

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 16 April 2013
Volume 84, No 2

Contents

Matter of the Day

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Boston Marathon Explosions..... | 1 |
|---------------------------------|---|

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Assembly Business | 4 |
|--------------------------------|---|

Executive Committee Business

| | |
|---|---|
| CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2013 | 4 |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|----|
| Parental Leave (EU Directive) (Maternity and Parental Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013..... | 10 |
|---|----|

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Assembly Business | 12 |
|--------------------------------|----|

Private Members' Business

| | |
|--|----|
| Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill: Further Consideration Stage | 13 |
|--|----|

Oral Answers to Questions

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Education..... | 14 |
|----------------|----|

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Employment and Learning..... | 20 |
|------------------------------|----|

Adjournment

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| G8 Summit: Security..... | 27 |
|--------------------------|----|

Written Ministerial Statement

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

| | |
|--|----|
| Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Further Allegations..... | 37 |
|--|----|

Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

They should be sent to:

The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.

Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)
Brown, Ms Pam (South Antrim)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Byrne, Joe (West Tyrone)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Cochrane, Mrs Judith (East Belfast)
Copeland, Michael (East Belfast)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Farry, Stephen (North Down)
Fearon, Ms Megan (Newry and Armagh)
Flanagan, Phil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hay, William (Speaker)
Hazzard, Chris (South Down)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Kinahan, Danny (South Antrim)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCallister, John (South Down)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McClarty, David (East Londonderry)
McCorley, Ms Rosaleen (West Belfast)
McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
McDevitt, Conall (South Belfast)
McDonnell, Alasdair (South Belfast)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McGahan, Ms Bronwyn (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
McIlveen, David (North Antrim)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McKevitt, Mrs Karen (South Down)
McLaughlin, Ms Maeve (Foyle)
McLaughlin, Mitchel (South Antrim)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (South Belfast)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ó hOisín, Cathal (East Londonderry)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Rogers, Sean (South Down)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 April 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Boston Marathon Explosions

Mr Speaker: Mr Alex Attwood has been given leave to make a statement on the explosions at the Boston marathon which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order or discuss any other matter until this item has been dealt with.

Mr Attwood: On behalf of the House, I thank you, Mr Speaker, for facilitating the House to make comments and express condolences to the people of Boston on what happened last night. On behalf of the SDLP, I convey sympathy and condolences to the Boston Mayor, Tom Menino, the governor of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick, the people of Boston and the marathon participants and their families.

There has been a particular relationship not only between Ireland and Boston but between Derry and Boston, Belfast and Boston, and the people of Northern Ireland and the people of Boston. All of us who have been to Boston will know that the city is at once American, European and Irish. Consequently, the images on our screens last night, which showed what happened in Boston yesterday, seem all the more chilling and telling.

Many of us will have heard the interview with Kevin Cullen, the Boston journalist who is very well known to the politicians and people of Ireland and the North. He told the story of a young boy who greeted his father as he passed the marathon finishing line. The child then returned to his mother and sister, only to be caught up in the bombing, and he lost his life. Kevin captured the awfulness and the loss that happened on the streets of Boston yesterday. When I was a little younger, I had the great opportunity to run the Boston marathon on two

occasions, and there is nothing like it, coming down that finishing stretch with a sense of achievement, fun and, for many people, contributing to charitable causes. All of that is in sharp and chilling contrast to the images of Boston that we saw yesterday. The achievement, the fun and the fundraising are the measure of the Boston marathon, and nothing takes away from that.

We should remember today not just the people of Boston but the people of other countries and places who yesterday similarly lost people in tragic and sudden circumstances as a consequence of terror. We should also remember that the scenes and means of terror in Boston yesterday were previously visited on us and were our experience — bombs in a crowded street in refuse bins leading to the death of a child. In remembering the people of Boston, we should also remember that there are others for whom the pain and poignancy of what happened yesterday are relevant to their own life.

Mr Spratt: On behalf of my party, I extend sincere sympathy to the people of Boston and, indeed, the United States on the tragedy that unfolded yesterday. As Mr Attwood said, on a day when there was fun in the city and folks were enjoying themselves, suddenly, mayhem and terror struck. This morning, I listened to that journalist tell the very poignant story of the eight-year-old boy being killed and his sister and mother being injured after the father had just run the marathon.

As Mr Attwood also said, terror has struck our streets many times, and similarly innocent people have paid the price. From no matter what quarter terrorism comes, it is wrong and cannot be condoned in any circumstance or situation. So I extend our sympathy, prayers and thoughts to the mayor and people of Boston and to the wider communities that have been affected because I am sure that, as the day unfolds, we will find that people from, perhaps, many parts of the world have been seriously injured or whatever. Our thoughts are with the injured — some very seriously injured,

with limbs missing and all the rest of it — and with the heroic people who are dealing with them. It shows you the heroic way in which the emergency services go in and get started at a very early stage.

Mr Hussey: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I express deepest sympathy to the people of Boston, its mayor and governor on the loss of life at this event. There is no doubt that the people who carried out this evil are terrorists. You cannot describe them as anything else. Their intention was to terrorise, and they have succeeded.

As I drove up here today, I heard the reports on Radio Ulster, which started by playing the sound of the bombs going off. That terror will be revisited on people who live in Northern Ireland. I almost froze as I drove up the road because I immediately thought of Omagh on 15 August 1998, when my town was visited by evil people. The fear came back to me that we could see that visited on us again. On 15 June 1988, in Lisburn, six soldiers were murdered at a similar event by terrorists. No excuse can be made for that type of activity. I listened to the story of the father crossing the line and his eight-year-old son running into his arms. I am not a father, but, if I were and I could hold my eight-year-old son and share that moment with him, it would be a moment I would never forget. However, some evil people decided that they were going to detonate a bomb. How can any human being do that to another? The father's love for his eight-year old son was clearly there for all to see; then he was told that his son was dead — just like that. Nothing can justify that. It could never be justified anywhere. It could not be justified here, and it cannot be justified in Boston.

My thoughts will be with the people of Boston over the coming days, but my thoughts will also be with those who have lost relatives in similar circumstances, particularly the families of the soldiers who were murdered on 15 June 1988. They were six soldiers who needlessly lost their life in a similar situation. Terrorists copy each other, and I hope that the American president's vow that these people will be caught will be carried through. It is unfortunate that that did not happen here. Let us hope that the American president can follow that through.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In the first instance, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I send our condolences to the families who lost loved ones yesterday in Boston. All of us saw the television footage last night of what is obviously a massive sporting event — indeed, a massive civic event for

Bostonians — being interrupted in this way and people losing their life. Our condolences and thoughts are very much with those families. I also send our best wishes to all those who have been injured. We wish them a very speedy recovery.

Alec Attwood referred to the great connection between Derry and Boston. Many people will remember Derry Boston Ventures and recent initiatives between the people of our city and of Boston. Indeed, many former mayors, even some who served in the House, have visited Boston on behalf of the city. I know that the current mayor, Kevin Campbell, has been in contact with his counterpart in Boston this morning to send condolences on behalf of the people of Derry and, no doubt, the people of Ireland.

As we think of that — again, Mr Attwood referred to this — there were other people in other places who yesterday lost their life as a result of sudden or tragic death by explosion. They should also be in our thoughts this morning. Tá siad inár smaointe.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Attwood for bringing this matter to the Assembly this morning. It is very appropriate that we in Northern Ireland who have established such strong links with the United States, particularly with Boston and Massachusetts, should stand here this morning to express our sympathy with those who have lost their life, been seriously injured or have suffered trauma from what has happened and to express our solidarity with the people of the United States.

It was not just an attack on the people of Boston or Massachusetts; it was an attack on the international community. It was the Boston marathon, which is one of the most prestigious — if not the most prestigious — marathon races around the world, attracting participants from a range of countries, including Northern Ireland and elsewhere in these islands. It was perhaps the softest of soft targets, when people were trying to relax, enjoy and appreciate a sporting competition and to appreciate people having fun and having a good time with their families. At no time should people have to have any sense of guard or vigilance about terrorist threats, but, particularly in those circumstances, people really should not have to be alert and worried about things going on around them.

