Minister join us in defending the most vulnerable against Tory cuts, which will only worsen the already bad levels of deprivation in the North?

Mr McCausland: The Member says that I did not answer the question she asked. I actually answered her question and the question that she and her party does not want to ask or face up to. The fact is that, if Sinn Féin cuts are imposed — when they are imposed, given the way that we are going — they will be detrimental to the most vulnerable. Those cuts will be the result of the inaction of Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

There is also an increasing body of evidence, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on minimum income standard for the UK in 2014 and the Institute for Fiscal Studies report 'Green Budget 2014', that supports the positive aspects of welfare reform and the introduction of universal credit, which will improve the financial reward for hard-working families and provide greater incentives for people to work. We need a system that encourages people into work, supports them in that regard and is there as a safety net for the most vulnerable. That is my task. I do not want to see the vulnerable being punished because of the financial incapability of others.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers. Minister, when we talk about some of the most vulnerable, we often think about those in receipt of disability benefits. How will the new personal independence payments (PIPs) affect children and older people?

Mr McCausland: The personal independence payment will affect only working-age claimants — those aged 16 to 64. PIP will not affect the most vulnerable age groups — children under 16 or adults over 64. Individuals in those age groups will continue to receive their benefit as long as they satisfy the criteria. It is only when a child reaches their sixteenth birthday that they will be invited to make a claim for personal independence payment.

Additional safeguards have been built into the PIP customer journey to ensure that vulnerable people in Northern Ireland receive all the help and support they need as they encounter the new benefit. I will continue to work with colleagues to ensure that Northern Ireland is not adversely impacted by the changes. We

are doing all we can in terms of getting the flexibilities that I have negotiated with Westminster and putting together a package of other measures to mitigate the worst effects of welfare reform and protect the most vulnerable.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, you will appreciate the scepticism many of us on this side of the House have about a financially illiterate Minister who stood a few months ago and accused four contractors of an £18 million overpayment. There is some concern around his waffling about of financial figures at the moment. Perhaps the Minister could give us a profile across each constituency of the impact of welfare cuts. It is unfortunate that he and his party have thrown in the towel to the Conservatives in relation to the impact of the cuts.

Mr McCausland: The opportunity to answer Mrs Kelly is always a privilege and a pleasure. The first thing is to point out that it was her party, when it was in DSD, that started the process of implementing GB welfare reform in Northern Ireland. It is not just that she does not mention that; she seems to have forgotten about it. I do not know what the reason is, but she obviously has forgotten about it. It is one of a number of things that were quietly forgotten about by Mrs Kelly.

Secondly, in terms of doing things on a constituency basis, in regard to welfare reform, we have generally looked at the impact on different categories of people, whether it is a particular age group or a particular section 75 category or whatever. All of those things have been looked at; it has not really been done on an individual constituency basis. However, it is clear that the work was done. In fact, we had to do it because, if we were going to develop mitigations and flexibilities, we needed to know what the impact was in order to develop and negotiate them. That work has been done, and it informed fully all the conversations that we had with DWP, Iain Duncan Smith, David Freud and others and the work that was then done in developing local flexibilities and mitigations here in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

Mr Cree: Will the Minister explain why he does not bring the Bill that he introduced two years ago back to the Floor of the House for discussion and, at Consideration Stage, table his package of proposals and allow other parties to do the same?

Mr McCausland: The worst thing of all, in many ways, would be to bring legislation into the Assembly and then for that to fall. We would be in a much more difficult situation then because you would almost be back to the drawing board and back to stage one. I can see the Member's colleague beside him nodding in agreement.

The second thing is that we have two parties that have their face set very firmly against it. Maybe the Member's head just nods. The fact is that there are two parties that are dead set against any movement. They seem to be like rabbits caught in the headlights and are not quite sure what to do. I do not want us to get into the situation where we would be worse off than we are now. We have a good package, and people are well aware of what is in it. It has been talked about enough. Everyone knows what is in it. The Member himself will be aware of the elements in that package. The real issue needs to be in the Executive, where the representatives of other parties agree that this comes forward as a Northern Ireland Executive package rather than simply being put onto the Floor and thrown out there. We do not want to get into a situation that would be worse than the current situation.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the capital and revenue projects his Department is currently developing, in conjunction with other Departments, in neighbourhood renewal areas. (AQO 6509/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is developing a number of projects in conjunction with other Departments in neighbourhood renewal areas. These range from capital street enhancement schemes to revenue projects that address some of the barriers that contribute to low educational attainment and poor health. These projects are being developed in conjunction with the Department for Regional Development, OFMDFM, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Education. Obviously, there is a long list of projects that it is not really possible to deal with in an oral answer. We work with all of those other Departments on a range of measures.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for what was a fairly short answer. Minister, given the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local government, can you assure us that projects that are under way will not be impacted by a reduced budget? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCausland: The answer was brief because it was either going to be succinct in summary of the situation or we would get into a situation where I listed all the projects across all the constituencies. We would have been well past the two minutes set aside by the Speaker to deal with questions and answers.

The budget for neighbourhood renewal and urban regeneration is being transferred to local councils, and my departmental officials are engaging thoroughly with councils to make sure that that process is as smooth and seamless as possible. How councils then take forward those projects, how they decide to prioritise them, to stage them and to finance them are matters for councils themselves. As of 1 April, if the Regeneration and Housing Bill goes through — I say "if" because it has not gone through yet — it will indeed be a matter for councils.

Mr Givan: The Minister will be aware of the meeting that he had yesterday with representatives from the Resurgam Trust in my constituency. That organisation is funded through a pilot scheme. Can the Minister give an assurance that there will be proactive work taken forward so that that scheme does not fall through any cracks because it does not naturally fit with urban renewal? Can he update the House on progress towards introducing the Regeneration and Housing Bill?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question. He was at the meeting and is aware that work is ongoing between DSD officials and the officials in the new council area to make sure that whatever happens moving forward is the best possible outcome.

The Member also asks about the Regeneration and Housing Bill. That is why I said "if" earlier. I have sought Executive approval to introduce the Regeneration and Housing Bill in the Assembly on a number of occasions. I made three attempts to table it at Executive meetings on 5 June and 9 June and on 8 July. I also sought clearance by urgent procedure on 9 July and 29 August. However, I have so far been unable to make progress with that important legislation because of the failure of some members of the Executive to agree to the Bill proceeding.

The Bill is essential in order to proceed with the transfer of functions and the conferral of powers to councils in April 2015, as agreed by the Executive in April 2013. The Bill was put forward for the Executive back in spring. I have listed the occasions on which I attempted to table it and have also sought clearance by urgent procedure. I also recently wrote to all

Ministers asking for comment on it. I got a reply from one Minister — the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister — who raised a range of issues now at a very late stage. I have responded to that. I wrote out on 2 September; we got a reply on 8 September. The reply to all the points has now gone back, and I hope that we will be able to move forward. Councils are expecting that, on 1 April, the functions will transfer. If the legislation does not go through, nothing will transfer.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer, which I listened to carefully. Can he tell us what endeavours he has made to submit his proposals for equality impact assessment, given that the new councils will be very quickly judged on their ability to be fair in the distribution of their resources? Can he tell us what training the new shadow councils have undertaken to ensure that, come 1 April, they will be in a position to do the job and do it correctly?

Mr McCausland: The Member should have a conversation with his own Minister. There is a role for the Department of the Environment as the lead Department in the reform of local government, so I suggest that, if he has concerns — he obviously has — he take them up with the member of his party. It is not a thing for me to deal with. If the Member does not even understand that, we are in a bad and sorry state. Clearly, it is something that his own Minister should be dealing with. He should talk to him. If they do not talk to each other, I cannot help that.

Fuel Poverty

6. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of his Department's effectiveness at reducing the proportion of households in fuel poverty. (AQO 6510/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for the question and for raising what is an important issue in regard to fuel poverty. Fuel poverty in Northern Ireland has three core contributors: income, energy prices and the energy efficiency of homes. Unlike other regions of the UK, a primary reason for high levels of expenditure in Northern Ireland is the prominence of oil as a source of domestic heating fuel.

In 2009, it was estimated that 44% of households were experiencing fuel poverty. According to the 2011 house condition survey, that figure is currently 42%. That is based on households needing to spend 10% or more of

their income on household fuel costs. Research has also highlighted 33,000 households across Northern Ireland that need to spend 25% or more of their income to adequately heat their home.

Whilst the proportion of households in fuel poverty has reduced slightly, without the measures delivered by my Department the rates of fuel poverty would be significantly higher. That underlines my commitment to assisting the most vulnerable households in Northern Ireland by providing measures to reduce their energy costs and maximise the energy efficiency of their homes.

There are 120,000 homes that have had energy efficiency measures installed under the current warm homes scheme, investing over £150 million. Over 14,500 old, inefficient boilers have been replaced in the boiler replacement scheme. I will shortly launch a new energy efficiency scheme that will be a targeted, area-based approach. It will find and target the most vulnerable homes — those where people live in severe fuel poverty — and offer energy efficiency assistance to them.

There is no doubt that more work could be done in tackling fuel poverty. However, I am restricted to the work that can be done within allocated budgets. I can assure the Member that I am committed to working in a collaborative and inclusive way, and I am always keen to explore all options and new initiatives to provide assistance to the most vulnerable households.

I chair the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership and work closely with my colleague in DETI, Arlene Foster. The partnership includes not simply the Departments that are relevant to this but a range of stakeholders who work in the area of fuel poverty.

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

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his detailed and lengthy answer. Does he accept that, despite all the policies and the wholehearted words of support from his Department, the impact on families in fuel poverty has been negligible? Does he really think that a 2% drop over recent years is good enough? What more could he have done to meet key departmental targets?

Mr McCausland: I made the point at the start that there were three main contributors to fuel poverty. The first is a really big issue in

Northern Ireland: our heavy dependence on domestic heating oil. That is so different from the situation in GB, which is why the work being taken forward by my DETI colleague, Arlene Foster, to expand the gas network to the west is so important. The more people who can access gas, the better, because it is a cheaper fuel. That sort of thing will have the biggest impact. The other thing we do, which I did not really mention, concerns income. Our benefit uptake campaigns have a significant impact on people's ability to pay for fuel. Income level is the third factor in fuel poverty. The work that we are doing at the moment — the targeted approach — is particularly innovative. The academic whom we are working with, Professor Christine Liddell, is at the forefront on that and is leading the way in the British Isles in that regard.

Mr G Robinson: Why has the decrease in the levels of fuel poverty not been more significant?

Mr McCausland: Fuel poverty has those three factors: income, fuel cost and energy efficiency. The major focus of my Department's fuel poverty strategy is to remove energy inefficiency as a cause of fuel poverty, because that is the one contributor to fuel poverty that we can do something about.

We can talk about tackling the price of fuel, which is important, as is the introduction of gas to a wider area, and we can talk about improving household incomes, but we really can do something about improving energy efficiency. In the social housing stock, we have done a tremendous amount of work on that, and by the end of this financial year all Housing Executive properties will be double-glazed.

By the end of this year, we will also be in a much better position regarding the energy efficiency of the thousands of Housing Executive no-fines homes: that is, stock that has no cavity wall and no cavity wall insulation. That issue has been around for several decades. Over the past decade, there has been a lot of denial, but we are actually dealing with the issue now, which will make a difference.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. It is pretty shocking that one third of people are expected to pay more than one quarter of their income to heat their home adequately. We deserve better from the Minister than listing the three causes of fuel poverty.

The Minister says that we can talk about increasing household income, but really he is talking about cutting household income. He wants to cut the basic rate of welfare for people and to impose heinous sanctions. How does he tie the two together? You are talking about increasing household income to tackle fuel poverty, but at the same time you want to take hundreds of millions of pounds out of the most vulnerable households in our society.

Mr McCausland: I encourage the Member to ensure that in future, when those issues are being debated at Westminster, the Members from his party, instead of running away from the issue, are in their seats in Westminster, doing their job and representing the people of Northern Ireland. Then he might have something to talk about and be in a position to comment on others. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, order. I call Mr Fearghal McKinney. I have time to take only the question. The Minister may respond to you in writing.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

My question is on a side issue that has been drawn to my attention. Is the Minister aware of what may amount to a warm homes scheme scam, whereby individuals purporting to represent the scheme present themselves at households, do undefined works and demand money? If he is aware, what advice would he give to householders who find themselves confronted in such a way?

2.30 pm

Mr McCausland: If the Member has information, I encourage him to bring it to my attention, and I am sure that he will also want to bring it to the attention of the police to have the matter properly investigated. Whatever information he has, I will certainly be interested to hear about it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister and Members. That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

Councillor Jenny Palmer: Intimidation

1. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Social Development, given that, a year ago, it was announced that a fact-finding investigation was

being conducted into the alleged attempted intimidation by the Minister's special adviser of Councillor Jenny Palmer, why that report is buried in the Department, where it is buried and whether it has resulted, or will result, in the implementation of any disciplinary proceedings. (AQT 1401/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question. I assume that he is, as a member of the Social Development Committee, aware that just the other day, on 8 September, the Chair of the Committee wrote to me about that very issue and asked for a reply within 10 days. Within the next 10 days, the Member and other members of the Committee will receive a fulsome answer.

Mr Allister: Is the Minister not being disrespectful to the House by refusing to provide information that he clearly holds? Should he not reflect upon that, or is he trying to conceal it from the House? Will he tell us whether the promised apology to Councillor Palmer has been issued and, if not, why not?

Mr McCausland: It would be disrespectful to the Committee, in so far as I have received a letter from the Chair of the Committee and I will give that information to the Committee within the 10 days. The response is being prepared and drafted. I think it important that I, having received the letter from the Chair, respect the Committee.

The other matter is outside the remit of the question that the Member originally raised. He moved on to something else, but I will say this about it: it is a personnel issue, which will have to influence our dealings with it and the way in which it is handled. I am sure that the Member is aware that there are rules, regulations and procedures that have to be in place when dealing with personnel issues. As I said, the matter will be with the Committee within the next number of days.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next topical question, I remind Members that they should ask a single question. Will they clearly focus on that? The same goes for a supplementary. Members should remember that Ministers can choose which element of a line of questioning to respond to. They have that discretion. So you should ask one question, and it should be focused on clearly in the discourse.