Of course, it brings things close to home as well, given that we have gone through such episodes in our own recent tragic history. We are, therefore, well placed to understand the feelings that are there in Boston this morning.

As others have said, it is also important that we recognise that many other sad and tragic deaths occurred yesterday, including those that resulted from bomb attacks, most notably in Iraq. The victims of those attacks are also very much in our thoughts.

Obviously, Boston has a certain poignancy for us all. Many of us have been there; I was there only last November in support of the Derry-Boston-Donegal link through Atlantic Bridge. I have no doubt that I walked past the site of the bomb on many occasions, which brings it home that a normal city doing a proper day's business has been very badly disrupted. I hope that those responsible will be brought to justice as soon as possible.

10.45 am

Mr Allister: Those of us from this part of the world know all about the random horror of terrorism, which strikes where and when it is least expected and adds greatly to the shock and horror that results. Therefore, we can truly empathise with the people of Boston and the victims of this savage terrorist attack.

Mr Hussey rightly reminded us not only of the generality of the great swathe of terrorism to which Northern Ireland was subjected but of specific incidents, such as the Lisburn attack when, again, wicked terrorists took advantage of the gathering of people on a fun occasion to wreak havoc and leave a trail of death and destruction.

My hope is that, in the United States, those who perpetrated this dastardly deed will be hunted down and, unlike on so many occasions in this part of the world, they will be made amenable and made to pay the price for their crimes in full. At no stage should those terrorists, whoever they may be, be rewarded for their terrorism. I trust that that will not happen, as, sadly, it has happened here.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Mr Attwood for bringing the matter to the House. Like all my colleagues, I was absolutely appalled and shocked when I learned of the events in Boston, and, like my colleagues, I listened to that very moving interview on Radio Ulster this morning. It brings it home to us as individuals or as parents the absolute pain and agony that random acts of terror can inflict in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, someone's life is changed forever, with the sadness that that brings.

I agree with Mr Hussey that thousands of people across Northern Ireland and, indeed, the

UK, will have been reminded today of their experiences in the past number of years here and the pain that was visited on them. Other families around the world will be reminded of how their lives changed so dramatically and painfully in the blink of an eye. So, we have to think about the victims and send our good wishes to those who have been injured for their recovery. Today and in the weeks and months that follow, we have to remember in our thoughts and prayers the families that are suffering and have lost a loved one, because their pain will stay with them for a great many years. We must all be reminded of that and of how quickly that change was visited on them on what should have been a fun day.

People from my constituency, as well as people probably from neighbouring Newry and Armagh, were in Boston raising money for the Southern Area Hospice. Such events, which people go to to raise money to help and support others, bring out the very best in human nature. That it should end in such horror has truly shocked and appalled each and every one of us.

I hope that those responsible are brought to justice speedily and dealt with accordingly. We cannot tolerate this type of random act of terror that threatens lives and visits pain on people. I associate myself with the comments of colleagues who have expressed their sympathy and condolences to the families, and I wish those who are injured a full and speedy recovery.

Assembly Business

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Questions for priority written answer that Members from my party put to the Minister of Finance and Personnel were answered in a disrespectful and discourteous way. We expect higher standards from our Ministers. I would like the House to be aware that we are concerned about this.

Mr Speaker: As the Member will know, I have no responsibility for how Ministers answer questions. However, let me say that I do have a responsibility to the House to allow Members to raise such issues of concern and to get them on the public record in the hope that all Ministers are listening. The issue has been raised by all parties in the Chamber from time to time, when they have felt very vexed that Ministers are not answering questions in the way in which Members feel they should be answered. It is only right that I, as Speaker, allow Members to raise issues that are of deep concern to them. The Member has it on the record now.

Executive Committee Business

CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2013

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I beg to move

That the draft CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2013 be approved.

This is a small element of the wider agenda and ambition that we need to have to deal with climate change, global warming and energy efficiency. My view is that we got an insight into the public appetite for dealing with global warming and energy efficiency from the very strong public response in favour of the single-use carrier bag levy that commenced in our shops last Monday, 8 April. Although that is a relatively small matter in the grand order of things — it is very relevant to the businesses affected — it is an example of where we need to go and how we need to escalate our energy efficiency and climate change responses. I hope that, across a range of initiatives in government and the Department of the Environment (DOE) in particular, there will be more manifest evidence of going in that direction.

I bring the motion before the Assembly with the approval of both the Executive and the Environment Committee. I acknowledge the work of the Environment Committee on the matter. It is very technical and can be a bit of a fog at times. Nonetheless, the Executive and the Environment Committee have both come to the place that I recommend. The carbon reduction commitment (CRC) scheme has been simplified and improved from its original format. That is what is behind the efficiency scheme order. In order that scheme participants throughout Britain and Northern Ireland can benefit from the significant financial savings and the reduction in the administrative burden that will be provided by the changes to the scheme, it is necessary for the 2013 CRC order to be approved formally by each of the devolved Administrations before it can be made at Westminster.

I will explain some of the background to the CRC scheme. It is a mandatory trading scheme aimed at improving energy efficiency and cutting carbon dioxide emissions in large public and private sector organisations that typically spend more than £500,000 a year on electricity costs. There are a number of

schemes rolled out by government to encourage businesses to deal with energy efficiency. This is one of three types of scheme, and it targets large public and private sector organisations that have electricity spend on that scale.

In Britain and Northern Ireland, there are 2,126 organisations in the scheme, accounting for around 10% of the carbon emissions of Britain and Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, there are only 48 participants: 29 from the public sector and 19 from the private sector. The scheme was introduced in April 2010, and since then stakeholders have argued that it is too complex and administratively burdensome. I have some sympathy with that when it comes to the practice of the scheme, although I believe that, in principle, the scheme is appropriate.

The scheme, as it currently operates, required participants to monitor and report energy usage and pay Treasury an allowance of £12 per ton of carbon dioxide associated with their energy use. So, at the end of each year, those 48 businesses and public sector organisations in Northern Ireland account for their energy usage. They then have a multiplier of £12 per ton of carbon dioxide, which they then pay the Government as a tax in order to deal with energy efficiency and encourage them to reduce their use of energy, thereby reducing the tax that they pay per ton of carbon dioxide used.

The scheme fell out of favour following the decision by Treasury in October 2010 to discontinue the recycling of the revenue it generated to the scheme's participants. That decision effectively changed the scheme into a tax measure, where the proceeds would be retained by Treasury as a revenue stream to assist with government finances. Taxation is an excepted matter, and therefore it is not within the competence of the Assembly to decide to leave the scheme. There has been discussion on that, but, given that tax is an excepted matter, it does not fall within our competence to say that we are not going to stay within the scheme.

In recognition of those concerns, the Chancellor announced that the London Government would seek major savings in the administrative costs through simplification of the scheme and that, if those savings could not be found, he would bring forward an alternative environmental tax. In his autumn statement on 5 December 2012, the Chancellor announced that the scheme would continue but in a more simplified and cost-effective format.

What does that mean? The simplifications that are being proposed, following an extensive consultation in 2012, to which there were seven Northern Ireland responses, and a DOE stakeholder event, are significant and will reduce the administrative and financial costs to the scheme's participants by, we believe, about 55%. The key changes include a reduction in the number of fuels covered by the scheme from 29 to two. That will particularly benefit NI participants involved in quarrying. They use a lot of kerosene, which is now exempted from the scheme. For the final two years of the first phase of the new CRC, 2012-13 and 2013-14, the allowance costs will be significantly reduced. The simplification of the scheme is being rolled out in two phases, starting now in April 2013 and accelerating in March 2014. We are doing that with the agreement of the scheme participants, 70% of whom said that it should be rolled out in two phases.

Secondly, the simplification also involves the removal of overlap with other schemes, namely climate change agreements and the EU emissions trading scheme. Those were the other schemes that I referred to earlier as the family of three to deal with the energy efficiency challenge.

Thirdly, there will be an abolition of performance league tables, which will be replaced by an annual publication of participants' aggregated energy use and emissions data. There was criticism of the performance league table for being confusing, if not misleading, and the annual publication of energy use and emissions data is a more rigorous way of ensuring the accountability of those who are involved in the scheme and allowing those involved in the scheme to use the reputational benefit of a reduction in energy use to the benefit of their organisations and businesses.