Councillor Jenny Palmer: Ministerial Contact

2. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister for Social Development, on a similar vein to Mr Allister's question, albeit in a slightly more personal context because of curiosity over whether approaches, as happened previously, have been made, whether he has spoken to Councillor Jenny Palmer since this morning's media reports, given that she obviously feels cheated and let down by his Department. (AQT 1402/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I did not hear the news item this morning. I was preparing for this morning's Executive Committee meeting and today's questions for oral answer. That and other matters took my attention, so I cannot comment.

Mr Copeland: I will follow on from Mr Allister's question: can you confirm whether, at any stage, the findings of your Department, and particularly the DFP internal inquiry, will be made public?

Mr McCausland: I think that the Member is aware of the rules for dealing with personnel matters. Personnel issues are not handled in the same way as certain other things. I am sure that the Member will bear that in mind when asking such questions.

Social Development Committee: Ministerial Relationship

3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Social Development how he would characterise his relationship with the scrutiny Committee after his attack on its integrity yesterday. (AQT 1403/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I want to ensure that the Committee does its job properly. Primarily, that is, of course, the role of the Chair of the Committee. I think that it was perfectly right and proper to say that a flawed process produced a flawed product. I also encourage the Committee, as I did yesterday, to address the big issues that face us at present. I listed a number of those yesterday, and they include fuel poverty, the standard of maintenance in social housing properties owned by the House Executive, and all the other areas that we are working in, such as energy efficiency, the boiler replacement scheme and antisocial behaviour. I would like to see more product from the Committee in that regard, but, sadly, so much of its time is being taken up on what is, I think, a pointless diversion.

Mr F McCann: Thank you very much, a Phríomh-Leas Cheann Comhairle. I noticed that the Minister completely dodged the question that I asked. Does he not accept that the Committee is essential for its role in holding Ministers and officials to account?

Mr McCausland: I certainly would not want to dodge Mr McCann. The fact is that this Assembly, as does any legislature anywhere in the British Isles, functions best when you have all the different elements working together. That is why I emphasised yesterday, and again this afternoon, the important role that the Committee has in addressing, considering and bringing forward ideas and recommendations on the sort of issues that really matter to the people of Northern Ireland. Those are the things that I already listed. So, I encourage the Committee to consider those and to reflect on them. They are key areas of work. I will take a simple example. We had some proposals on antisocial behaviour. The Committee had contrary views on them, but when I actually asked, "What do you think would be the best way to tackle it?", there was nothing forthcoming.

Building Successful Communities

4. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Building Successful Communities programme launched by his Department. (AQT 1404/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am glad to say that all the Building Successful Communities regeneration forums have now been established in the six pilot areas across Northern Ireland. Those are Doury Road in Ballymena; and, in Belfast, lower Falls; Lenadoon and Glencolin; Tigers Bay and Mountcollyer; lower Shankill and Brown Square; and lower Oldpark and Hillview. Doury Road, Lenadoon and Glencolin, and lower Falls were established in April and May. Tigers Bay and Mountcollyer, lower Shankill and Brown Square, and lower Oldpark and Hillview have all had their first meetings within the past four weeks. All the meetings to date have been positive and constructive, and that is an encouraging start. Each forum's membership has embraced the challenges ahead in attempting to use housing as a spearhead for physical, social and economic regeneration.

Each forum includes representatives from the local community who will consider the redevelopment plans for the area, as well as representatives from statutory bodies and elected representatives. Work is ongoing to appoint the consultants who will work with the

forums, and I hope that the individual action plans will be in place in the new year, with action plans to follow during 2015.

We are having a seminar on 17 September, which I will open. It will feature keynote addresses from people who have experiences in the field, including those from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, urban regeneration and the Wheatley Group in Glasgow, and it will be attended by forum members from all six areas.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am glad that he made mention of the Doury Road scheme in my constituency. I have had the privilege of attending a number of the meetings so far, and I can say with certainty that the buy-in from statutory bodies and the community has been excellent and certainly very encouraging. What is the benchmark of success for those programmes? What is the endgame, and what is it hoped will be achieved for disadvantaged areas such as the Doury Road in Ballymena?

Mr McCausland: Building Successful Communities is an attempt to address the difficulties and needs in areas where the regeneration programmes that have been in place for a number of years — in fact, for the past decade — have not really made the impact that is required. In the pilot areas, a range of initiatives will be brought forward, but, at the end of the day, what will be the evidence of success? A regenerated community. That is what the people in those areas want to see. They do not want to see dereliction, they do not want to see derelict properties, and they do not want to see blight. They feel a sense of despair. Therefore, this is something that gives them an opportunity for hope and progress.

The key thing with this is that we have around the table all the relevant players — the relevant Departments, agencies, local people and local elected representatives. Everybody there is saying, "We know this area. We either live or work in it. These are the things that will make a difference." What the outcome will be in terms of a programme in each area will be different, but the end result has to be vibrant communities and places where people want to live, work and socialise.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Sammy Wilson is not in his place. I call Mr Patsy McGlone.

Racial Equality Strategy

6. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Social Development, given this morning's newspaper articles that show that 20 organisations have come together to highlight the shortcomings of the racial equality strategy, particularly saying that it needs to be much more ambitious, far-reaching and robust, what his Department is doing — and what more it could be doing — with the likes of the housing association movement and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to address issues such as the intimidation of the minority and ethnic communities in our midst and the need that there is among many sections of the community, particularly those such as the Lech family in Moneymore, a family that I have got to know very well in the last two to three years, good decent people who were intimidated out of their home. (AQT 1406/11-15)

Mr McCausland: First, I personally do not know the details of that particular family in Moneymore. Of course, what I would say is that in this or in any other situation where people are being intimidated because of their religion, race or whatever, that should not happen. It is wrong. It hardly needs to be said, but it is right to say it. It is something that everybody should sign up to — that it is wrong — even without saying it. I am putting on record today that it is wrong. It should not happen. It is something that happens in a number of areas. The reasons are different in different cases. In some cases, they are communal; in others, they are individual. There is a whole range of circumstances.

The Housing Executive has a good record in trying to help people in those circumstances. However, there is a limit to what the Housing Executive can do; it is simply one player in this. The fact is, of course, that others are involved. If there are issues of intimidation, the police have a role to play to ensure that the perpetrators are brought before the courts and dealt with appropriately. The community will very often give their support to those who are the targets of intimidation. It is very difficult to come up with a single answer and say that A, B, C, D or E are the five things that need to happen. It will depend on the circumstances. However, I assure the Member that the Housing Executive keeps this very much in mind, as I am sure he would expect. I think that its community-cohesion unit also does good work in trying to create more cohesive communities where that sort of thing does not happen.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. I thank the Minister very much. However, he highlighted the question

that I asked but did not respond to it. Essentially, what I wanted to know is what his Department is doing — his Department's As, Bs, Cs and Ds — at progressive level to work with those agencies and bodies to ensure that a strategy is developed to ensure that people are made to feel at home and are accommodated in this part of the world.

Mr McCausland: If the issue is, for example, one of racial tension between groups or individuals and people are being targeted because of their ethnic background, that is not an issue that can be solely my responsibility. In fact, OFMDFM has responsibility for racial equality, so there are a number of different Departments. It is not just a matter of simply asking what DSD is doing. We work through the Housing Executive on the housing aspect of the issue, but there are wider issues there. Maybe that matter needs to be looked at. It is a bit like the question from another member of the SDLP. It is important that the question be directed to the appropriate person, Minister and Department.

Mr McGlone: So you have nothing to do then?

Mr McCausland: Well, I did say that the Housing Executive, which is one of my Department's bodies, does have a role. I did say that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

2.45 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We move on to questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Ms Lo: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will take no points of order during Question Time. I will take them immediately afterwards.

I inform Members that questions 2 and 12 have been withdrawn.

Bovine Residencies

1. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if there is any resolution to the problems faced by farmers and

marts in relation to the limit on the number of bovine residencies required by some retailers. (AQO 6520/11-15)

11. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on any formal discussions she has had with the Livestock and Meat Commission and the mart owners to deal with beef penalties being administered by the meat plants regarding farm residencies. (AQO 6530/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 11 together.

Over the last few months, I have met and listened to farmers, processors, mart operators and the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC). I have also asked the meat plants to reconsider their position on penalties. I am very encouraged that all elements of the beef supply chain are committed to working together to address the current difficulties for the benefit of the industry as a whole. I am hopeful that we are now close to a resolution on those issues, which have been causing such concern to the industry.

I welcome the work that the LMC has done in conjunction with the key elements in the beef supply chain to develop a protocol for agreement among the parties. It is a positive step that the Livestock Auctioneers' Association has agreed that marts will have the discretion to display information on farm residencies. I hope to see processors significantly reduce their penalties on cattle with over four farm residencies until the end of the year, as has been proposed. My Department is willing to work with herdkeepers and marts to explore how information about cattle residencies can be accessed as simply as possible, and it has already committed to commencing work to bring about the changes to the animal and public health information system (APHIS). To assist herdkeepers immediately, and until residencies can be displayed electronically in markets, my Department will provide a report to the keeper on request, listing all animals in the keeper's herd. The report provides keepers with full movement history for their herd and can be obtained from local DARD Direct.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. I am not sure that all farmers and market owners would agree that this seems to be moving proactively. However, the Minister did say that she is hoping for an outcome in the near future.

Will that outcome result in either the number of residencies allowed being increased for those retailers or, indeed, being removed altogether?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that there is any hope of it being removed, but certainly things are moving in the right direction. What we are seeking is confirmation from those people that they will not introduce further changes.

You will be aware of the LMC protocol, which it published last month. It clearly sets out that there needs to be communication across the supply chain. The reason that farmers ended up in such difficulty this time is because changes to residencies were brought in without any warning.

There have been positive contributions in response to the LMC protocol. One thing clearly set out in the protocol is that, if there are to be changes to the specifications, those need to be communicated well in advance so that farmers can make decisions based on knowledge of the specifications into the foreseeable future. I am pleased with that piece of work. As I said, the mood music is good. There has been no formal sign-off on the protocol, but I am hopeful that that will happen in the time ahead. We are seeking assurances that there will be no further calls from the major retailers to reduce the residencies any further. I think that four is reasonable, and I know that, particularly given the type of farming that we have, it would be very difficult for our farmers to be able to put up with any more than that.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that DARD needs to drive this centrally on behalf of the farming community? Does she also agree that, in the current situation, many beef farmers are caught in limbo and need relief now to address the issue?

Mrs O'Neill: I do agree. As I said, the way in which this was brought in was unfortunate, to say the least, and left some farmers who had bought cattle for finishing at high prices last year in a situation in which they had nowhere to go with them. I am pleased to see that all the main processors appear to be joining up to a protocol that would allow farmers until the start of January to be able to adapt. We will then have a new system. The penalties need to be reduced. Farmers cannot be caught out because of a change that these people brought in without forewarning.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. How long will it take to make changes to APHIS?

Mrs O'Neill: We want to be able to get things moving. Part of the agreement that has been established, with LMC taking the lead, is that the Livestock Auctioneers' Association will allow marts to display the information.

We will work our way through that, but we need to make the changes to the computer system. We will do that, but, in the meantime, we will work with the marts to give them a physical copy of the information that they need until such times as we have the changes secured. We are talking about six months for the APHIS system to be formulated in the specifications required. I have prioritised that work with my Department and asked it to make sure that we deliver our end in making sure that we can resolve the situation. That is why we have taken a two-pronged approach. That will physically help them until we can get the information on the APHIS.

Mr Allister: Has the Department considered or taken any advice on whether this price-cutting ploy is anti-competitive under EU law?

Mrs O'Neill: It is not something that has been brought to my attention. The way in which the processors have gone about bringing in these changes has been unfortunate, to say the least. I think it is has been very clear. One positive thing that has come out of this recent conversation is the fact that, unless there is fairness and communication across the supply chain, we will not have a sustainable farming system into the future and be able to target all the markets that we are going after. As to whether it is anti-competitive under EU law, no, that is not an issue that has been raised.

Rural Development Programme

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the funding for the 2014-2020 rural development programme. (AQO 6522/11-15)

5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the new rural development programme. (AQO 6524/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Again, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will answer questions 3 and 5 together.

As part of the decisions on CAP reform, I received Executive agreement to a budget of up to £623 million for the next RDP. That is an increase in funding of almost 16% compared

with the current programme and gives us the largest RDP we have ever had. It will allow us to deliver a broad range of measures to improve the competitiveness of our farm and agrifood businesses, protect and enhance our environment and improve the quality of life in rural communities.

I intend to match the EU funds, pound for pound, with £186.5 million of my Department's own resource. The provision of that match funding will be a high priority to ensure that we maximise the EU funds available. The agreement secured with the Executive will provide additional funding of up to £250 million to fund the proposed farm business improvement scheme as requested by the Agri-Food Strategy Board. That additional funding will help me to deliver on the aims and objectives of the 'Going for Growth' report.

In July, I announced further detail of the proposed allocations for schemes in the programme. My officials are working to finalise the draft programme in conjunction with the RDP stakeholder consultation group. Formal submission to the European Commission is expected in October.

Mr Beggs: Much of the rural development programme 2014-2020 is aspirational, with money still to be committed to in any budget. With considerable and intolerable health pressures and cutbacks being implemented by every Department, including the Minister's, my question is this: can she advise how the current cuts in her Department — a result of the failure to maintain welfare parity — will affect the rural development programme during this year? What effect does she foresee it having in the future when she will have to implement much larger cutbacks in her Department?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my original answer, I intend to prioritise this work, and it is vital that we do that. The Executive would be cutting off their nose to spite their face if they were not to look at this work, because this is us enhancing European money. It doubles our money, so it is a priority for me. This is about the Executive clearly saying that they have a commitment and want to invest in rural communities. I am delighted that, back in June, we got the commitment to secure up to £623 million for a new rural development programme, which will be vital. As I said, I will prioritise that. There is no impact whatsoever on this year's funding. All funding has been allocated. The current programme is about to come to the end of its life, and we will be looking towards our new programme for next year. As I said, we are

already budgeting for the money that I have set out.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. When does the Minister expect the new programme to get off the ground for delivery?

Mrs O'Neill: It is vital that we learn lessons from the previous programme, which we inherited and where, I suppose, everyone can agree that there was very much a slow start. I want to be able to get things off the ground as soon as possible. In order for us to do that, the first stage is to achieve EU approval for the programme. We intend to go to Europe in October. We have been working with EU officials as we have been developing our programme, and we are hopeful that we will get that turned around pretty quickly — certainly, at the start of next year. I have impressed on Dacian Cioloş, the EU Commissioner, the need for us to have our programme cleared and turned around as quickly as possible so that we can have clarity on the EU rules and on our programme and so that we get things up and running as soon as possible.

My aim is to recruit for the new LAGs towards the end of year and have them in place by the end of the year, and then all the work around animation can start. It is particularly good timing in that the new council structures will be consulting on community plans over that time. Those two programmes can very much dovetail and assist each other.

Going for Growth

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress made in implementing Going for Growth. (AQO 6523/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am delighted that the Executive have endorsed the growth aspirations of the industry, as set out in 'Going for Growth' and agreed a proposed response as part of the package of significant support on CAP and the rural development programme announced at the end of June 2014. Since then, my officials have been working with colleagues across Departments to refresh and update the response prior to publication to take account of the various actions that have already taken place.

Progress has been made on a number of fronts. For example, we have developed our new rural development programme, which contains a range of new support schemes to address the aims and objectives of Going for Growth,

including a farm business improvement scheme and an agrifood processing investment scheme. We have deferred the introduction of charges for export health certificates for meat and dairy products. An appointments process for the TB strategic partnership is under way. We have launched the all-island Chalara control strategy, increased the number of DARD-funded postgraduate places, launched a further tranche of the research challenge fund and appointed a contact point at AFBI to assist researchers and businesses in making applications to EU research funding programmes. We have also opened a third tranche of the manure efficiency technology (MET) scheme. With DETI and Invest NI, we have jointly launched a loan scheme to support the sustainable use of poultry litter.

My Department will continue to work with other Departments and industry representatives to drive forward implementation. I am sure that the Member will agree that there has been good progress to date.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's report to the Executive. In her statement just now, she did not mention fisheries, which are a vital part of our rural economy, as she will be aware. Can she outline the progress made on the commitment to grow fisheries? Is the £90 million that was promised for the industry on target?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that I am committed to ensuring that we have a sustainable, thriving fishing industry into the future. Work is going on in quite a number of areas at this moment in time, particularly around European funding and making sure that we have more interaction. You will be aware that I established a task force to work more with the fishing community on the ground around how it can access European funding in this new round of funding. That work is under way.

A number of key actions in the 'Going for Growth' document are directed at fisheries. I can assure you that they are receiving as much attention as any of the other areas that I mentioned here today. That is vital, given the recent Russian ban on food imports, which will impact slightly on some of the fishing community here. So, we are making sure that we are to the fore of championing the needs of our local industry.

Mr McMullan: Can the Minister provide more detail on the proposed farm business investment scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: The farm business improvement scheme is a key recommendation under the Going for Growth strategy and reflects a clear need for farmers to be provided with capital and advisory and training support to invest in their farm businesses and to improve their efficiency and competitiveness. The Executive have agreed a proposed budget for the scheme of £250 million that will be delivered via the rural development programme. My officials continue to develop the details of the scheme and the necessary business cases, building on the Agri-Food Strategy Board's views and the responses that we received during the consultation on the RDP and from the stakeholder consultation group.

The scheme is intended to provide support for increasing farm production sustainably by improving competitiveness through efficiency, integrating the supply chain and adapting to market requirements. An important element will be support for training and learning new skills to ensure that the industry can benefit from the transfer of new innovative technologies and adapt to the changing needs of the industry.

Mrs Dobson: Does the Minister share my and the industry's concern about the much-delayed funding agreement for Going for Growth? Will she inform the House how she feels that has impacted on targets that the Agri-Food Strategy Board anticipated would be met in 2014-15?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member might want to catch up: the Executive agreed the position and the funding package for the 'Going for Growth' document back in June; I think it was 26 June. As I have just outlined, a range of things has happened in the absence of all that. We were not sitting back waiting for the package. The package and the financial support was, obviously, key in being able to devise and develop a programme, and it greatly enhanced the rural development programme.

We now have a greater rural development programme than we have ever had, but, as I said, we have moved on with quite a number of issues, which I have already outlined in my initial answer to Mr McCarthy. A lot of progress has been made, and it is important that we build on that and use what is there. This is a thriving industry that, with the right support, can continue to grow. The Executive have very clearly put that on record and have sent a strong message to the industry that they are interested in supporting it through the Executive agreement that we achieved back in June.

3.00 pm

Mr B McCrea: What is the Minister's assessment of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's (AFBI) role in Going for Growth? What steps has she taken to address the projected 25% reduction in budget in the next three or four years?

Mrs O'Neill: AFBI is obviously a key player as we move forward. There is no doubt that AFBI's work is central to Going for Growth. AFBI takes about 18% of my resource budget every year, so we have a strong ethos of building on research, and we need to continue to do that in the time ahead. I am sure that the Member is referring to a recent media article in which there was talk about AFBI's budget, but I can assure him that I am committed to investing in research, and the Executive have a commitment to increase our drawdown of European funding. AFBI is a fantastic vehicle for doing that and has been out in Europe making sure that it is in touch with funding partners and people it can work with.

Given the financial challenges that have been imposed on all of us, AFBI, like other elements of my Department, is looking at its budget and where it needs to prioritise its work. Work will be ongoing between AFBI and me on how we prioritise the areas of work on which it will focus. The Member will be aware that AFBI's work is quite wide-ranging and includes plant health and animal health. In moving forward, it is important that AFBI's work aligns with the work that the industry requires. That is an ongoing conversation.

Countryside Management Scheme

6. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the implementation of a new countryside management scheme. (AQO 6525/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: A new agrienvironment scheme — the environmental farming scheme (EFS) — is being developed. The scheme will provide support to farmers and land managers to carry out environmentally beneficial farming practices. These practices will aim to preserve and enhance biodiversity; improve the quality of our water, air and soil; create small woodlands; and help to mitigate climate change. The proposed scheme will have three levels: a targeted level, primarily for environmentally designated sites; a wider level to deliver benefits across the countryside, outside of environmentally designated areas; and a group level to support cooperative action by farmers in

specific areas, such as a river catchment or commonage.

It is planned that rural development programme proposals will be submitted to the European Commission in October 2014. Commission approval can normally be expected around six months following submission, although we have had indications that that will be sooner. Subject to Commission clearance and the necessary IT and control systems being in place, it is planned to launch the scheme in the second half of 2015, with the first environmental farming scheme agreements commencing in January 2016. Following the initial launch, the scheme will open in further tranches.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. Can she assure the House that the scheme will have the most effective and practical control measures but will not be overburdened by bureaucratic systems?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. In the past, the Department has been accused of being overbureaucratic. Obviously, we have to meet the European Commission's needs because it is giving us such a large pot of money, but I can assure the Member that there is no intention or will on the part of the Department to make it overcumbersome for people. We want to have great uptake of the schemes. Farmers are fantastic custodians of the countryside, so it is right that they should be rewarded for that. As I said, however, we will work within the rules set down by Europe, and we will always try not to be overbureaucratic.

Mr Cree: What is the Minister's assessment of the organic management scheme in the previous countryside management scheme? Why was that uptake so poor?

Mrs O'Neill: It is hard to know. It is a farmer's individual decision whether they want to participate in the scheme. That scheme ran out quite some time ago. I do not have the details with me, but I am happy to provide them to the Member. There is a combination of reasons why we did not have uptake. Maybe farmers did not feel that there was a market for their produce or that they would get value for it. I have visited some organic farms, and I have seen some fantastic practices. However, it is, I suppose, a consumer choice whether they want to pay more, so there is a combination of reasons.

One of things we looked at in shaping the new programme was whether there would be a need to develop another programme. Unfortunately,

there was no demand for it at this moment in time, but I am sure that, if there was a change in consumer practice, needs or wants, we could certainly look at it again.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the scheme contain support for traditional breeds of cattle?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. It is intended that the environmental farming scheme will contain support for the Irish Moiled cattle. That is the only breed native to the North of Ireland. It is on the Rare Breeds Survival Trust's watch list, so we thought it would be important in moving forward that we had something specific for those cattle.

Beef Cattle: Nomadic

7. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any proposals she has to deal with beef cattle imported from the Republic of Ireland referred to as "nomadic". (AQO 6526/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have been acutely aware that the beef from cattle born in the South and slaughtered in the North cannot be labelled with a single country of origin and that beef from these so-called nomads has a lower market value than British- or Irish-origin beef. I have been very concerned about the impact of the price penalties applied to these animals on individual farmers and the wider beef industry. I am of the strong view that the term "nomad cattle" has no place on this island.

Following discussions with industry stakeholders and Minister Coveney in the South, I have approved an application made to DARD under the voluntary beef labelling scheme to allow a local processor to use the term "Irish" to label beef from such cattle. I am hopeful that this will open up new markets for local processors with British retailers. It should also assist the long-standing tradition of trading cattle across the island of Ireland, particularly store cattle coming from the west of Ireland for finishing and slaughter in the North.

Minister Coveney and I wrote jointly to the major retailers on the issue. We asked them to consider how beef from cattle born in the South and slaughtered in the North could be marketed so that it was not at a disadvantage in terms of the UK retail market for beef originating on the island of Ireland. I intend to follow this up in the coming weeks. We all want to see a sustainable and profitable beef sector, and I will continue to work closely with industry

stakeholders and Minister Coveney in support of that.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thanks very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra chuimsitheach sin. I thank the Minister as well for her comprehensive reply. Could the Minister tell me, please, if there is any indication of the time frame she will be working in with Minister Coveney? Thankfully, I take it from your response that he, too, is positive in his approach to the issue, which is in all our interests.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. We have had quite a number of conversations in relation to the issue and have met in person. We have jointly written to all the major retailers. We think that together we will be a stronger political voice in raising the issue with them.

In terms of a resolution, I am led to believe it should be over the next number of weeks if there is a market to be found. That would be positive news for the industry. This is a long-established trade that needs to continue. It has happened for many years, particularly west of Ireland cattle coming up for finishing, so we do not want to see that interrupted. This was another major issue for the beef industry this year, given that people were caught out again and could not dispose of their cattle. I am confident that with Minister Coveney we can bring strong political influence to the issue and deal with the retailers.

Mr Swann: Minister, can you give the House some reassurance that any cattle entering the Northern Ireland meat chain through the scheme retain their traceability and that there will be steps taken to strengthen that and make sure that the meat can in no way enhance or encourage the smuggling operation that is taking place at this minute in time and make it easier, so that we can reassure processors and, indeed, the general market that Northern Ireland beef is safe to eat?

Mrs O'Neill: I hope that the Member is not scaremongering. I give a 100% guarantee that there is full traceability in all the beef. The only addition will be that the beef will have a label that says "Irish". The EU regulations suggest that you have to include where it was born, reared and slaughtered, but the beef can also now say "Irish". Full traceability is absolutely there. That was our strength during the horsemeat crisis. Minister Coveney and I are keen to make sure that there will be no

interruption of that in securing an additional label. It is merely to accommodate the trade that happens on the island.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. How does the Minister propose to encourage retailers to begin to accept the new labels?

Mrs O'Neill: Along with Minister Coveney, I have written to all the major retailers. I have met a number of them, and he and I intend to meet them together to impress on them the fact that this is a traditional trade that happens and that there is full traceability in the meat. I am hopeful that we will secure a meeting with all the major retailers over the next month, because it is important that we impress it on them that this is traditional trade, it is our aspiration and we are working actively towards the free movement of cattle right across this island. I do not think that any consumer would have a problem with beef that is born in Cork and slaughtered in Newry, so we want to impress that on the retailers over the next number of weeks.

Rivers Agency

8. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the role of the Rivers Agency in cleaning out designated water courses. (AQO 6527/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency has permissive powers under the terms of the Drainage Order 1973 to carry out maintenance to designated watercourses to ensure that they are free-flowing and performing their drainage function. Designated open watercourses are routinely inspected, with those benefiting rural areas typically on a six-year rolling inspection programme, and urban watercourses are inspected and maintained annually. Watercourses that are prone to siltation or dumping are inspected and maintained more frequently. Where a designated watercourse is culverted, it is inspected on a three-year cycle. In addition, culvert inlet grilles are inspected and maintained on a frequent basis, many of them weekly. Additional grille inspections are also undertaken when heavy rainfall is forecast and after flood events, as debris can often be carried downstream by high river flows causing obstructions. In assessing maintenance needs, consideration is given to whether any obstruction to flow or reduction in channel dimensions will have a significant impact on the drainage function of the watercourse or increase flood risk. The Drainage Order 1973 does not empower Rivers Agency to carry out

maintenance for any other purpose, such as the removal of litter or the improvement of water quality.

Mr Hussey: Does the Minister agree that the totally disjointed cross-departmental responsibility for our waterways is impeding their protection and operation? Will she now at last agree with the merit in the proposal to transfer Rivers Agency to the Department for Regional Development?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that it is totally disjointed. Past events have shown how the Departments work closely together. If the flooding is from rivers, my Department will be in the lead; if it is from surface flooding, Roads Service will be in the lead. There are clear practical examples of how Departments have worked together. I have always said that I am open to the PEDU report, which looked at one body taking the lead. I have always said that I am very open to that in the context of a wider review of Executive Departments. I do not have a closed mind to it, but I do not think that it is fair to say that there is not good cross-departmental working on flooding. Past practice has shown that that is the case.

Mr Dunne: Can the Minister advise us if Rivers Agency has increased its staff and the resources that are available to deal with especially the flash flooding that we have experienced in recent years?