Fourthly, there is a commitment to monitor the impact and cost-effectiveness of the scheme and for it to be subject to review in 2016.

In his autumn statement last October, the Chancellor said that there will be a full review in 2016 and added:

"the tax will be a high priority for removal when the public finances allow."

I am not necessarily in sympathy with that assertion, and I may have a difference of view on that matter, but that appears to be the ambition of the Chancellor.

11.00 am

What are the benefits of the scheme? It has been assessed that the simplifications will radically reduce the administrative cost to participants by more than half, which equates to savings of around £272 million up to 2013 across Britain and Northern Ireland. For Northern Ireland companies, the removal of kerosene and light fuel oil from the qualifying fuels will bring overall average cost reductions of over 12%. However, that change will particularly and disproportionately benefit Northern Ireland companies involved in quarrying, which will see, in our view, a reduction in their costs of between 50% and 70%.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will. Am I allowed to give way during a statement?

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. I have a query about that last aspect. Is that a saving on current costs to those Northern Ireland businesses, or a saving on what the proposed costs may have been?

Mr Attwood: I believe that it is a saving on current costs. That has been affirmed by somebody sitting on the right.

I am sure that the quarrying industry, which has made representations to me and to the Department of Finance and Personnel, will welcome the fact that, at a minimum, the savings will be 50% and, at maximum, maybe 70%. I have not picked up in recent conversations on the scheme that the quarrying representatives are challenging that or raising further queries about the new simplified scheme.

Overall, it is estimated that the simplified scheme will reduce emissions from participants in Northern Ireland by 5% up to 2013. In the grand order of things, 5% is not a lot, but I am great believer that the aggregate of diverse acts from businesses in the public sector contribute to ambitions, including the ambition that Northern Ireland should be a world leader in carbon reduction, which, in my view, is an ambition that we should shape and scope as we go forward. That is the ambition of the Scottish Government, and it is one that we should share.

In closing, and before I respond to any points that are raised, I thank my Executive colleagues for their support for the CRC scheme. There was a bit of discussion on it, but given that it was a tax and, therefore, an excepted matter, we did not have much flexibility to go down certain roads that some might have aspired to. I also record my thanks to the members of the Environment Committee who have provided helpful comment on the development of policy and legislation. Their observations are welcome. I thank the Chair and the previous Chair for their diligence as I have sought to bring the legislation to the Assembly. I am pleased that we are having this debate today and that I have been able to explain a little more about the benefits of simplification of the CRC scheme.

This is the critical point: the revised scheme will continue to exert pressure, and that is a driver for large energy-intensive organisations in the public and private sectors to deliver cost-effective energy efficiency improvements. That will not only help to reduce their energy costs and improve their business competitiveness, but will, in turn, lead to a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, which is what we all desire. The scale of energy costs in public and private organisations in the North is a very significant environmental and economic challenge. More will have to be done to deal with the issues of energy costs and energy security, and a reduction in energy usage. In a significant but small way, the CRC scheme is a contribution to the latter ambition. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I rise as Chair of the Committee for the Environment to support the motion. The Committee has been supportive of the scheme, formerly known as the carbon reduction commitment scheme, since the Department first outlined proposals way back in April 2008. In the interim, the Committee has continued to receive regular updates from the Department on the scheme's progress and operation, and the benefits to Northern Ireland.

Last July, the Department informed the Committee that, since its introduction, the scheme had attracted considerable criticism. Participants felt that the scheme was unnecessarily complex, costly to administer and that aspects of the scheme overlapped other climate change and energy efficiency policies. In response, the UK Government committed to simplifying the scheme.

The Committee shared the Minister's concerns that, as a result of changes made during the

comprehensive spending review, the CRC scheme would no longer be recycling revenue raised to participants but diverting it to public finances instead. Committee members expressed concern that the scheme had become very different from that originally agreed by the Committee, the Executive and the Assembly in 2009. The Committee sought clarification from the Department on the possible implications resulting from the withdrawal of participation in the scheme by the Northern Ireland Executive. The Department advised that, because the nature of the scheme had changed through the removal of the revenue-recycling element, it was now regarded as a tax, which is an excepted matter. The Minister mentioned that.

On 22 March 2012, the Committee considered the Department of Energy and Climate Change UK consultation on a simplified scheme. The consultation contained proposals aimed at creating a leaner and refocused scheme that would deliver its energy efficiency targets while making compliance easier and less burdensome for participants. The Minister advised the Committee that he fully supported the scheme and would wish it to continue. The Minister outlined that the new simplified scheme had the potential to provide a real reduction in costs of over 12% on average for participating Northern Ireland companies. This would be achievable because the number of participating fuels would be reduced from 29 to two, and the scheme would now cover only emissions generated from the consumption of electricity and gas.

Another benefit outlined by the Minister is the reduction of administrative costs across the UK. Savings in Northern Ireland would be brought about through a variety of measures such as the removal of footprint reports and measuring electricity using only half-hourly meters. In addition, practical measures such as reduced requirements on maintaining records and simplifying allowance sales would help to reduce the administrative burden for all Northern Ireland participants.

The Committee formally considered the draft statutory instrument at its meeting on 28 February 2013, and it has been noted that the House of Lords and House of Commons Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments passed a motion to approve it on 25 March.

The Committee for the Environment supports the motion, but it will continue to seek departmental updates on the operation of the CRC, its impact and the compliance costs of CRC on participants.

I will speak very briefly to add a few thoughts as an individual MLA and not as the Chair of the Committee. As we look back at the past few weeks of severe weather and frequent flooding all over Northern Ireland, we really need to think seriously about carbon emission to mitigate the difficulties that come from the effects of climate change on Northern Ireland. This is a good scheme, although it is very disappointing that the revenue gathered will now go back to the Treasury and will not be retained in Northern Ireland to be ploughed back into schemes to help with measures to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I want to say a few words to welcome the scheme.

I have had the privilege of representing my party on the Committee over the past number of years. We were genuinely concerned when the scheme came before the Committee because the original scheme was designed to divert moneys back to support companies and help them to meet their targets. Though I support some of the measures in the new scheme and the order before the Chamber today, I say to the Minister that, in setting targets, we must ensure that we make the resources available to help those people to achieve them.

I know that this is an excepted matter and that the money will go back into the centre, but I ask the Minister to bid for some of those moneys, reclaim them and use them to support those companies. Also, as we set targets in the future, whether they are European targets or our own, as a small region doing its bit to tackle climate change and assist in carbon reduction, money should be ring-fenced. It is unfair that we bring in new measures and regulations without giving companies and people the tools and resources to achieve them.

I support the order, but I would like the Minister to recognise those points.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for opening on the issue and outlining some of the detail of what is, ultimately, a complex scheme.

The carbon reduction commitment energy efficiency scheme is, for me, an example of regulation driving innovation. As a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, and indeed as an individual MLA, I have visited a number of businesses, including users of high volumes of energy that would be covered by the scheme, a recent example being when the Committee visited Bombardier.

The company was rightly very proud to show us its new building and explain to us how energy efficient they had made it. I have no doubt that this regulation was one of the drivers for that, but so was the business case because, as well as helping us to reduce carbon emissions, encouraging businesses to go down the line of increasing their energy efficiency makes them more competitive on a global scale. As we well know, and we know only too well, energy costs are among the highest costs to businesses and one of the key issues in trying to reduce costs. This scheme encourages businesses to move in the right direction.

I have to say that I regret the removal by the current Government of the recycling of revenue, which was mentioned by all Members who have spoken so far. I am on record as saying at the time that I thought it a retrograde step. It is a shame that the Finance Minister is not here because he often talks about green taxes as though I am responsible for them all. As will be noted, our Environment Minister is not responsible for this measure, so the one Green Party MLA in the House is certainly is not responsible for it. Though I support many aspects of the CRC energy efficiency scheme, I do not think that anyone can claim that it is here thanks to me.

The removal of the recycling of revenue is regrettable because we now have a stick approach to business. I suppose that the carrot is increased competitiveness and a reduction in costs through improvements in energy efficiency, but what we could have done, by recycling the costs from the tax back in through the businesses, was speed up the process of change.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Certainly.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, though the scheme drives energy efficiencies, there is a danger that it could also drive the exportation of jobs, particularly by companies that use high volumes of energy? It is equally important that the European Community place the same high standards and similar pressures on energy users elsewhere so that we are not simply exporting jobs to other parts of the world.