Mrs O'Neill: We do not have an issue with staff. We have recruited staff — I do not have the numbers to hand, but I can certainly provide them — over the last number of years. Our priority is that, as is set out under the Drainage Order, we make sure that rivers are clean, that we inspect them annually and that there is no flooding unnecessarily because of work that has not been done. In areas where there was a need to maybe enhance inspections, we have been able to deploy the staff we have on the ground. I can write to the Member with the number of staff that we have employed over the last couple of years.

Mr Dallat: The Minister may well be aware that, at the height of the building boom, many rivers were piped and culverts then created, but those culverts are not being checked on a regular basis and there is a question mark over whose responsibility it is. Will the Minister investigate that and ensure that, where those culverts exist, whole neighbourhoods are not threatened with flooding? One Department does not accept, another does not accept, the things are not adopted and neighbourhoods are living in fear.

Mrs O'Neill: I can make sure that we investigate that. I am aware, even on a constituency level, of cases where developers have gone bust and people have been left in a particularly difficult situation. I know how difficult it is to get someone to take ownership. I will certainly take a look at my Department's role and what we do.

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

Farming: Russian Import Ban

1. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she intends to take to support the agriculture industry in light of the impact that the Russian import ban is having on farmers and processors in Northern Ireland. (AQT 1411/11-15)

3.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: The ban is particularly affecting our dairy industry, and we are quite concerned about how it will impact on other sectors further down the line. The ban has mainly affected cheese.

Last week, I went to Brussels and took part in a special meeting the EU had convened to get all the member states together to talk about the issue. I made sure that I impressed on the DEFRA Secretary of State, whom I also attended meetings with, the need for our industry to be protected, to be given immediate and timely supports where appropriate and to find new markets for products that would traditionally have gone to Russia.

So whilst there may be a smaller impact on the number of businesses that are immediately affected, I think that there will be reverberations further down the line that may cause problems for us. I also think that finding new markets needs to be a key priority.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, Minister, for that response. You mentioned that you met the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Elizabeth Truss, last week. I take it that you were lobbying for support on that occasion, and I hope that you were. Do you intend to meet her again to try to get support, in particular for the introduction of export refunds for the dairy industry?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Member will be very aware that my political position and

ideology regarding the EU and how to support the industry is very different to Elizabeth Truss's. However, I made it very clear that I think that any supports that can be provided by the EU need to be timely and appropriate. I welcome the fact that the EU has already taken steps in terms of storage, but I think that it is important that we do not have similar situations as we have seen in the past when the EU sat back, and the industry was detrimentally affected. I made that case very strongly to Elizabeth. I also made that case to Commissioner Ciolos, whom I was also in a meeting with. I made the case for our local industry.

I suppose what we have to do now is to watch the market very closely and to see how this is going to impact on other sectors. It is also disappointing for a number of industries, particularly the pork, beef and pet food sectors, which had been targeting Russia as a market. That will obviously cause setbacks for those people, in the immediate future anyway.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Badgers: TVR Project

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) project is progressing. (AQT 1413/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that the project commenced in May in the 100 square kilometre area around Banbridge and that it will run for five years and end in late 2018. TVR is a research project that will provide much-needed information on badgers and the TVR approach. It is not a pilot and is not being attempted anywhere else. No badgers will be removed this year, and all badgers that are captured will be sampled, microchipped, vaccinated and released.

I went to the site to see the ongoing work for myself. The project is certainly going very well. I know that the vets are very enthusiastic about the work they are doing and are absolutely passionate about it. So, good progress is being made, but it is too early to give statistical information about the project. We are only a number of months into it.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. What has been the uptake in the area where the project is being implemented?

Mrs O'Neill: The uptake has been very good. The Department has written to all the landowners, and we have had a very positive response. At present, our departmental researchers are calling with farmers and landowners in the Banbridge TVR area to obtain the permissions to access the land and to conduct TVR activities over the next five years. I think that some 93% of farmers in the TVR area who responded have given permission to the Department to access their land. We are very grateful for that, and I obviously encourage all the remaining farmers to get involved and to give their permission to departmental staff to access their land.

Forest Service: HQ Relocation

4. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for information on the date of the move, following her announcement that Forest Service headquarters will relocate to Fermanagh. (AQT 1414/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to say that the headquarters relocation team has prepared a project plan and has identified key stages for an expected move by June 2015. The Department has worked very closely with DFP's properties division to complete an appraisal of Inishkeen House in Enniskillen to consider the viability of placing more Forest Service staff there. The first phase of that work is complete, and it has been confirmed that Inishkeen House can potentially accommodate more staff. The indications are that, with an internal redesign, Forest Service headquarters staff could be accommodated there. I am very pleased with that, and I assure the Member that we are on target and working very hard to be able to deliver the project and for staff to be there by June next year.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. It is good to get good news here the odd time.

There is considerable interest amongst people employed in the public sector in Fermanagh. An awful lot of them have to travel to Belfast and places like it to get employment. Will the Minister outline how many jobs in total will be made available in Fermanagh?

Mrs O'Neill: There will be 65 in total going to the Forest Service in Fermanagh. The Member will be aware of all the other relocations, with fisheries going to south Down, Rivers Agency to Loughry in Cookstown and DARD headquarters to Ballykelly. These are all positive. All are on

target, and a lot of work is going on. It is about making sure that staff feel comfortable with all the moves, so we have a significant lead-in time to allow all that to happen. It is all very positive stuff.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McNarry is not in his place. In fairness to him, he contacted the Business Office but did so just outside the time allowed for the withdrawal of questions.

Rivers Agency: Planning Service Relationship

6. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the relationship and consultation between Planning Service and her Department, in particular Rivers Agency. (AQT 1416/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can provide more detail in writing on the specifics, but there is a relationship: when applications come forward, the Planning Service may, at times, consult Rivers Agency, which will assist it with mapping designs and whatever else it has been asked for at the time. There have been instances in the past of, for example, objections to planning and Rivers Agency having to get involved by providing details of what it feels are potential or problematic areas.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for her answer. From my experience in Lisburn, the reality is that we may lose a multimillion pound investment because investors cannot wait for Rivers Agency to respond to Planning Service applications that would bring much-needed investment to Lagan valley. Delays from Rivers Agency have had a detrimental effect. What can you do, Minister, to ensure that Rivers Agency will prioritise such applications?

Mrs O'Neill: I hope that the Member has spoken to and dealt with Rivers Agency directly. However, I am happy to talk to her outside the Chamber about that constituency issue.

DARD HQ: Ballykelly

7. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the relocation of her departmental headquarters to Ballykelly. (AQT 1417/11-15)

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in a previous answer, we are delighted to be moving forward with the project. We had Executive sign-off on the project back in June and are on schedule for the relocation. It is so important, and it is fantastic to see the Executive committing to the Ballykelly area, the wider rural community and to a fairer distribution of public sector jobs. I am passionate about making sure that we get the project right and that we move it forward because this will be the first Department to move lock, stock and barrel out of the greater Belfast area. It is important that we lead the way, and, hopefully, other Departments will follow.

We are on schedule for the first cohort of staff to move in 2017, and the rest will move over the next number of years after that. Work is progressing nicely, we are ensuring that we engage with staff, and we are also on target, as I said, for all the other projects — moving fisheries, Rivers Agency and Forest Service.

Ms McCorley: The Minister referred to the relationship with staff. Are staff content that they are being properly informed?

Mrs O'Neill: I am hopeful that staff are content, by and large. We made sure that we had an ad hoc committee, and we have been meeting the trade union side throughout the process, because it is so important that we get this right. DARD headquarters has been where it is now for about 50 years, so, inevitably, quite a number of staff are from the greater Belfast area. Therefore, it is understandable that those people would not want to move. I think that the fact that we are taking the project forward in the way that we are is allowing for the changes to happen and for people to move in and out of DARD. I hope that that will accommodate as many staff as possible. I have always said that we would never want to be in the position of forcing anybody to move.

As I said, I am hopeful that, with the right planning, which I think we have in place, and continued engagement with the trade union side and staff on the ground, staff will be confident that they are being kept informed of everything as it happens and that they have been given every opportunity to create a solution for themselves that, hopefully, creates a good work/life balance.

Insect Pollinators

8. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to advise the House on the action taken by her Department to address

the serious decline in insect pollinators in Northern Ireland. (AQT 1418/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any detail with me on that, but I will be happy to provide it to the Member in writing. If he wants to be more specific and to contact my private office, I would be happy to give him whatever information he needs.

Mr Cree: Thank you. That would be very welcome.

The Minister will remember that the House encouraged the development of a bee health strategy a couple of years ago. What work has her Department done on the development of that strategy? Perhaps if the Minister does not have that information to hand, she could let me know.

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware of concerns about the bee population. So yes, some work has been done on that, but, again, I will provide that information to the Member in writing.

Farm Safety: Slurry

9. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for further information on what has been done to increase farm safety, especially in relation to slurry handling, and whether any work has been done on the possibility of a warning device for farmers to alert them to toxic fumes while handling slurry. (AQT 1419/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department plays a very active role with the Health and Safety Executive, which takes the lead in farm safety. We are very keen to work with all the industry partners, particularly the farming unions. We have all come together to promote the Stop and Think SAFE message and to encourage farmers to think before handling slurry. It is a very dangerous profession, as we all know, and there is an ageing population in the farming community. All those factors need to be taken into account.

There are concerns that such a warning device could provide a false sense of safety, in that it may not be calibrated correctly but farmers might rely on it. The HSE is not keen for that to be rolled out. If that was the case, we would certainly encourage uptake of it in whatever way we could, but, at this moment, that is not a solution that either industry or the Health and Safety Executive have identified.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Pat Sheehan. Excuse me; I call Mr Gordon Dunne for a supplementary question.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for her answer. To follow that up, has the Department involved universities or anyone else in research and development to try to come up with suitable equipment? Unfortunately, deaths from slurry-related incidents are a regular occurrence in Northern Ireland and will continue to be, given our large dairy sector. Surely there is a need for someone to look at this and to come up with a proper design, such as something for that purpose that will be effective, efficient, strong and portable. Has that aspect been looked at?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that all those things are being looked at through the auspices of the Health and Safety Executive. If there was a solution that we could provide, I have no doubt that we would have it. The work has not yet been done to say that that is the definitive solution. So, I think that there are a number of things that we need to be doing along the way, particularly around grant aid for slurry, for example, to make sure that tanks are safe and all those things. We can do all that, but we await the Health and Safety Executive's approval of a device of that nature. I have no doubt that it is consulting universities and has other researchers involved in researching farm safety. It is so important that we do not just put a sticking plaster on something that could be a bigger issue; it is important that we get it right.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Pat Sheehan — again.

Ash Dieback: Impact

10. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the impact of ash dieback. (AQT 1420/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The 2014 survey of ash is complete, and 406 of the planned 1,000 inspections have been carried out. That survey was done in the recently planted sites of ash in public and private woodland; roadside plantings; established trees and hedgerows; and there is ongoing nursery surveillance. Any suspect trees that have been sampled have undergone laboratory testing for the ash dieback pathogen, and we are adopting a risk-based, intelligence-led, targeted approach.

Our 2014 survey has found only two new infections, with no evidence that the disease is

circulating in the wider environment. So, I suppose that is positive in itself. However, current scientific understanding suggests that the conditions for spread in the wider environment exist right across the island of Ireland. Two wider environment sites were identified in the South last year when action was taken to destroy the mature ash in hedgerows and associated ash debris affected by the disease. So, we continue to remain vigilant and to survey for this serious disease.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Time for questions is up.

I see that Ms Anna Lo has come into the Chamber. You wished to raise a point of order earlier.

3.30 pm

Ms Lo: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, it was to apologise to you and to the House for not being in the Chamber earlier. I was involved in a seminar to look at the draft racial equality strategy and missed the opportunity to come down. Sorry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. Thank you for coming in person to apologise to the House.

Mr Wilson: On a point of order.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Hello, Mr Wilson.

Mr Wilson: Since it appears that apologies are the order of the day, I also apologise for my absence during —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Could you speak up? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: You never usually have to ask me to do that, mind you. I also apologise for my absence during topical questions to the Social Development Minister. I apologise to the House for that. I hope that my apology is sufficiently fulsome and has sufficient volume as well.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I feel better already. The House will take its ease while we change the top Table.

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

Committee Business

Barroso Task Force

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

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

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA 179/11-15) on its Inquiry into the Barroso task force; and calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

The President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, announced a European Commission task force for Northern Ireland just over seven years ago, on 1 May 2007. It was the first time that a task force for a specific region in the EU had been created. It was done to support the peace process, with a particular emphasis on how to assist Northern Ireland in its efforts to improve its economic competitiveness and to create sustainable employment. The Northern Ireland, or Barroso, task force as it came to be known, comprises a group of representatives from the European Commission who work with officials from the Northern Ireland Executive Departments to strengthen European engagement.

On a day-to-day basis, the task force is managed in Brussels by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy at the European Commission, with representation on the task force from many other directorates-general. The Northern Ireland aspect of the task force operates through the Barroso task force working group, chaired by the junior Ministers, and its thematic working groups. These thematic groups focus on the economy, environment and social themes, with a cross-cutting focus on Horizon 2020, which is the EU's programme for research and innovation. The work of these groups and of the Executive as a whole is supported by the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels.

President Barroso's term comes to an end next month, and the Committee for the Office of the

First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed that it was timely to undertake a short inquiry to reflect on the work of the task force and what it has achieved. The Committee wished to gather evidence on the outcomes from the work of the task force and to identify and consider any lessons learned, in order to inform recommendations for the Executive's engagement in European affairs in the future.

At this point, I thank all those who submitted evidence to the Committee inquiry. That evidence was vital to its considerations. The Committee was pleased to note the positive comments from the European Commission's director-general for regional and urban policy, Walter Deffaa, on his cooperation with the authorities in Northern Ireland.