11.15 am

Mr Agnew: I take the Member's point. We will not achieve the purpose of reducing emissions if we simply export the problem of climate change and of emitting vast amounts of carbon

and other greenhouse gases and allow other countries to do it. We have to look at ways of ensuring that that does not happen, and that is the point that I am making with the approach of driving the resources that come from the tax element of the scheme back through businesses. That would have given those businesses not just an incentive for change but a further resource to help them through that change. It would speed up the process, drive innovation forward in the UK and improve the competitiveness of businesses even further.

Today's order will allow the changes that are needed. It is right that the scheme has been reviewed. We have looked at its impact — the UK Government, essentially, have looked at its impact — on businesses, and, where the scheme was not working, we have come back with changes. Largely, I support those changes, because it is an energy efficiency scheme but the order is about making the scheme itself more efficient.

However, I would like to ask the Minister a question. In the original proposals, it was reduced down to include four fuels, because those four fuels were said to make up 95% of fuel use. I am concerned that it is now being reduced further to two fuels. Is the Minister aware of the impact on the percentage of fuel use of taking out those other fuels? I see that he is smiling: he may not have the information there. I am happy for him to provide it at a later date. I am happy with the reduction from 100% coverage of fuels to 95%, and I can see the sense in reducing the burden on businesses. However, I want to know what that impact will be.

Overall, the Green Party supports the scheme. It is an example of where the green agenda and the business agenda can complement each other, as happened when we worked together on the green new deal, which, unfortunately, the Executive rejected. However, we are seeing more and more where the business agenda and the green agenda can complement each other, and the scheme is another example of that.

Mr Attwood: I thank all Members who contributed. I will respond to the points that have been raised.

As the Chair of the Environment Committee said, the scheme has, under Treasury rules, been deemed to be a tax, and, consequently, you cannot withdraw from it. That said — in order that I do not mislead the House in any way — the Department for Education in London has withdrawn from the scheme, because

Michael Gove, the Education Minister in London, has, as people will be aware, various views on the world and, for good or ill, the determination to see them through. Somehow or other, he has been able to negotiate with the Treasury so that English schools will not be captured by the new scheme. However, there is a kick in that: as I understand it, because of Michael Gove's approach and the Treasury's consent for his schools to withdraw from the scheme, the English schools will have to pay a contribution out of their budgets, assessed at 2012-13 figures, towards payments into the Treasury as an alternative means of making a contribution. As a consequence, and as I understand it, the English schools will pay more in their contribution under this scheme than the Northern Ireland Departments will pay under the order. It does not seem to me to be a very wise approach to seek to opt out of a scheme if the consequence is that we would pay more to the Treasury or suffer consequences for the block grant. Therefore, I did not think that that was a feasible way to proceed.

The Chair also touched on the challenge of energy efficiency. Last week, I chaired the most recent meeting of the adaptation subgroup of the cross-departmental working group, which is made up of all the Departments seeking ways that we can adapt our policies and practices to deal with climate change and lowering emissions. I think that we still have a mountain to climb when it comes to energy efficiency in the Government's estate. As officials will know, I expressed frustrations that, although we gather and talk, we are not driving things. I will not deny that that comment is as much about me, as the person who chairs the group, as it is about any other Department.

Mr Boylan raised a number of questions, one of which was about targets. Late last month, a pre-consultation went out — it was not even a consultation — about the potential scope and shape of a climate change Bill. London has climate change legislation, and the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales have Climate Change Acts, but we do not have one here. We need to have one here to capture in our domestic law our contribution to climate change. We will have to get our heads around how we are going to deal with targets and whether we should proceed with a voluntary approach or, as I believe we should, proceed with putting challenging emission targets in a climate change Bill.

I am not anticipating the outcome of that debate. We have not had a proper consultation yet, proposals have not gone to the Executive yet, and no Bill has been drafted yet, but, in

testing the public mood in this pre-consultation, we have to get our heads around whether we are seriously up for having challenging targets in a climate change Bill.

The point that Mr Boylan made about targets is that we have to get our heads around the fact that a low-carbon economy is the only sustainable way forward and that it is the best way forward for economic growth in the North of Ireland. If we do not embrace the concept that sustainable development based on reductions in carbon emissions is the best economic model, we will not be able to compete on this island, never mind globally. Businesses and farmers, as well as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and other Departments, have to get their heads around that.

I say all that because three international visitors to Belfast are with the new chief executive of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) over yesterday, today and tomorrow, and he is taking them to meet the Department of the Environment (DOE), the NIEA and the business community. Part of the purpose of those conversations is to escalate the understanding of what a low-carbon economy might look like.

A former vice-president of DuPont Global is one of that triumvirate, and I met him yesterday afternoon. He told me that people have to understand the connection between what he referred to as the "denominator" and the "enumerator". I do not know what those words mean, but he explained what they mean for DuPont's business practice. I do not know whether DuPont is a world leader in business for carbon reduction, but he said that the denominator is reducing carbon reduction and that the consequence is the enumerator of more competitive business. That is the broader agenda that is touched on in the contributions to this order, and it is the broader agenda that our Government and the DOE, in my view, have to lead, push and sponsor.

If you look at best practice in energy efficiency in the North and consider companies such as Bombardier, Delta Print and Packaging and a number of other US investors, you will see that that is the business model that they are increasingly adopting. That is because it is the successful, ethical, economically productive model to use in the future.

Steven Agnew, as is his nature when he questions Ministers, always asks the question that the Minister does not have the answer to.

Why have we reduced from four fuels to two? I do not know, but I will get back to him on that matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme Order 2013 be approved.

Parental Leave (EU Directive) (Maternity and Parental Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the Parental Leave (EU Directive) (Maternity and Parental Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval for the Parental Leave (EU Directive) (Maternity and Parental Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013, which were made on 6 February 2013 and came into operation on 8 March. The regulations are subject to the confirmatory Assembly procedures, which require that a plenary debate be arranged to approve the regulations no later than six months after the regulations — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Clear the Gallery. The House is suspended for two minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 11.26 am and resumed at 11.28 am.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Minister to continue.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The regulations implement the 2010 Council directive on parental leave, which stipulates that all European Union member states must provide unpaid parental leave for at least four months. The 2010 directive also sets parameters for considering the applicability of the right based on a child's age.

The directive states that any worker returning from parental leave should have the right to apply for flexible working. Although that requirement is already largely met by existing flexible working entitlements, which are the same in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the right does not currently exist for those who have

a temporary contract of employment with an agency.

The primary aim of the revised directive is to provide working parents with greater flexibility to balance their work and family commitments. The directive also seeks to promote equality between men and women in labour market opportunities and treatment at work.

As employment legislation is a devolved matter, the Department for Employment and Learning was required to transpose the directive on behalf of the Executive by 8 March 2013. On 8 October 2012, my Department published a public consultation document that sought the views of stakeholders on the merits of introducing the minimum changes required by the directive. The document also sought views on the possibility of introducing changes beyond the minimum requirements that had already been explored by the UK Government as part of their modern workplaces consultation.

Although it was clear from the response to the consultation that there was an appetite for a more extensive examination of working parents' rights, there was no strong consensus on what changes should be made to parental leave entitlements beyond the minimum requirements of the directive.

As with the Great Britain consultation, it was apparent that there is a need for a much broader review of working parents' rights in Northern Ireland before any decisions can be made to effect changes to parental leave entitlements that would go beyond the minimum requirements of the directive. I therefore decided to implement the minimum requirements of the directive at this stage and to defer any decisions on any further extension to working parents' rights, pending a more comprehensive review of parental rights. I have just secured Executive approval to consult on proposals for a more fundamental sharing of parental leave rights. I intend to launch the shared parental leave consultation in early May.

11.30 am

The regulations before the Assembly today give effect to the minimum requirements set out in the revised directive. It may be helpful if I set out the general rights that are available to working parents and explain how the existing entitlements have been enhanced through the regulations before the House today. The right to unpaid parental leave is available to any employee who has been continuously employed for at least a year and who has or

expects to have parental responsibility for a child or is registered as the child's father. It permits working parents to take parental leave up until the child's fifth birthday or until the child's eighteenth birthday, if the child has a disability. Qualifying employees who are adoptive parents have a comparable right. They are entitled to take parental leave in the five-year period following the adoption or until the adopted child turns 18, if that is sooner. Parental leave, which is unpaid unless otherwise agreed, is limited to four weeks in any 12-month period unless more favourable arrangements are agreed between the employer and employee.

In line with the decision to address the minimum requirements of the directive, the regulations have now increased the maximum parental leave entitlement for all qualifying parents from 13 to 18 weeks. The Assembly's approval of the regulations fulfils the Executive's obligations to transpose the directive. The regulations make no other changes to the amount of parental leave available, and the general qualifying criteria remain unchanged. The entitlement to unpaid parental leave will continue to be available to both parents for each qualifying child. There will be no change to the maximum age of a child whose parents are entitled to take the leave. It will remain at the fifth birthday or the eighteenth birthday for a disabled child. The statutory entitlement to four weeks' leave in a 12-month period is also unchanged.

In seeking the Assembly's approval of the regulations, I think that it is appropriate for me to make reference to a second set of regulations that address a further requirement of the directive that employed parents returning from parental leave must have the right to request flexible working. Many employees who are parents and carers already have that right. However, until recently, agency workers with a contract of employment or an employment relationship with a temporary agency did not. As the directive required a change to that position, my Department made the Parental Leave (EU Directive) (Flexible Working) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013, which also came into effect on 8 March. Those regulations, which were subject to the negative resolution procedure, extended the right to request flexible working to employed agency workers who are returning to work from a period of parental leave. The two sets of regulations together ensure that Northern Ireland addresses fully the minimum requirements of the 2010 directive.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their scrutiny of this amending statutory rule. I am also grateful to the Committee for its recommendation that the regulations be confirmed by the Assembly. I hope that I have provided the House with a sufficient explanation of the purpose of the regulations. In my closing remarks I will of course respond to any points made by Members.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I thank the Minister. For anybody who said that employment and learning is not exciting, that showed you.

I want to first make a declaration that my wife is currently on maternity leave and so is affected by the regulation.

The Committee for Employment and Learning considered the proposals for the Parental Leave (EU Directive) (Maternity and Parental Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 on 23 January and agreed that it was content with the proposed statutory rule. The regulations implement Council directive 2010/18/EU on the revised framework agreement on parental leave, which establishes minimum standards designed to allow working parents to take periods of unpaid leave from work to care for their children. They amend provisions relating to parental leave in the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. At its meeting on 20 February, the Committee agreed to recommend that the regulations be confirmed by the Assembly, and we have not changed our mind since then.

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his comments and remind him that he has to declare an interest not only on behalf of his wife but on behalf of himself, because he will be subject to the changes. Of course, that did not detract in any way from the objectivity that the Chair deployed in scrutinising what was before the Committee and, indeed, the Assembly today.

It is worth stressing, while I have the opportunity, that this is part of a much wider review of employment law that we are undertaking. What is before the House is the minimum requirement that the Executive and Assembly have to meet under the EU directive, and, hopefully, we will establish that in the next few minutes with the approval of the statutory rule. However, it is part of a much wider landscape. In due course, we will consult on whether we wish to go beyond the minimum

requirement. I stress that that will be a decision for the Assembly to take in due course, after a period of consultation.

Members are also aware that there are moves in Great Britain with respect to the sharing of parental leave. Again, I stress that, last week, the Executive gave their approval for my Department to take forward a consultation on that matter as it relates to Northern Ireland. After we have briefed the Committee in the next few weeks, I hope that we will go out to consultation in the early phase of next month. In due course, we will come back to the House with the outcome of that process. That is part of a much wider review of employment law of which maternal and paternal rights are one aspect.

Although the Chair may reflect that, at times, these subjects can be very dry, I think it is important to acknowledge that they have an impact not only on business — it is important we take its views into account — but, most critically, on parents across Northern Ireland. We have a philosophy that the more you invest in and respect people in the workplace, the more productivity you will get on the far side. As we look to compete internationally on the basis of the quality of our people and their skills, the more we respect people in the workplace the better. Having the necessary flexibilities and respecting the views of business and investing in people at the same time, we stand to be able to punch above our weight internationally.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

*That the Parental Leave (EU Directive)
(Maternity and Parental Leave) Regulations
(Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.*

Assembly Business

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not quite sure about this, so maybe you could clarify it for me. There was a disruption in the House, and, like everybody else, I was watching what was going on in the Public Gallery. When I turned around, there was no one in the Chair. I am not sure what state the House was in at that stage. Were we in recess? Was the House adjourned? Was it just a state of flux?

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, the Minister was in full flow as well. I had suspended the House, and I had left the Chair. There certainly will be an investigation into what happened in the Public Gallery.

Private Members' Business

Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Mr Allister has advised that he is not in a position to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill today. However, as it still stands as an item of business on the Order Paper, it will need to be disposed of formally.

Mr Allister: I will give a brief explanation, if I may. Members will recall that, at Consideration Stage, an amendment was accepted by the House according a role to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Commissioners. The commission is now seeking engagement on resulting issues. If the Further Consideration Stage proceeded and was completed today, there would be no further opportunity to make any adjustments to the Bill. Therefore, in order to make engagement with the commission meaningful, it seems necessary to me that we do not proceed with Further Consideration Stage today. I hope that that explanation makes sense to the House. I would say that, in any event, the stage would have been very brief by virtue of the dearth of amendments.

Not moved.

Mr McKay: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will take a very quick point of order. Let me say to all sides of the House that I have no intention of opening out the debate. If there is a point of order to clarify any issue that Mr Allister raised, I will happily take it, but let us not widen out the debate.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can you clarify whether changes made at Consideration Stage cannot now be undone? Furthermore, at what stage would you inform the Assembly that the Bill is invalidated —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McKay: — as it is clearly incompetent as it now stands?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Allister has gone some way to clarifying why he cannot move the Bill this morning. I am worried that we could end up opening up the whole debate on a Bill that has not been moved in the Chamber. I am being careful here. I think that we should move

on. I am trying to be fair to all sides of the House. The Member who sponsors a Bill, especially a private Member's Bill, controls it. He or she decides at what stage a Bill should be moved in the House. In the past, Ministers have come to the House and not moved Bill stages. I am being careful in guiding the House that we should not open up debate on a Bill that has not been moved. I really believe that we should move on.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it on the same subject matter?

Mr McCartney: It is about the business of the House.

Mr Speaker: OK.

Mr McCartney: Thank you very much, a Cheann Comhairle. We are tasked with having full business in the House. In the past, we have been lectured about having half days and not enough legislation. Indeed, the person who lectures us about having half days and not enough legislation has come to the House today and afforded us a half day. He had a chance to bring legislation, and he failed. It reminds me of the old Irish proverb "Is fada an bóthar nach bhfuil casadh ann": it is a long road that has no turn.

Mr Speaker: Once again, it is a much wider issue than that which the Member has raised this morning. Yes, in the past, all sides of the House have raised issues about the business of the House. The Business Committee has responsibility for the business of the House. Those issues should be raised there and not on the Floor.

Further Consideration Stage of the Bill has not been moved. The next item of business will be Question Time. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 11.42 am.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn and require a written answer. Trevor Lunn is not in his place for question 3.

Education and Skills Authority: Rural Schools

4. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Education whether he will consider placing additional requirements similar to those in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 on the Education and Skills Authority when considering any rural school closure. (AQO 3792/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I have no plans to replicate the legislation that the Member refers to. However, I recognise the importance of viable rural schools to the sustainability of local communities, and that is reflected in my Department's sustainable schools policy.

The Education Bill includes powers for my Department to make regulations and issue guidance on the area planning process, including consultation. I will keep the matter under review, and, if necessary, I will use those powers to place requirements on the Education and Skills Authority in relation to consultation in respect of rural schools.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister accept that rural schools, despite the fact that they often have a smaller enrolment size, serve as an advantage to his Department in keeping otherwise exorbitant transport costs down? Does he also accept that school closures may, in some cases, lead to any subsequent savings being consumed by the ensuing increases in school transport costs?