On the outcomes of the work of the task force, the Committee was grateful in particular for the detail provided by the European Commission submission. It highlighted a number of outcomes across a wide range of policy areas that could be directly or indirectly attributed to the work of the task force. The range of activity undertaken should be commended. In consideration of the evidence received, it is clear that the task force in Brussels and the task force working group in Northern Ireland have stimulated a marked increase in engagement in European affairs by Departments. The outcomes can be grouped into successes across four areas: the drawdown of competitive funds; the establishment of fora and networks; an increase in profile and focus; and the creation of appropriate structures.

Much of the evidence received on the drawdown of competitive funds commented on the Executive's performance in exceeding their annual goals in the Programme for Government target of increasing drawdown by 20% over the period 2011-15. The target for drawdown is £64.4 million over that four-year period. The Executive are on track to meet and perhaps surpass that target. That must be commended. Just one example is the success of the Department for Regional Development in drawing down competitive funds from the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme.

On the establishment of fora and networks, the creation of the task force working group is seen as providing a useful forum for discussion and sharing of best practice among Departments. In addition, other networks have been created, including the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum (NIERF), which was created by Belfast City Council and is now co-chaired by

OFMDFM. It provides a platform for strategic collaboration on EU funding and policy for the public, private and voluntary sectors. Those networks serve to increase knowledge and capacity in applying for funding and influencing policy.

The profile and focus offered by the task force and its working group were viewed as successful outcomes. The visibility of Northern Ireland as one of many regions in Europe and the access to senior officials in the Commission were viewed as positive outcomes in providing impetus, focus and a more cohesive approach to how our Departments engage in European affairs. The structures created by the task force, particularly the additional staffing resources in the Executive offices in Brussels, were viewed positively in providing information on policy, legislative and funding issues relevant to Northern Ireland.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that one of the gaps that there appears to be is with groups that may well spend funds and put forward proposals for drawing down funds in Northern Ireland? Many of them are still not aware of the kinds of funds that they could access and the kinds of projects that might be eligible. Did you identify a gap in communication between those groups and the relevant authorities in Brussels?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. The question of a coordinated approach to the dissemination of information is an ongoing challenge for Europe. Our MEPs, or at least some of them, have produced information leaflets that community groups and others find extremely useful. If you look at the landscape and the map of stakeholders, you will see that there is an ongoing challenge to ensure that there is a coordinated approach so that information gets down to the ground, where it is needed. Perhaps that is a lesson of the task force.

On lessons learned and in looking to the future, the Committee's analysis of the evidence found four main issues. The Committee has made a number of recommendations accordingly. First, the focus and momentum provided by defined targets was a clear theme emerging from the evidence provided. The aspirations of the Executive's engagement in European affairs must be clear, and success or otherwise must be measurable. Monitoring and evaluation of success is key to capitalising on the opportunities offered. To this end, the Committee recommends that the current benchmarking exercise to compare Northern Ireland's performance in drawdown of

competitive funds is completed and then shared with Assembly Committees as soon as possible.

The Committee welcomes the clearly defined Programme for Government target in relation to funding drawdown. We recommend that more clearly defined targets are developed for the working group, where outcomes can be more easily measured. It is only through measurement and evaluation that performance can be enhanced. However, the Committee does recognise that some goals, for example in relation to networking and influencing, will be more qualitative in nature.

The Committee also recommends that data on applications for European funding is more comprehensively captured, monitored and evaluated. It is through sharing lessons learned and best practice that capacity can be developed to improve the number of successful funding applications. So, the Committee also recommends that the Executive publish their annual European priorities in a more timely fashion. The Committee has been advised that the document is currently a work in progress, but, at the mid-point of the year, the 2014-15 priorities document is as yet unpublished. A telling comment from the Centre for Cross Border studies stated:

"the lack of timeliness in formulation, communication and evaluation of objectives, means that they appear to be published as if they were simultaneously being set, receiving their mid-year progress update, and their final outcomes."

Turning to the second issue of clarity of roles and responsibilities, the Committee welcomes the architecture that has been established by the Executive since the European Commission's original report in 2008 and acknowledges the recent review of the thematic priorities and the role of the official supporting the task force working group. The Committee, however, is concerned to learn of confusion, even among Executive Departments, on the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the Executive's engagement in EU affairs. The role of the supporting mechanisms must be clear because, without clarity, effective engagement cannot be undertaken, success cannot be captured and information sharing will be limited. So, the Committee recommends that the architecture of the Executive's EU engagement is clearly defined and widely disseminated, with greater clarity of the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders. Businesses, charities and community groups

must have clarity on the support available in accessing funding or policy information.

The effectiveness or otherwise of the structures must be evaluated. The Committee was pleased that OFMDFM recently reviewed the structures that support the working group and implemented changes to thematic groups and to the supporting liaison officers to better respond to changes in European policy and legislation. The Committee hopes that these changes will enhance the effectiveness of the engagement in EU affairs to the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland.

Turning to communication, there are lessons to be learned about effective communication of the nature of the task force and the working group and the work being undertaken. The issue was raised by this Committee and other statutory Committees during the 2013-14 session, where delays in receiving timely reports from Brussels-based officials were highlighted. So, the Committee recommends that a communications plan for the task force and the working groups is developed as a matter of urgency. The plan should include means of regular, timely and accurate communication of the work of the task force and the working group to Executive Departments, Assembly Committees and other key stakeholders. Indeed, the submission to the Committee's inquiry from the European Commission provided much detail on the work being done by the task force and the task force working group across a range of policy areas. The detail within would be very useful for Assembly Committees and is but one example of information that could and should be communicated in a structured and a regular fashion rather than coming to light only in written evidence to a Committee inquiry.

Given the issues experienced by Assembly Committees in exercising their statutory scrutiny function, mechanisms to facilitate effective and timely communication with Committees must be developed and developed as a matter of urgency. The Committee also recommends that OFMDFM, in leading on European affairs at the Executive, actively pursues opportunities for two-way secondments for civil servants to the European institutions to build capacity and expertise. The Committee also recommends that the Executive explore opportunities for Northern Ireland to offer its experience and specialisms to other EU partners.

3.45 pm

In conclusion, the Committee acknowledges the work of the Barroso task force and of the task

force working group to date, while making a number of recommendations that seek to enhance and further develop Northern Ireland's engagement in EU affairs. While the future of the task force itself is unclear, the Committee recommends that OFMDFM continues to support an interdepartmental forum to support a cohesive and coherent Executive-wide approach to EU engagement. It is important that the valuable skills and networks that have been developed to date are further enhanced.

It is only through more effective engagement in European affairs that we can hope to maximise the benefits of our EU membership and grow our economy. While much remains uncertain about our future in Europe, we must support the public, private and voluntary sectors in grasping the opportunities currently afforded by the European Union.

I commend the motion and the report to the House.

Mr Moutray: I support the motion from the Committee before us today. The report has been enlightening and timely, given the imminent change on the horizon with the presidency of José Manuel Barroso coming to an end shortly. I believe that the inquiry has clearly highlighted the benefits of the Northern Ireland task force and also the areas needing further work and effort to help fully utilise the task force that was established by President Barroso in 2007 to support Northern Ireland's efforts to improve its economic competitiveness and create sustainable employment.

Throughout the report it is evident that the task force in Brussels and the task force working group in Northern Ireland have stimulated an improvement and an increased engagement in European affairs by Executive Departments. It is also very clear that, in terms of policy, the task force has directly and indirectly created positive outcomes for Northern Ireland.

In the Programme for Government the Executive made it abundantly clear that the aim was to increase Northern Ireland's drawdown of competitive funds by 20% over the period, and we are all aware that Northern Ireland has exceeded that target. I count that as an achievement. However, it is vital that we continue to work and build upon our proven track record in Europe and move towards the establishment of clear targets and clear outcomes and the capturing of data to prove and demonstrate its successes and to ascertain what else can be done to improve and enhance our drawdown from Europe.

The report contains 11 recommendations, and it is not my intention to go through them all in detail, but I want to mention a few of them that I believe are of the utmost importance. On recommendation 1, it is inevitable that, when there is a change in personnel, the focus changes, relationships change and linkages that were previously established can be lost. However, I believe it is vital that we maintain a focus on what has been achieved, endeavour to hold on to the linkages and connections that have been made previously and realise and further the potential, and perhaps the opportunities, that will come with that change.

Of the regions represented, Northern Ireland is among the top achievers, and we therefore have to continue to improve, enhance and build upon what has already come to fruition.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. It is good to see that the targets that have been set by the Executive are actually being met and exceeded, but will he agree with me that one of the impediments — and there are many — to fully drawing down the amount of money that we could draw down is sometimes the bureaucracy that exists within Departments? It almost becomes very difficult for projects to meet the timelines that are set down for spending funding, and many of the balances or checks that Departments put in place in terms of new business cases etc affect the ability of people, first of all, to apply, and, secondly, to see the projects through. Indeed, some projects have been lost as a result of the bureaucracy within Departments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions are meant to be short. You have an extra minute.

Mr Moutray: Thank you, and I thank my colleague for his intervention. I agree entirely with what he said about red tape and bureaucracy. They still need to be challenged and overcome in relation to Europe.

I mentioned earlier the need for the establishment of clear targets, and that is where recommendations 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 play a role. It is clear that, to measure the success of something, you need to set clear targets and clear outcomes and have the capability to capture data to prove the worth of something or highlight that something is just not working. I support those recommendations. There is a need for a better evaluation process of ongoing work and a more open line of communication with the Executive and the Committees.

There needs to be a quicker and more effective way of publishing the annual European priorities document and a more regular review of processes by Committees to look at the progress and aid the Executive as they look towards future European priorities.

There also needs to be a concerted effort to help improve the accessibility of funding and the completion of application forms by third parties and arm's-length bodies. Unfortunately, there remains a lack of capacity where funding applications are concerned. Often, that is because they are too complicated.

Recommendations 8 and 9 deal with communication, and both are key to going forward. Any ongoing work, whether it results in achievements or a lack of progress, must be measured and communicated. Communication of the task force's work is essential, be it with the public, Departments, Committees or key stakeholders.

There is much good work ongoing. For instance, the financial gain of €14.5 million at the half-way stage of the Budget period and the Peace IV programme, which is worth €150 million, was lobbied for by the task force and has been secured. Those are key messages — key wins — that we need to get across to the public. We also have benefited financially from the transport and mobility policy, with €28.4 million having been secured for seven projects in Northern Ireland to improve our transport infrastructure.

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

Mr Moutray: There have been many more wins, and I am sure that other Members will mention them in the debate. I welcome the report. It has provided Members with clarity on the task force and its work. I support the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion. I commend all the good work of the task force since its establishment in 2007. Without doubt, the task force has made an impact by improving the North's economic competitiveness, achieving sustainable employment, helping to raise the profile of the North and having a role in the decision-making that takes place in Brussels.

Following the inquiry into the Barroso task force, the Committee makes a number of recommendations to support and enhance future engagement in European affairs.

President Barroso's term is coming to an end, and it is important that the Executive are being proactive regarding future engagement in the European Union.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she accept that this is not a debate that is likely to get much coverage in the media today, because they do not like to hear about the successes of the Executive against the targets that they have set? Not only have the Executive achieved those targets, they have exceeded them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms McGahan: I thank the Member for his contribution. It is not often that we agree, but I definitely agree with you on that point.

The Barroso task force was set up and the four desk officers were appointed to help the Executive support Programme for Government commitment 26, which is to facilitate delivery of the Executive's 20% target for increased drawdown of competitive EU funds.

The report on the inquiry into the Barroso task force has identified a lot of positivity for the North across a range of policy areas where an impact has been made through engagement with the EU. One example regarding DCAL, and it is one of many, was that Department's keeping of a watching brief on Creative Europe 2014-2020. DCAL was notified of a creative industries funding call and informed the Arts Council of the opportunity, and it was grateful for having that important issue highlighted.

The report has identified that the task force has been successful in putting a focus on all Departments to increase their drawdown of competitive funds by 20%. The inquiry has identified that a lot of expertise has been built up by the task force since 2007, and it is important that that is not lost. That knitting and networking have been invaluable in establishing links. In that context, the Committee recommends that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister continues to sustain an interdepartmental forum to support such a cohesive and coherent approach to European engagement across the Executive. This is an important area of work, as many laws and policies of the EU have a direct impact on the people in the North of Ireland. The EU is making decisions that affect us: 70% of legislation that the Assembly deals with originates in Brussels, so it is important that we are in there, shaping and influencing decision-

making in Europe and that we are not, as someone stated, gold-plating legislation.

Different reports have shown, in a tangible way, the improved interaction with the EU institutions through the positive role of the task force. Playing a more active role in the shaping of EU policy will enable us to benefit from the opportunities it provides, and this is one of the Committee's recommendations in the report.

The Statutory Committees have made progress in developing and fostering that channel available via the Executive office in Brussels, and it is important that we harness and use that important position in Brussels. How we engage more effectively with that office is vital, and we need to move from being reactive to being more proactive to shape and influence. That is difficult and demanding.

I mentioned before in the Chamber that I attended an EU funding event in Dungannon, organised by our local MEP and MP. The aim was to learn about as many of these funding programmes as possible. The feedback from the well-attended information session, addressed by Martina Anderson, had been extremely positive, and many of those in attendance had been unaware of the extent of the funding available from Europe for research and innovation projects in areas as diverse as technology, health, transport, energy, agriculture, food and space sectors. It shows that, while we have made progress, we have much more to do.

In evidence submitted to the inquiry, the feedback on the Barroso task force has been positive, and it is identified as an important mechanism for enhancing and engaging with EU structures. Most submissions advocate that we continue to have a platform to enhance our engagement with the EU and its institutions, amongst other suggestions for improvement.

I welcome the report.

Mr Attwood: As others have done, I want first to acknowledge the work of the Committee Clerks, the Commission, President Barroso and all those who went before him: Haagerup; Delors; Hume; and other MEPs who tried to put Northern Ireland closer to the centre of power in Europe. It may well be that, with the forthcoming appointment of Commissioner Hogan, if he gets the agriculture or trade brief, we will have further opportunities to be at the centre of decision-making in Europe.

The report seems to me to be a good report, but it is somewhat technocratic and descriptive.

So, sourced in the report, I want to move a little bit beyond it by making the following observations. The first is this: a part of the management of all of this back here is a task force working group made up of the junior Ministers and senior civil servants. I do not think that that is adequate. I think that that organisation, as part of the management of the drawdown and promotion of EU funding in the North, should have representatives from the business community and the third sector generally. That is a principle that we should apply across government, not just in respect of Barroso. One of the strengths of the Scottish Government is that they second into Departments people from outside government, from business and elsewhere, who have specialist knowledge and insight, in order to maximise the ability of government to do what is needed in the interests of its people. And don't they do it well? I do not believe that a group made up of junior Ministers and senior civil servants has a gathering of all the skills necessary to maximise what we need to do.

Secondly, we should adopt the Dublin approach to EU drawdown of funding, whereby Enterprise Ireland has staff dedicated to identifying all opportunities, and each Department and other public agencies have staff dedicated to that task as well. They have escalated that in a way that makes what we do in Northern Ireland seem quite marginal and limited. So, for all the apparent success that Mr Wilson refers to, and I will come back to that comment, compared with how Dublin manages its European outreach in European discretionary funding, we have a mountain to learn. In my view, we should just adopt the model in Dublin of Enterprise Ireland and cascade it across the systems of government in the North.

4.00 pm

Thirdly, Mr Wilson rightly says that we have had some success and that we are going to draw down an increase of 20% over 2011-15, and that is welcome. We do not obviously know whether that is all that good compared with comparable states in Europe because the benchmarking exercise has not been fulfilled. So, subject to that caveat, this is the question: the drawdown in Dublin of FP7 up to 2014 is around €900 million, and the drawdown in Northern Ireland from FP7 will be less than €50 million. So, subject to the benchmarking exercise, with a population of four and a bit million down there and less than two million up here, there is a huge discrepancy between less than €50 million and €900 million.

At one of the sessions of the Committee recently, one person who has a lot of knowledge about these matters did not know precisely what the future drawdown notionally of the Dublin Government is when it comes to the FP successor programme, Horizon 2020, which is €1.2 billion, and, based on their success with FP7, it will be close to €2 billion — €2 billion 100 miles from here. What is our hoped drawdown? Far, far less than that in comparable terms.

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

Mr Attwood: So, I welcome the report, but we have a mountain to climb in maximising the opportunities of future EU drawdown.

Mr Spratt: I am not going to repeat a lot of the things that have been said, but, since 2007, when the task force was set up to improve economic competitiveness and create sustainable employment in Northern Ireland in the context of the peace process, it is significant that only two regions in the European Union have the support, and Northern Ireland is one of them. President Barroso's term will come to an end next month, and it is vital that the momentum that has been put in place is not lost and that we continue to build on the progress that has been made.

The report makes a number of recommendations in relation to targets and outcomes. I am not going to go over the recommendations one by one because my colleague has already done that, but there is a clearly defined target in the Programme for Government regarding the drawdown of European funds, European priorities and subsequent implementation plans. However, the Committee recommends that the European priorities are identified in a more timely fashion and that all the plans are regularly reviewed in order to ensure that the Executive can benefit from the opportunities as they become available.

The working group should set its own targets and use SMART goals that are easy to verify and measure, while acknowledging that some of the goals, such as networking and influencing, are more difficult to measure but are no less important.

The Committee also recommends that the Department captures data on funding applications, including those from third parties and arm's-length bodies. That information should then be shared with Departments,

thematic groups and the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum. A comprehensive monitoring system would provide an opportunity to inform, develop and enhance future performance.

The other recommendations relate to clarity of roles, responsibilities, communication, profile and focus. It is important to build capacity and knowledge between the European institutions and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Many organisations have benefited from European funding. I can think, in particular, of many disadvantaged communities in my constituency.

I have to compliment Ministers from right across the board. They are often criticised in the House and outside by the press. They have regularly gone to Europe and been successful in obtaining fairly substantial sums of money as part of the United Kingdom, not, as Mr Attwood portrays it, because Northern Ireland is only a region, not a state, of the European Union. He is pretty fanciful with the way in which he describes the whole thing and the benefits to the state in the South. Perhaps he should do some more geography on where he is actually talking about.

The Chair covered all the points. I compliment the Committee staff on how they have dealt with the report and how they put it together. The Chair mentioned, as I would expect him to, the regional development money that has been brought in. Regional development has done very well from Europe. As Chair of the Committee for Regional Development, I have to say that that Committee also played a major role in ensuring the drawdown of TEN-T money.

One of the most important things is that Departments share with their Committees, at a timely and early stage, any opportunities to get funding from Brussels. We should all ensure that the Departments for which we have responsibility do that.

MEPs have been mentioned, and I want to compliment Diane Dodds. She produced a number of booklets on funding opportunities for groups, churches and other organisations. That has been very helpful in getting funding from Europe. I compliment the work and she and her department have done in Europe.

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

Mr Spratt: Thank you. I commend the report to the House and support it.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the report and thank the Chair for bringing it to the Assembly this afternoon. I add my voice of thanks to the Committee officials and also to the Department and the junior Ministers for appearing at the Committee and supporting it in its deliberations on this very important matter.

The essence of what all contributors have said is that we need to continue to work together on the issue. Obviously, what we are addressing today is the whole question of how we relate to the Programme for Government's commitment 26, which is about increasing the drawdown from 2011 to 2015 by 20%. We have all agreed that that is a modest amount, but, as Jimmy Spratt said in referencing a previous contributor, this is not a sovereign state, which is how the South is classified. Therefore, we are not in a position to get anywhere near the kind of money that has been available there. That is not to say that we must not be more ambitious in the time ahead. I see the lessons that have been learned from this phase of our renewed and enhanced engagement as being developmental in real terms.

Members referred to the fact that Manuel Barroso is moving on. We need to ensure that, whatever happens with regard to new appointments in Brussels, our focus remains entirely on working together much more effectively and sharing the wealth of experience that is undoubtedly out there. We need to harness all that to ensure that we maximise the drawdown that we are entitled to secure. As I said, 20% is, in my view and in the view of most Members, fairly modest. Nevertheless, it is important and welcome that it is a target that is clearly being met.

I think that Sammy Wilson referred earlier to the fact that perhaps some obstacles remain when it comes to the engagement of some Departments. That may or may not be the case. I simply say this: in the template for the implementation of Programme for Government commitments, we have a series of measures to make sure that we identify any problems that there may well be, whether from a Department or anybody else's failure to fully engage with, or realise, what is eligible for drawdown.

In our engagement over the years with Brussels, all of us have understood that a lot more is yet to be done. I commend the role of the working group, under the guidance and co-chairmanship of the two junior Ministers. We all agree that very important work is being done. May that work continue, not only to meet the targets that we have set but, in the time ahead,

to continue to increase the targets that we want to reach beyond that 20%. Anybody working in their relevant sector over the years will know that there is an absolute wealth of experience in the community and voluntary sector. Many of us here know people who are very adept at drawing down European funds because, often, any sizeable, realistic or meaningful project in the community requires a cocktail of funding. Very often, European funding is an essential part of that. There is also a wealth of experience in the business sector, the agri-sector and a whole range of other sectors.

We have benefited from lessons on how to gain funding for transport and moneys for health, research and innovation, food and all the rest, so we know that we can benefit tremendously from a much more enhanced role from Europe. I wish the officials well in the time ahead, under the leadership of the junior Ministers, not only in realising the 20%, which we believe that we are well on target to secure, but in then setting much more ambitious targets. That means all of us, collectively, putting our shoulder to the wheel.

I commend all those, including the three MEPs, who have been working very hard over the years. Of course, it would be remiss of me not to refer again to the funding paper that Martina Anderson produced not that long ago, 'Gateway to EU Funding'. Notwithstanding all the work being done by each Department, OFMDFM and the junior Ministers, the MEPs and a range of other stakeholders who are out there, day to day, engaging with Europe, —

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

Mr Maskey: — any additional information that we can get will only enhance our opportunity to draw down the funding that is available to us.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and to welcome the publication of the inquiry into the Barroso task force and its delivery to date. It is clear that the task force working group has proved to be a catalyst for an increased focus from all Departments on EU matters, particularly the Programme for Government target to increase Northern Ireland's drawdown of competitive funds by 20% over the period, something that has been hugely beneficial to many parts of the Executive and the region.

As with most task forces, there are many good news stories and successful outcomes but also a number of recommendations that need to be developed to sustain a cohesive and coherent

approach to EU engagement across the Executive. In focusing on recommendations from the inquiry, there are some that I would like to note specifically. Recommendations 5 and 6 are that OFMDFM ensure that, as far as possible, data on funding applications, including third parties, is captured — as my colleague Jimmy Spratt mentioned — and that cohesive monitoring systems in supporting and enhancing future skills and performance are developed.

I feel, however, that it is equally important to monitor the fullness of all funding applications, but especially those that are unsuccessful. I am approached, as I am sure that many of us are, by groups that have applied for funding and been turned down due to an array of issues. It is vital that, if we are to ensure transparency in funding, we must equally monitor the groups that have not been successful in receiving funding and, if possible, why they have not been awarded the requested funds. More focus could then be put on giving additional support and information in the areas where groups are failing. I must acknowledge all the work that my colleague Diane Dodds has done on that, particularly in my area of Lagan Valley.

Another area worth highlighting is EU research and innovation. I have concerns that we still have a shortage of successful research and innovation projects as a percentage of total projects and a shortage of SMEs participating in framework programme 7 (FP7). Currently, NI has more work to do to make our rate equal to the SME participation rate in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and other EU member states. That is something for which we may need some extra support and guidance to help businesses to develop their key projects and to seek funding.

4.15 pm

Better communication, clarity of roles, responsibility and structure came up as part of the report. It is clear that more needs to be done to ensure that all stakeholders know the roles and mechanisms involved in EU engagement across the various Departments to avoid confusion or duplication of effort. It is concerning that certain Departments were not sure of roles and responsibilities and how that could have a detrimental impact on NI's overall goal of strengthening our economy.

I welcome that the report acknowledges the addition of the Peace IV programme, worth £150 million. That was supported by the task force, and it is something that I am sure

everyone in Northern Ireland will be happy to see.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that other Members will have different areas of the report to discuss. Broadly, I am happy with the outcomes of the inquiry, but it is clear that we must not become complacent and that we must ensure that we carry through on the recommendations that have been requested in detail in the report.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too welcome the motion. Like other Members, I commend the good work that civil servants and President Barroso have taken on under the task force.

As Bronwyn McGahan mentioned, the task force was about strengthening our engagement in the EU. It was initially established as a mechanism to improve and to help us with our economic competitiveness. Under President Barroso, we were offered some excellent opportunities, which, unfortunately, some of the Departments might have been too slow to grasp, but I suppose it is a learning exercise. The main focus of the inquiry was on the outcomes and looking at our post-Barroso future. In that respect, we must thank all those who made submissions and made the effort to try to inform our approach to what was a largely important piece of work.

One of the recommendations from the inquiry was on the lessons that we learned. I think it is important to know how important it is for Departments to continue to work together going into the future, and it is essential that we continue to have a collaborative approach to Europe. It is hugely important that the lessons we learn from Barroso are not lost but are, in fact, built upon and enhanced even further. I think that we need to continue the momentum of positive engagement of the Assembly in European affairs.

Another recommendation coming out of the inquiry was on European priorities. Although I was not in the Chamber when he said it, I think I heard Mr Nesbitt, the Chair of the Committee, refer to the Executive's EU priorities and how they needed to be published sooner — at the very least, in the first quarter of the year. I do not think really that that is a lot to ask. It would allow Departments to be more proactive in their approach to horizon scanning, which, I think we can all agree, is an area that we need to improve on.

We need to be looking at the earliest possible date at what policies and legislation are coming from Europe. That means keeping an eye on

issues that might emerge as discussion papers but that gradually develop into legislative proposals. That means that we would have a chance to try to shape them from the earliest possible time, and it would allow for more success, particularly if it were to do with European funding at drawdown stage. I think that Jimmy Spratt said that you cannot measure how important networking and engagement are in Europe, but you cannot put a value on how important those are.

Lessons need to be learned from the European operation in the South. I think it is one of the most successful member states when it comes to requesting and securing European funding. Its Brussels-based staff are in from the very beginning, lobbying and influencing when possible new streams are just an idea. That allows them to have a significant impact before the White Paper is even produced. I think the fact that we have a new team in the Executive office is a welcome move, as is the fact that they are now designated as liaison officers rather than desk officers, because a key part of being successful in Europe is being active and networking.

Another recommendation coming out of the inquiry and the report is on the area of EU funding. I heard it mentioned that we need a benchmarking exercise to be completed, because, other than that, we cannot tell how successful we have been in comparison with other places that are in similar situations to us. I think there is a perception that we have been a bit overreliant on Peace and INTERREG funds. Hundreds and hundreds of funding streams have completely remained untapped as far as the North is concerned, and there are huge opportunities for us in competitive funding over the next while with Horizon 2020 and others.

The Programme for Government commitment to increase the drawdown of European funding by 20% has been mentioned. It has been successful to date, and targets have been met and exceeded. Given our past drawdown, I think we can perhaps concede that our FP7 performance was slightly disappointing. I would have been one who said that 20% was not a high enough target, but I think it is important to note that it is developmental. It is just a start, not an end; it is something that we can build upon and learn from for the future.

Some steps have been taken to assist drawdown. Alex Maskey referred to how so many of our community projects rely on a cocktail of funding, so European funding is hugely important. That is why one of the

priorities is around the need for a European capacity-building fund that would enable a range of people to draw down funds without having to rely on Departments and go through the bureaucracy that Sammy Wilson mentioned. The appointment of contact officers in AFBI, Queen's and the University of Ulster to coordinate the approach of different partners to draw down funding is also helpful.

In the report, the Committee also recommends that, as much as possible, we should try to capture any data from arm's-length bodies and third parties to get a fuller picture of whatever European money is in the North and to look at the effectiveness of the fund that we mentioned.

I think that there is consensus that, when it comes to Europe, we need to be more proactive and there is serious room for improvement. The Assembly should look to allocate more substantial resources to improve our participation.