Mr O'Dowd: I accept the Member's points. However, she needs to be aware that, from the outset of the area planning process, I have said that it is not budget-driven. I could continue with the budget that I have and keep open all the schools that we have across the board, but I do not believe that that would be a proper use of resources, and it certainly would not benefit

the education of our young people either. Before I make a decision about any school — in this instance, you refer to rural schools — based on the development proposal, I will take into account all the criteria that the Member refers to. The educational well-being of the child will be first and foremost, but we will also consider which alternative school pupils will travel to, transport arrangements etc. I believe that I have the flexibility to do that and to take such decisions, and I will take decisions based on those criteria in the future.

Mr Storey: The Minister will be well aware of the widespread concern in the rural community following the publication of the area plans for primary schools. That has caused concern out there, and I think that it was unnecessary. Sir Bob Salisbury made a recommendation in his report about the development of a policy for small rural schools, which the Minister has previously referred to in the House. Has he not put the cart before the horse? Would we not be in a better position if we had that policy first in order to determine the future shape of our rural primary schools?

Mr O'Dowd: I note the recommendation in Bob Salisbury's report. I will respond to the report in the House in a number of weeks' time.

Any small schools policy that is arrived at will be based on my departmental policy and where we are at this time. In relation to a small schools policy, there is a need to bring all the policies together on the one page and to look at the information and intelligence that we have garnered from area planning.

I think that a lot of the concerns about the information published in the area plans arose from the way in which the media published the information. They published lists of schools, particularly in rural communities, that did not meet the criterion of 105 pupils. I am already on the record as saying this, and I will put it on the record again: this is not a numbers game, and it is not an economic equation. This is an education equation that I am involved in. There are rural communities out there that require and will continue to have very small schools in their vicinity because that is what is right for them.

Mr McAleer: Will the Minister explain how the area planning process will improve attainment across all schools?

Mr O'Dowd: I want to see a network of sustainable schools that concentrate on the educational needs of our young people rather than on the survival of the school. There needs

to be a number of pupils in a school to ensure that the curriculum is being delivered. There also needs to be a significant number of pupils in a school to bring in resources. We want to ensure that there is sociability and so on in a school, because young people learning from each other is an important part of the learning experience.

The six criteria that we have set out for area planning are based on educational needs and the needs of communities in relation to education. I am confident that, if we continue to work at area planning, we will end up with a group of sustainable schools going into the future that are concentrating on the education of young people rather than on whether the school will survive into the next year.

Mr Dallat: I listened carefully to the Minister. I know that he is awash with reports and all sorts of things, but will he tell the House how he measures the likely impact of the closure of a rural school on a community? If we knew that, we might better understand the other issues that he discussed with us today.

Mr O'Dowd: I measure it through the development proposal process, which is a statutory process with two stages. First, there is a pre-consultation process, whereby the school's managing authority will engage both with the board of governors to discuss its future and with other interested parties. If the managing authority decides that the best way forward is to publish a development proposal for closure, a two-month consultation process begins in which I take written and verbal representations from interested parties — elected and unelected — and from schools, community leaders and so on. I have been through this process with several schools; indeed, I was with a school only yesterday to discuss a development proposal. So, I take all that information on board, I assess it against the sustainable schools criteria, one of which is strong links with the community, and I make a decision based on that.

We see everywhere the measure that we have of keeping unsustainable, unviable, educationally unfit schools open. We see young people leaving schools without proper numeracy and literacy and without proper examination results. They have not been given the opportunity in school to achieve their full capability. So, I need to take two measures into account: the sustainable schools policy and the development proposal; and the measure that, I have no doubt, Mr Dallat is perfectly aware of, which is the young people who, through no fault of their own, were allowed to attend

unsustainable schools throughout their educational career because no one had the courage to make the decision to close them.

Irish-medium Education: Peripatetic Teachers

5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to address the deficit in the number of peripatetic teachers in the Irish-medium sector. (AQO 3793/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Responsibility for providing peripatetic services to all grant-aided schools rests with the education and library boards. The boards have advised me that they are not aware of any shortage of such teachers for Irish-medium schools. The establishment of the Education and Skills Authority will allow for a strategic view to be taken of the provision of peripatetic services to all schools in the future.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response.

An n-aontódh an tAire liom gur chóir do mhúinteoirí san earnáil sin bheith líofa sa teanga Ghaeilge? Does the Minister agree that, in cases where peripatetic teachers are involved, particularly in the Irish-medium sector, they should be fully fluent in the language?

Mr O'Dowd: That is ideally the case, particularly where children are learning through the medium of Irish. I asked my Department to check whether any representations had been made on the issue either by Members or the sector. No representations have been made to date about shortages of such teachers. I will take the Member's comments on board and ask that further enquiries be made about the matter. Our Irish-medium sector is an integral and equal part of our education system, and it should receive services that are equal to the rest of our education system.

Mr Brady: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give us an indication of the growth of Irish-medium education over recent years? How many teachers are currently employed in the sector?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have the full figures in front of me for teachers in post in the Irish-medium sector, although it has grown over the past seven years in particular. We have seen significant growth in Irish-medium education and the provision of Irish-medium teachers. We

also have courses running in our teacher training colleges for Irish-medium teachers to deal with the demand from the community.

I can give the Member the increased intakes to the Irish-medium postgraduate certificate in education courses for the primary and post-primary sectors. There were 22 in total in 2007-08. To the end of the most recent academic year available — 2009-2010 — it was up to 28, so there has been an increase in those years. I will, however, provide the Member with the detailed figures that he requested.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Does he agree that it is vital that no sector be given a privileged position in our education system, including the Irish-medium sector, and that resources should be prioritised to where there is the most pressing need?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, we have a legislative duty to facilitate the Irish-medium sector. The sector has grown, and my Department reacts to the demand from the communities, pupils and parents. We will continue to do so. No sector is prioritised over any other. My Department reacts to need and to our statutory obligations in these matters.

Schools: Non-selective Systems

6. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Education, in light of recent commitments by Catholic trustees to move away from academic selection, what assurance he can give to parents about the performance internationally of non-selective systems. (AQO 3794/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: International evidence supports the case for removing academic selection to improve outcomes for all. Parents should be assured that a move away from academic selection is in the best interests of all our children. International evidence shows that it is key to raising standards across the whole education system. The best performing education systems internationally, such as that in Finland, are all mixed-ability systems that do not use academic selection as a criterion for entry into a school.

Poland's education system has been a rising star in international rankings. In 2003, Poland ranked 24th in the programme for international student assessment (PISA) rankings for 15-year-olds. By 2009, it had risen to 14th place, ahead of countries such as the USA, Sweden, France, Germany and the UK. Those startling

improvements in performance were achieved by a system that operates mixed-ability schooling. A former Polish Minister commented:

"The weaker pupils did better and the strongest ones carried on getting stronger."

We do not need to look abroad to see how standards can be maintained and improved in a mixed-ability environment. Our primary schools cater for all abilities. As was seen in the recent international comparisons, our education system at primary school level is among the best in the world. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for our post-primary system, but I am determined to change that.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers to this point. Does he accept that there is a role for streaming or banding in mixed-ability schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta. There is. Indeed, there is streaming and banding in many of our highest-performing non-selective schools. It is part of the system.

In recent days, it has come to my attention that some Members opposite and some of those who are involved in education discussions think that my view is that there should be no selective process at all once a child enters a school. That is not my objection to academic selection: my objection is that we select children on the basis of a number of questionable tests of the child's ability. Those tests then put them into a school. That is the wrong way to go. Children should enter a good school. When they enter that school, the school is quite right to set whatever testing regime it sees fits to identify the educational needs of the child and to teach to that child's needs. You will have different streams in those schools. That is only right and proper, because the school is not choosing pupils to meet the needs of the school; it is ensuring that pupils come through its doors and that it teaches to the abilities of those pupils. They challenge pupils of all abilities to move forward, and that is an excellent way forward.