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

Ms Fearon: We need to embed a culture of European participation in all our Departments.

Mr Cree: I support the motion. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has done considerable work to prepare the report, and I take this opportunity to thank the staff for their excellent work.

Northern Ireland has gained much from European funds over the years, but it certainly has not maximised its drawdown. I have been in Brussels on several occasions and learned a little about how the system works. On a recent visit with the Assembly and Business Trust, we were told how important it was to get involved when ideas are first floated, because it is usually too late to amend proposals once they have been published in a paper. We were dismayed when we were told by Northern Ireland and Westminster officials that their procedure was to await the publication of a paper before trying to amend it to suit our needs. Hopefully, that situation has changed as a result of Barroso and other developments.

The Programme for Government has a commitment to increase the competitive drawdown of European funds by 20% during the current Budget period. The Departments have made good progress towards meeting that target, and, at the halfway point in the year, some £41.3 million has been drawn down. That represents 64% of the target, so, clearly,

Departments are well on track to realise the total figure of £64.4 million by the end of March 2015. I believe that the relative ease with which the Executive are able to meet that target indicates that the bar has been set too low and that a much more ambitious target is required.

It is the Executive's duty to maximise their efforts to ensure that Northern Ireland begins to punch well above its weight in Brussels. Working with the Barroso task force has helped in that regard, but there are significant challenges still in front of us. The four cross-departmental subgroups are engaged in the European priorities implementation plan, and it is crucial that Northern Ireland be engaged fully in Brussels at all levels to ensure that we can access the various funding streams available.

Members will remember the framework programme 7 statistics for 2007-2013, which others referred to earlier. Northern Ireland was bottom of the league, and that takes into account the figures for all other regions in the United Kingdom. We need to move on and improve the situation. We also need to ensure that our businesses can access European funding with the minimum of red tape and bureaucracy.

I return to the report on the inquiry into the Barroso task force. We have seen a marked increase in engagement in European affairs by Departments. The task force has directly or indirectly created positive outcomes for Northern Ireland. We appreciate that fact and are keen to continue to improve the situation.

Mr Mike Nesbitt, Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, has already referred to the focus and momentum provided by the defined targets as a clear theme emerging from the evidence provided. The Executive's engagement in European affairs must be clear, and success or otherwise must be measurable. Monitoring and evaluating success are key to capitalising on the opportunities offered by EU engagement. There is an issue with clarity on the rules and responsibilities, and that has been recognised by the Committee. Communication, as always, is vital, and the Committee recommends that a plan be developed for the task force and working groups as a matter of urgency.

In all, the Committee made 11 recommendations for the support and enhancement of future engagement in European affairs. As a member of the Committee, I support and commend the recommendations to all and trust that the House will support the report and that the Office

of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will implement its recommendations.

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

welcome the inquiry report from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is heartening to have that external recognition that the sustained hard work that Ministers have been undertaking with their officials over many years has resulted in a marked increase in our European engagement. That work has, directly or indirectly, been very positive for the Executive. We are well on track to exceed the Programme for Government's competitive EU funds drawdown target. In building European alliances, we have raised our positive profile in comparison with our 250 competitor regions by participating proactively in countless formal and informal knowledge networks to achieve our strategic European priorities.

In April 2008, the European Commission noted that, although apparently less involved in EU policies than others, we had a "credible track record in general." In the past six years, the Barroso task force working group has progressively and relentlessly enhanced engagement in European matters by Departments, although I would be the first to admit that the working group has not always taken the credit for its successes. As a small region located on the north-west periphery of continental Europe, we punch substantially above our weight, to use a Carl Frampton analogy. All of that hard work has produced a step change in our relations with Europe. I want to thank the Committee for recognising that achievement in its report, including the role of our Executive office in Brussels.

I want to talk about taking a more strategic approach in Europe, because, although our experience of European engagement is positive, there is more to be done to make the most of the opportunities that Europe can offer. We remain committed to participating in Europe in a positive, outward- and forward-looking and progressive manner to become a preferred region of choice for partnership working and in which to live, work and invest. The Executive will continue to promote their interests in the European Union, raise their profile throughout Europe and raise awareness and encourage participation in European matters.

We all know that it is a time of change and renewal in Europe. Shortly, the European Parliament will begin its confirmation hearings for nominees for the next college of European commissioners. The European Commission

president designate, Jean-Claude Juncker, has made strengthening Europe's competitiveness and stimulating investment his number one priority to boost jobs and growth. Despite the change of key decision-makers in the main EU institutions, the work to sustain and nourish a fragile economic recovery will continue. Mr Juncker will present an ambitious jobs, growth and investment package in the broader context of the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy. Let me tell the House that the economy was, is and will remain the key issue. I should also tell the House that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have issued an invitation to Mr Juncker to visit Belfast to showcase what has been achieved and to look at where the opportunities for jobs, growth and investment are here.

I will now deal with the nature of the structured relationship with Europe.

4.30 pm

Our partnership with the Commission's services was originally intended to support the peace process, with an emphasis on generating more growth and jobs in line with the Lisbon agenda. Subsequently, that Lisbon economic development plan evolved into Europe's growth strategy for the decade to 2020.

In a changing world, we want a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. These mutually reinforcing priorities were to deliver high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. Five ambitious objectives on employment, innovation, education, social inclusion and climate/energy were to drive actions at EU and national levels to underpin the 2020 strategy.

The specific remit of the Barroso task force was to mobilise the services of the European Commission to move our economy up the value chain to enter the top league of innovative European regions. Over time, our long period as a major recipient of European regional aid was to be reduced. Correspondingly, we would increasingly rely on our own resources to compete against the best in Europe.

But, at that time, no one had anticipated that a credit crunch in the US housing market would lead to a full financial meltdown by the middle of 2008, which would eventually turn into a global recession. So, over the past six years, our collective approach to European engagement has matured. The emphasis we place on networks, strategic alliances and partnerships has delivered success for the Northern Ireland Executive.

We have built a European infrastructure that is second to none. We are supported by a network of committed contacts in the key directorates general of the European Commission whose work impacts most on devolved responsibilities. We are committed to continue working at a high level, politically and operationally, to enhance our prosperity. The continuation of a structured relationship with the Commission, such as that with the Barroso task force, is vital in that regard.

I turn to the recommendations in what is a comprehensive report. Although I welcome the report and the spirit in which this work has been taken forward, I cannot respond to each of the recommendations within the time allowed. As European engagement is a collective responsibility, I would like an opportunity to consult in detail with Executive colleagues. In fact, junior Minister McCann and I have tabled the Committee's inquiry report for discussion with Departments at a meeting of the Barroso task force working group tomorrow afternoon. At a later stage, we will provide a formal written response to the Committee.

Let me give an outline of what Ministers are doing. Notwithstanding the need for consultation, I agree with the Committee that the expertise and knowledge that we have painstakingly accrued over the years should not be lost. I support the continuation of an interdepartmental forum to further develop and enhance our European engagement so that the investments that we have all made are built upon and not squandered.

Our engagement infrastructure is second to none because we have built it that way. Now we have to optimise its use to win hearts and minds, to persuade others of our own point of view. That requires systematic as opposed to regular engagement with Europe. That is why, in developing the Executive's strategic European priorities for 2014 and 2015, Minister McCann and I have sought to ensure greater clarity between strategic outcomes and operational processes. We believe it is important to do the right thing but also to do things right.

Working with Departments to get that balance right has taken longer than anticipated. It has led to some delay in the production of the 2014-15 priorities. A European priorities statement that focuses on the most vital indicators, tracking overall progress towards the Executive's strategic aims, is a very necessary next step. It is a means of taking our European engagement to the next stage of development. However, the Committee's point that the

Executive should publish their annual European priorities in a more timely fashion is well made, and I will raise that point with the Departments tomorrow.

In conclusion, before I turn to some of the excellent contributions that have been made on the Floor this afternoon, I want to say that we are at a crossroads in our journey with the Commission services. We understand that Europe is complex and requires committed, sustained and systematic engagement. Success in our economy, society, environment and culture means being prepared to argue for and influence the policy priorities that impact most on our devolved responsibilities.

In effect, I suppose you could say that we have served our apprenticeship. Our approach has been tested and found to be mature. It is timely to thank President Barroso and Commissioner Hahn, who have been our partners in what has been something of a marathon, and, in defining our new future relationship with the new College of Commissioners, we are mindful that our new structured relationship may well be different from that of the past. The only certainty with EU institutional change is that nothing is certain, but I can give an assurance that I and my ministerial colleagues will continue to work in the European arena to promote our region as a great place to live, to work and to invest.

I will turn briefly to some of the points that were made. Sammy Wilson, in making an important point, referred to the bureaucracy in Departments and the red tape that is hitting applications. I think that will have resonance with every Member and right across every constituency office. Departments must promote EU audit standards, but a commitment was secured from the European Union to simplify the EU funding programmes. That gives Members some hope. I know that, in the past, community organisations that have attracted European funding have found themselves in absolutely ridiculous situations where they were funded to provide coffee and scones at one of their meetings and ended up getting a receipt sent back to them because the Fairy liquid to wash the dishes afterwards to leave the community centre in the same tidy fashion that they found it in was not authorised expenditure. I have raised that with SEUPB and with our Department of Finance and Personnel to try to see where we can ease those regulations so that that form of difficulty does not reoccur.

The Committee Chair mentioned the need to evaluate success of European engagement through benchmarking. We can advise that, at

this stage, we are committed to assessing our own absolute, as in how we have performed against how we have performed before, as well as relative performance in drawing down competitive funds. Recently, we have engaged the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to conduct a small feasibility study to focus on the data availability, the comparability and the analysis, and we anticipate that the next phase of that work will continue towards the end of the month.

Mr Alex Attwood argued for wider membership of the Barroso task force working group to include local organisations and stakeholders. It was a strong point, and we are committed to developing the capacity of local organisations, particularly community and voluntary organisations, to develop their European engagement and to access the funding programmes. It should be noted that the primary focus for that will be the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum, which the Department is co-chairing with Belfast City Council. It is now in its second year and has over 100 members.

Megan Fearon made a valuable point in that more needed to be done, and she raised a query about proactivity in the nature of horizon scanning. The revision of the desk officer structure should make the horizon scanning more effective, and the new legal officer that we have in the European office should give us early warning of European Court of Justice case law. Hopefully that addresses some of those points.

Contributions from Mr Moutray, Mr Spratt and Ms Hale were very strong on the need to reduce red tape. I have alluded to where that can be done and where the European Union directive is, but I want to assure you that, as far as community organisations go, we will continue to push for that reduction.

I congratulate all our MEPs. I have seen all their work individually. I suppose that I am closest politically to Diane Dodds.

I have seen the funding directories that are produced, and I would advise community organisations to access those through their political parties and their MEPs in order to simplify the rules and continue the success that we have had in attracting funds from Europe.

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am pleased to conclude the debate on behalf of the Committee. I think that it has been extremely

constructive and has highlighted, as has the inquiry report, that we have undertaken a constructive and timely examination of the work of the Barroso task force in Brussels and the task force working group in Northern Ireland.

I will not go through all the Members' contributions. They have been well made and detailed, and I think that they have highlighted the centrality of European engagement to development in Northern Ireland in areas such as community development, research and innovation, economic development, business growth and peace building. Indeed, we have heard that, since 1995, the European Union has invested €1.3 billion in peace building in Northern Ireland and we have successfully secured €150 million under Peace IV. That, however, begs this question: what is being done to plan ahead for how that type and level of investment in peace building in Northern Ireland is going to be sustained if and when the peace funding comes to an end?

Key successes have been mentioned in the form of infrastructure projects, ICT projects, tourism promotion, technology development, jobs promotion and, indeed, key successes in the TEN-T programme. I think that Members' contributions have highlighted a number of the successes of the task force to date and also referenced helpfully the inquiry report's recommendations about how the Executive can enhance their engagement in European affairs.

It is through effective engagement that the ultimate goals of improving Northern Ireland's economic competitiveness, creating sustainable employment and improving participation in decision-making in Brussels on behalf of people in Northern Ireland can be achieved. We must continue to do all that we can to maximise the benefit of Brussels to Northern Ireland.

I would like to thank all the Members who participated in the debate and the junior Minister for taking the time to respond to it. I encourage everyone to remain connected across the Assembly Committees in scrutinising the work of the Executive in Europe. I hope that the report and the debate will help us to continue the momentum of improved Assembly engagement in European affairs, and I commend the report and the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister

and deputy First Minister (NIA 179/11-15) on its Inquiry into the Barroso task force; and calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we change the staff at the top Table.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Road Infrastructure Improvements: Lisburn and Dunmurry 1 Development Area

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes. I call Mr Paul Girvan.

Mr Givan: I want to bring an ongoing issue to the attention of the House. There has been a bone of contention in Lisburn for a number of years because of the scheme that is known there as LD1: the development scheme in the north part of the Lisburn area.

The issue has been raised over a number of years. I and colleagues have sought to advance the situation. The council in Lisburn has also sought to advance it and is party to the agreements that have been put in place. However, there has been huge frustration at the way in which it has been managed.

4.45 pm

I will give a little context to exactly what I am referring to in respect of LD1. It is a proposed housing scheme at the Brokerstown Road/Ballinderry Road area in the northern part of the Lisburn area. Zoning was subject to a comprehensive design scheme. A planning agreement was put in place, there was the upgrading of the Brokerstown Road/Ballinderry Road alongside frontages, and there was a traffic impact assessment to assess the needs for the extent of any further road improvements.

The adopted Lisburn area plan subsequently zoned 84 hectares of land in that particular

area. The plan required a comprehensive design scheme, a transportation and impact assessment, and the upgrading at the Brokerstown Road/Ballinderry Road junctions of the Knockmore Road. There was subsequent planning approval for significant housing developments to be taken forward by the Carvill Group, Antrim Construction and Dingles Builders, and that included a requirement for an article 40 planning agreement relating to the provision of road alterations, landscaping and community facilities. That agreement was made on 14 July 2006 between the Department of the Environment, the education and library board, the council, the developers and the landowners.