2.15 pm

I used the example of our primary schools. No one objects to all-ability primary schools; no one objects to all socio-economic backgrounds in our primary schools; and our primary schools are some of the best in the world. The secret of

that is that, in that all-ability situation, children learn off each other, they challenge each other, and, as the Minister from Poland said, the weakest get stronger and the stronger get stronger again. That is what education is all about.

There needs to be greater clarity about the different positions on academic selection. We need to remove the emotiveness from the debate. We need to remove the political rancour from the debate. We also need to allow all the people who have an opinion on this matter to express it and debate it without being labelled as one thing or another or a party supporter or whatever it may be. I have challenged many organisations that have a position of wanting to end academic selection —

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

Mr O'Dowd: — to come out and say so.

Mr McDevitt: Another area where there is an awful lot of international evidence that we are not doing things right is the age at which we start children in school. Does the Minister agree that international evidence suggests overwhelmingly that we start our children too early in compulsory education? What steps is he taking to follow up on that evidence?

Mr O'Dowd: There needs to be a debate about that matter. It is certainly a subject that will require cross-departmental discussions. The school starting age of a child bears down on many factors of family life, but let us look at the education issues and what the Department has been involved in over this last number of years. As regards a child starting formal education, we have our preschool education setting, which is age-appropriate and deals with the needs of a child in that preschool year. When a child enters formal education in primary school, they now enter at what is known as the foundation stage, which is a less formal regime than many in the Chamber would recognise from their days in primary school. Those with younger children will understand better the foundation stage if their children are going through it. It has a greater emphasis on learning through play and association than would have been the case in the past, and there is no longer the rigid regime that was once in place for children. That is proving, in my view, to be a very effective way to teach our young people through age-appropriate education. We are beginning to see the benefits of that through our education system. So, although there are repeated concerns about school starting age, the

foundation stage has gone a long way to dealing with many of those concerns. I think that our preschool settings are dealing with those concerns, but I would not stymie the debate about school starting stage. It would, though, have to be a cross-departmental debate. There would have to be a lot of investigations carried out, because it affects many different factors of our daily life. The most important equation in that, however, is the child. So, I am happy to take part in the debate.

Mr Dickson: Minister, can you tell us what you are doing today and in the days to come to break the deadlock on post-primary transfer so that no more children in Northern Ireland will be labelled as failures at the age of 11?

Mr O'Dowd: What am I doing? I am engaging with different sectors and discussing the issue with them to see how we can move forward on the basis of international best practice and reassure parents that the way forward will ensure that their children have a pathway that will meet the needs of and, indeed, place demands on each child. As Education Minister, I support academic excellence. Of course I support academic excellence; it is the way forward. I support the challenging of young people in academia. I support a wide and varied curriculum. I think that the entitlement framework has changed the educational landscape going forward, allowing all young people to be challenged in relation to their abilities and allowing them to promote even abilities within themselves, whether they be academic or otherwise or a mixture of both.

I bring the challenge back to the Member: what is the Alliance Party doing? The Alliance Party's manifesto says, "End academic selection". This is why I say that all interested parties in the debate should be free to come out and debate it without being labelled as a supporter of the Minister or an objector to the Minister. You should come out and stand by what your education research, your policies and your social policies have shown you and encourage others to do likewise. We have to show the parents of young people of all age ranges that the vision we have for education can and does work. Indeed, many of our best performing schools are non-selective. You do not have to go to a school with the word "grammar" on the gate to go to university. In fact, I was talking to a senior university figure the other day, and I asked her how many of her young people came from non-selective school backgrounds. She told me that it was between 40% and 45%. You do not have to go to a grammar school —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: — to go to university. You have to go to a good school to achieve.

Mr Cree: I notice that, in his response, the Minister failed to refer to one of the most basic fundamentals of our education system: the regard given to parental choice. Whether he likes it or not, thousands of children still sit examinations every year, and I am deeply concerned that there is complacency from some parties about the unregulated nature of those examinations. Will the Minister assure us that, as long as there is parental demand for selection, whether he likes it or not, the option will remain open?

Mr O'Dowd: There is not parental demand for selection; there is parental demand for excellent education. I fully support parents in that, and I have spent the past five or six years with the education brief for my party and the past two years as Minister of Education ensuring that we drive towards that. The results coming out of our primary schools and the improved results coming out of our post-primary schools show that our policies are bedding in and beginning to work.

Where is the parental choice when a letter arrives from a school that sets an unregulated academic selection test telling parents that their child is not getting in? Where is the parental choice there? That is not parental choice. The child has been asked to sit a test that is very questionable in respect of its capacity to decide a child's ability and the school has decided that the child is not getting in.

Mr Storey: Nonsense.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: There is no parental choice there. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: There is greater parental choice when a parent brings their child to a non-selective school and the school says to the parent, "Regardless of the abilities of your child, we will ensure that we do everything we can to ensure that your child achieves everything they can". Those schools may ask children to go through a number of tests to see what their ability is. It is not the fact that thousands of children are sitting tests; it is that thousands of children are sitting the wrong tests, at the wrong

time and in the wrong place for their educational well-being.

Mr Allister: With the wrong Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member opposite ever gets enough votes to become Minister, he can take the job up. Until he gets enough votes to be Minister, he would be safer sitting in the corner and being quiet. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: The evidence is there. You may not agree with the evidence, but do not dismiss it with snide remarks from the opposite Benches or the corner. Take the evidence on, debate it and let parents —

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

Mr O'Dowd: Let parents —

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

Mr O'Dowd: — listen to a reasonable debate about the issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask that all questions and answers are made through the Chair.

Gregory Campbell is not in his place to ask question 7.

Schools: Rural Areas

8. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education, with regard to area planning, whether he can give an assurance that small schools in rural or isolated areas which are required going into the future but which are experiencing low enrolments will be protected. (AQO 3796/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Area planning is the mechanism for delivering the sustainable schools policy. Enrolment trends are only one of a full set of six criteria specified in the policy against which a school's sustainability is assessed. The policy is not used mechanistically to close schools that fall below enrolment thresholds. The policy also includes an accessibility criterion that provides guidance on home to school travel times. That recognises the particular needs of isolated rural communities. Where school managing authorities determine that a small school should be retained, the sustainable schools policy states that support should be

made available, if required, to ensure that the school is educationally sustainable.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I welcome the Minister's reassurance. Will local innovative solutions across the sectors and geographical boundaries be part of the process?

Mr O'Dowd: Sorry, Chair, I missed the last part of the Member's question. Is it possible for him to repeat it?

Mr Lynch: I will just repeat it all, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's reassurances and further ask whether local innovative solutions across the sectors and geographical boundaries will be part of the process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: And I remind Members that they should not read their questions. *[Laughter.]* Order.

Mr O'Dowd: My response to the Member is that, without doubt, they will be part of the solutions. Local communities know best the situation in their area. Now, they will have to be educationally sound local solutions. They will have to be tested against those criteria. The primary purpose of a school is — if you excuse the pun — education. Primary and post-primary schools are not there for any purpose if they are not achieving the educational well-being of young people. Rural communities deserve excellent education in the same way as urban communities do. I have engaged with rural communities and rural schools about innovative solutions, a number of which attract me very much because they are based on education. They are based on the understanding of the issue of education and the understanding of communities, particularly with regard to shared education. There are fine examples of that in the Fermanagh area, and I will visit Fermanagh tomorrow to discuss a number of those proposals as well. So, where local community solutions come forward, I will engage with them and, where they meet the criteria, they will be part of future plans.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. In saying that he will make his decisions purely on educational standards, does he not agree that the rural community may sometimes get to a point where that is the weight you need to take into account in making the decision? So will the Minister follow the Scottish system or look at the presumption against closure before he makes decisions?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not make any presumption when I come to a development proposal: I am open-minded in regard to all these matters. However, it is unfair to turn round to a rural community and say, "Well, you are small and isolated; I will give you a second-rate school. We will forget about you". If you want to decimate rural communities, give them poor education; give them substandard education; do not give them the same education as urban communities are used to.

My colleague, the Chair of the Education Committee, referred to the small schools policy. The small schools policy will be most tested on this area of how we deal with sustaining a school in an area where there is such a small community, perhaps within a broader one. I am keen to look at that area, and I think that there is a sound argument there, but we have to put the resources into that area to ensure that there is good education in it. We have to back it up. We have to back up our statement with resources for the school and not simply say, "Well, that's a small school; we will leave that there". So, let us back it up with resources and a policy that identifies the needs in those circumstances. The sustainable schools policy allows us to do that. Indeed, that is how I will look at it as I interpret it and make decisions around the sustainable schools policy.