The article 40 agreement, which is the real issue of concern, related to road construction and alterations, and the agreement contained a number of covenants. First was that no residence would be occupied until a number of junction improvements were complete and operational. That included the signalisation of the Knockmore Road/Ballinderry Road junction, which has not happened; the widening of the Ballymacash Road — the eastern part at the Ballymacash Road/Prince William Road junction — to provide a left-turn lane, which has not happened; then no more than 140 residences would be occupied on the site until further junction improvements were completed and operational, which included the widening of the west side of the Prince William Road south of the junction of the Knockmore Road to provide a left-turning lane, which has not happened; signalisation of the Prince William Road at the Ballymacash Road/Ballymacash Park junction, which has not happened; no residence would be occupied on the site until all of the following improvements would be fully completed and operational: the signalisation of the Prince William Road/Nettlehill Road, which did happen, and other improvements; no more than 200 residences would be occupied on the site until the Ballinderry Road access and linkage to development had been provided to the satisfaction of the highway authority — again, there are issues there.

As of today, there are over 300 residents occupying those areas, and yet there are at least four very significant junction improvements that should have commenced. That has not happened, nor, indeed, is there any indication of that work commencing. There is no work programme in place for it to commence, and it would appear to me, based on that evidence, that the article 40 agreement has therefore been breached, not once, not twice, but repeatedly.

The owner of the agreement is the Department of the Environment. I appreciate that the Minister for Regional Development is here to deal with some of those issues, but, primarily, the Department of the Environment is responsible for the legally binding agreement, and yet planning has continued to be granted and houses are still being built. Obviously, there is an issue with the Carvill Group because it is in administration, but the other two developers are continuing to develop. Indeed, I suspect that every elected representative here and on the council wants that area to be developed. We supported it being zoned for housing and the other community facilities that were to take place in that area.

However, elected members are not satisfied with the fact that the Knockmore Road and Prince William Road — two key arterial routes in our constituency — are heavily congested and are adjacent to Laurelhill Community College and Killowen Primary School, of which combined there are over 1,000 children and young people.

You then have the neighbouring Pond Park and Ballymacash primary schools, of which I am on the boards of governors, and Knockmore Primary School — all near this particular area and all of which use these roads. There is also traffic coming down Prince William Road from Antrim. Yet none of these improvements has taken place.

There is a real public safety concern, given the length of the queues that exist. I access the Ballinderry/Knockmore road every day because of where I live, and the dangers of trying to navigate that particular junction should not be underestimated. At the Prince William/Knockmore road junction, where you have schoolchildren wanting to cross the road to Laurelhill Community College and Killowen Primary School, there are 40-foot HGVs mounting the kerb to get round the junction. You have oncoming traffic that needs to stop in advance of those lorries or, indeed, buses, which need to come into that lane of traffic in order to turn on to the Prince William Road. It is an entirely unsatisfactory position for public safety.

The question is how we progress, because we are where we are. I appreciate that there are some complications because of the situation with the Carvill Group. I understand that the initial agreement seems to have changed somewhat from what Roads Service is now indicating would be required. Obviously, the developers are disputing what their contribution should be. I think that Roads Service has a

responsibility to identify what is required and to work with the DOE to try to pull all relevant stakeholders around the table so that this can be moved on.

Regrettably, DOE has been, in my view, very poor at bringing this issue to a head. Officials in the Planning Service need to tackle this, and that is why I have raised it with the Minister repeatedly. I raised it with Minister Attwood but was not able to meet him, and I have raised it with Minister Durkan. It was only in June this year that I was able to get a meeting. I appreciate that Minister Kennedy has always made himself available and has always indicated that he will come to these meetings and will seek to assist us. However, the Department of the Environment has been, in my view, severely lacking in grasping this difficult issue that the public expects it to deal with and advance.

My appeal is for this to be progressed and dealt with satisfactorily, because the status quo is not satisfactory. Developers want to continue to build, and we support development of this area, but you cannot have increased traffic congestion in the absence of the article 40 agreement being complied with. If it is not going to be complied with, who will take the enforcement? It is DOE's responsibility to deal with any breaches, but that has not happened. If there are complications — this is complicated — there needs to be the will to bring the appropriate people around the table to push it forward.

The north Lisburn feeder road was developed entirely through private-led contribution. The Knockmore/Sprucefield link is, again, solely dependent on private-led contribution, and here you have another significant set of improvements required that may come through entirely private-led contribution. I understand that we want to try to support the Department for Regional Development, and that it is facing very difficult financial challenges, as is every Department, but there comes a point when we ask ourselves whether anything will happen in our constituency to improve these roads unless it is private-developer led and, if so, when that will ever come into being. So, there may need to be a requirement for some pump-priming on the part of DRD. Some resource may need to be brought to the table in order to facilitate the works needed to improve public safety and, indeed, the economy of the Lisburn area. People are being put off coming into Lisburn on these roads because no action has been taken.

I appeal to Minister Kennedy to continue to use his influence and powers to progress this

matter. We have a meeting next week with Ministers Kennedy and Durkan, and I know that other elected Members will bring the same message to that meeting. I trust that the Ministers will be able to use their offices to finally bring a resolution to this issue, which has gone on for too long.

Mr Deputy Speaker: For the record, I correct myself: it is, of course, Mr Paul Givan who has just spoken and not Mr Paul Girvan, as I think I said.

Mr Craig: It is sad to say that, after almost a decade, we are still talking about the Knockmore link, or what I am starting to describe as the missing link. In science, we all thought that the missing link was something else. We are starting to see this as the missing link, particularly in Lagan Valley and Lisburn.

Where the Knockmore Road ends and the park-and-ride facility at Sprucefield is situated, there was supposed to be a developer-led junction or road to link those two. As the Minister well knows, that development has not happened. In itself, that is leading to major congestion in that whole southern end of Lisburn. We have heavy traffic, as described by my colleague, to all those major schools that were outlined; we had better not forget the two best schools in Northern Ireland — our two grammar schools, Friends' and Wallace. A large chunk of that traffic — buses and, unfortunately, cars, with parents leaving their children off — goes down there morning and afternoon, causing absolute mayhem.

What also causes great difficulty at that junction is the fact that it is very close to one of the largest industrial areas in Lisburn, where there is a lot of heavy traffic. We are proud to have the Coca-Cola plant for the whole of Ireland and further afield in our constituency. That all leads to major industrial traffic finding itself locked in a road infrastructure that is no longer fit for purpose and that was supposed to have been corrected by developer-led development.

Even as the climate for developers improves, there seems to be an issue about outstanding moneys owed and work not done on the Knockmore link and Prince William Road. The outworkings of this are incredible because, as the Minister well knows — I met him over the summer with Halftown Road residents — major industrial traffic uses what can only be described as a small country road. When two lorries meet on that country road in Halftown, they mount the footpath and consequently destroy it, causing a major public health issue, on which I am still waiting for the Minister to

come back. I have had the police out at that junction, and the evidence was clearly there. There were lorry tyre marks right up the middle of the footpath, so it was difficult to deny that it was happening. These are all the outworkings of what I originally described as the missing link: the Knockmore Road.

Like my colleague, I question why every single road development in Lagan Valley has to be developer-led: in other words, private developers must pay for it. I have no difficulty whatsoever with the concept of their making a contribution towards it, but if I move a few miles down the road to Belfast, what developer ever put money into improvements on the M1? What developer ever put money into developing the Westlink? Why can we pour millions upon millions of pounds of public money into developing the road infrastructure in Belfast, but we cannot develop the infrastructure elsewhere?

When I look at the Knockmore link, I see an opportunity for government, if it is prepared to prime that link, to open up the entire development of the southern end of Lisburn, maybe reducing some of the traffic going down the M1 but certainly creating huge levels of employment in Lisburn, Lagan Valley and the southern end of what is now, in reality, greater Belfast while producing a better outcome for Northern Ireland as a whole.

I appeal to the Minister to look at the issue to see whether there is any way in which it can be looked at other than as a developer-led development.

5.00 pm

Mr B McCrea: Initially, I was not going to speak on this matter, although I read it with interest on the Order Paper. I acknowledge that Mr Craig, Mr Givan and the Minister are here, as are you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am speaking because I am interested to see whether the matter is addressed and in what way. The real issue, however, is the benefit of Adjournment debates: there are five of us in the Chamber, and it is a beautiful sunny evening, as people will acknowledge. The matter in front of us is important, and, of course, the Minister is here to try to address it. I just wanted to put that point on record.

I have only two issues of substance, because the substance of the debate was covered more than adequately by the two Members who spoke previously. First, I think that Mr Givan said that there is to be a meeting next week with the Minister of the Environment and Mr

Kennedy. That appears to be a more substantive way of moving forward and resolving the matter.

Secondly, how will we get some form of focus on Lisburn? Mr Craig's point was that it seems that everything is Belfast-centric. I probably live at the other side of the "missing link" that he talked about, but it would be really valuable to see it. We have some interest in doing what government does best, which is infrastructure improvements. That is what government can do to improve the standard of living for our citizens and, of course, the economy. It is a battle with the rest of the Executive that we have to win because we need more investment in road infrastructure.

I hope that my two colleagues did not mind me intervening on what is really their subject, but I am interested to hear what Mr Kennedy has to say.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, including Mr Givan, its sponsor. Despite Mr McCrea's comments, this debate is valuable. Adjournment debates are a means by which particular issues can at least be highlighted, leading, I hope, to a resolution. I do not say that I come with a resolution to this issue today: further necessary work and meetings are required. However, in the spirit of the operation of the House and the public service that it provides for Members to avail themselves of, it is good that these issues can be aired.

I have asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report so that, if I do not pick up on any of the points that Members raised, I can address them in writing. We had a very fair assessment of the current situation from Mr Givan and Mr Craig, and Mr McCrea accepted that that was the case.

As I said, I welcome the opportunity to debate the road infrastructure improvements for the Knockmore Road and Prince William Road in Lisburn. I will put on record and confirm a lot of the information that we have already heard, but it is important that we also put on record the official sequence and timeline of events. A concept master plan was developed for the Lisburn and Dunmurry 1 development area, which is also known as the LD1 Brokerstown site, in the early 2000s.

The site consists of approximately 45 hectares and is located between Glenavy Road and Ballinderry Road, just to the north-west of Lisburn city. The final concept master plan was

issued in February 2003 and requires the development of the LD1 site to be undertaken in accordance with the general principles in it.

Three development consortia were originally involved: the Carvill Group; Antrim Construction; and Dingles and O'Kane and Devine. In 2003, two of the three developers in the site signed a planning agreement to ensure that road improvements would be carried out at various stages of the housing development. Outline planning approval was granted in September 2006, subject to an article 40 agreement, for two of the three consortia of developers for a total of 1,800 houses. As Members will know, an article 40 agreement is a legal agreement under article 40 of the Planning Order 1991 that enables the Department of the Environment to facilitate, regulate or restrict the development of land and may be used to achieve monetary contributions or transportation provision. It cannot be appealed.

A transport assessment that was included in the outline planning application identified the need for a number of junction improvements on the existing road network to ensure that there was sufficient capacity for the predicted flows arising from the development. Those were set out in an article 40 planning agreement and conditioned under the outline application, which asked for a number of junction improvements in association with the phasing of the development. Those junctions are Knockmore/Prince William Road; Knockmore Road/Ballinderry Road; and Prince William Road/Ballymacash Road.

Subsequent to outline planning approval being granted, each developer submitted an article 28 planning application seeking an uplift to vary the planning condition for the maximum number of dwellings permitted from 1,800 to 2,900. An article 28 agreement is a legal agreement under article 28 of the Planning Order 1991 that enables the Department of the Environment to permit a change of conditions in a planning approval. As sufficient progress was not being made, my Department offered refusal reasons in October 2009.

In 2010, RPS consultants submitted a further analysis based on a 550-unit uplift and a 700-unit uplift. An uplift of 550 units proved to be the maximum additional allowable, and that would have required significant improvements to 11 junctions in the area, including the junction in question, Knockmore Road/Prince William Road. My Department requested a revised transport assessment for the whole of the 110-acre LD1 development, and that

identified a requirement for additional improvement works over and above those set out in the original article 40 agreement. The costs of those junction improvements were estimated to be between £15 million and £18 million. However, no resolution was reached on a new article 40 agreement, and the developer withdrew the uplift application in January 2014.

As Members indicated, no resolution has been reached to date on the improvement of the junctions under the original outline planning application. My Department's position is that improvements at the junction previously mentioned should be built to the Transport NI design standards, as, obviously, that is in the interests of public safety.

Recently, my officials have carried out a review of the history of this application and have also reviewed new drawings that Hoy Dorman consultants forwarded in May this year. That was to establish what the main differences were between design drawings as presented by the developer and the Transport NI standards for junction design. This is, as we heard, a matter of ongoing discussion and correspondence between my Department and the Department of the Environment's planning division. I assure Members that my Department will continue to liaise with the Department of the Environment's planning division and the developers to seek to progress the delivery of improvements to the road network as part of the development in order to discharge the planning conditions.

You have heard that another meeting is due to take place on Tuesday 16 September between my Department, the Department of the Environment planning division and, indeed, the sponsor of this debate, Mr Givan. I hope that we can make progress at that point and as we go into the future.

These are complex issues that need to be resolved. On my behalf and on behalf of DRD, we want to engage positively with that. We welcome the contribution of both the elected representatives and, potentially, other interested parties. There has been involvement in the past by Lisburn Borough Council. If that is considered to be positive, perhaps we can explore further opportunities with that as well.

I am afraid that we are in a situation where there are no outcomes at this stage. However, I think that the Adjournment debate is an important facility whereby the issues are at least aired. We have been able to set out what has happened hitherto, and we also need to look forward to see whether we can resolve

those issues as quickly and as speedily as possible.

Adjourned at 5.12 pm.



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Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,
Belfast: The Stationery Office

and available from:

Online
www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

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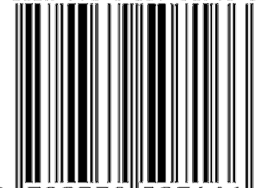
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ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325
Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited
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ISBN 978-0-339-50716-6



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