Miss M McIlveen: Further to my comments yesterday in the debate on integrated education, particularly in relation to the role of the controlled sector support working group, will the Minister give serious consideration to that group being able to attend the area planning steering group? Can he confirm that representatives of CCMS and the new sectoral body for Catholic education attended the first meeting of that group?

Mr O'Dowd: Representatives of CCMS were there. An individual who is going onto the new sectoral body was also at the meeting, but he was there in his CCMS role.

I will give this serious consideration. I noted your comment yesterday on the working group and its role and functions in area planning and meant to respond to it in my speech. I will seriously consider whether we can facilitate them on the area planning working body, which may well be a good introduction for them into that field of work. I will take it into careful consideration and come back to the Member.

Primary Schools: Intake

9. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education, given the recent publication of the draft area plan for primary provision, what consideration is being given to the potential intake in primary schools over the coming years and the birth rate of specific areas, rather than just current roll numbers. (AQO 3797/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Education and library boards are the statutory planning authorities in their areas. They have adopted a needs model as the means of assessing the need for places. The model projects the need for places over a 15-year planning horizon at board and district council level up to 2025. It uses the most up-to-date, complete and reliable data available at any point in time. The boards' draft area plans use the projections from the model, as well as the current enrolments at existing schools.

The needs model provides information on the overall number of places likely to be needed at district council level. It is not designed to be used as the basis for making decisions about the siting, opening or closing of individual schools. Such decisions must take account of the local context, the individual circumstances of a school and the overall number of pupils to be catered for.

2.30 pm

Employment and Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 2 and 12 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Further Education: Visually Impaired People

1. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department is taking to make further education more accessible to visually impaired people. (AQO 3804/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Through the additional support fund, my Department provides £3.5 million each year to further education colleges for support and assistance to students with learning difficulties or disabilities. Students with a learning difficulty or disability are assessed to determine the level of support they require. For visually impaired students, adjustments may include technical aids, specialist software, learning material in alternative formats and personal support.

My Department provided funding for an information resource hub to signpost services for both existing and potential learners in order to improve access to information about college provision, services and the support available. The Department also provided funding for the development of online guides for disabled students. Those guides were developed by Disabled Go, the UK's leading provider of disabled access information. The guides provide information on campus layout and on hearing systems, lighting levels and signage. They help disabled learners, visitors and staff to access college premises and to make the best use of facilities.

Newly enrolled visually impaired students are offered orientation visits to allow them to become familiar with the layout of college buildings. Personal assistance is available to ensure their safety while transferring between classes. Students with a visual impairment are encouraged to make use of a buddy arrangement for campus navigation, especially in the event of an emergency. Other support includes the adaption of performance assessments to formats tailored to suit students' individual needs.

Further education colleges continue to liaise with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) to determine how best to encourage and support enrolments from blind and visually impaired students. For example, the South Eastern Regional College is working on a project with the RNIB in the Lisburn area. Under that project, the institute identifies prospective students and trains them in the use of specialist software before they embark on their further education studies.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for his answer, but does he accept that, for those who pass through further education in Northern Ireland who are visually impaired, the employment outcomes are extremely bleak? Indeed, in a recent survey, the RNIB has shown that only 25% of blind and visually impaired adults in Northern Ireland are in full-time paid employment. That is a dreadful indictment of the system that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, Mr Wells?

Mr Wells: Is it not a dreadful indictment of the system that it allows so many capable people to end up with no form of paid employment?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Wells for his question and for highlighting that issue. The first thing to do

is to stress that anyone who comes through either the further education system or the higher education system with a qualification is a peer and is of equal standing to anyone else with the same level of attainment, and should be viewed as just as employable. Obviously, we still have issues and barriers within the wider employer network in that regard, but I believe that many employers now recognise that blind or visually impaired people have a lot to offer to their workforce. My Department has a disability employment service, which has a number of programmes to assist people with a range of disabilities in the workplace. It is important that we continue to highlight that those are available, and if there are issues that we need to address around individual needs that have not been met, I am more than happy to do so for any person so affected.

Mr Swann: I am sure that the Minister is aware that there is a large decrease in the number of students with a hearing impairment now accessing further education. Will the Minister indicate what he is doing to address that situation?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee for highlighting the issue of hearing impairment. It is something that we are conscious of, and I know that there was some concern expressed about the drop in the number of enrolments in the higher education sector in particular, although I imagine that that concern also extends to the further education sector. Our provision is open to everyone, irrespective of the circumstances that they are coming from. We provide funding to the further education sector and the higher education sector to ensure that they can make the adaptations to facilitate the particular needs of individual students. In particular, we have managed to double the provision of training for sign language interpreters for deaf people in Northern Ireland over the past couple of years. That is a particular investment in ensuring that we have a strong cohort of trained professionals who are able to assist not just in the education sphere but in other aspects of life in Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. What discussions or engagements has he had with voluntary organisations that campaign on behalf of visually impaired people?

Dr Farry: The Department has had a number of discussions with a range of organisations that represent disabled people. There are two

aspects of the Department's work that are of most relevance, the first of which is that it directly funds the further and higher education sectors. Again, I stress that we provide significant funding to the colleges and universities, and that funding is available for them to deploy to support people.

The second aspect is the disability employment service, which is part of the wider employment service. Again, we have a number of programmes in that. We are constantly seeking to review what we offer, based on the advice that comes back from the community and voluntary sectors. I very much value their opinions and the front line experience that they can relate of the people whom they come across.

Mr P Ramsey: Following on from the question from the Member who is also the chair of the all-party group on visual impairment, will the Minister commit to meeting RNIB to look at more creative and unique ways of ensuring that visually impaired people are not further marginalised and isolated from employment opportunities? That subject is always on that all-party group's agenda.

Dr Farry: I assure the Member that I am more than happy to arrange a direct meeting with RNIB to discuss any particular issues that it wants to raise with me. That offers stands to any other bodies, and a number of them have had discussions with me over the past two years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn. I understand that questions 3 and 7 have been linked. Cairíona Ruane is not in her place. I call Fra McCann.

Youth Unemployment

3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the success of schemes to tackle youth unemployment. (AQO 3806/11-15)

7. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people have taken part in the youth employment scheme in South Down to date. (AQO 3810/11-15)

Dr Farry: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was going to group questions 2, 3 and 7 together, and I will continue to do so, but I will focus on Mr McCann's supplementary

question. I request an additional minute for my answer.

Since the launch of the youth employment scheme in September 2012, over 900 employers have signed agreements to participate in it. As of the end of March 2013, those employers had offered a total of 1,685 opportunities, to which 3,626 young people had been submitted. To date, 517 young people have taken part in the scheme, and, of those, over 200 have secured full-time permanent jobs. In addition, 354 young people have started temporary jobs under the First Start initiative.

Members asked questions about South Belfast and South Down. In South Belfast, 74 employer agreements have been signed and 119 opportunities have been made available to young people. In South Down, 174 employer agreements have been signed and 265 opportunities have been made available to young people.

In addition to the youth employment scheme, my Department is funding a number of new initiatives under the Executive's Pathways to Success strategy to increase the opportunities that are available to unemployed young people in South Belfast, West Belfast, South Down and elsewhere across Northern Ireland. Those initiatives include a collaboration and innovation fund that will fund activity to help 2,800 disadvantaged 16- to 24-year-olds from Belfast to improve their employability by gaining work-related skills. Similar activity will take place in South Down to help over 1,100 young people.

We also have the local employment intermediary service, more commonly known as LEMIS, which provides personalised assistance to help unemployed young people who live in West Belfast, South Belfast and other areas to overcome their barriers to work. The service is also available on an outreach basis in South Down

My assessment is that we have the right measures in place. Forty per cent of participants on the youth employment scheme have found full-time, permanent employment. However, we must do more to encourage young people to participate. So far, young people have taken up only 30% of the opportunities that are available. I am actively considering how we might improve uptake going forward. I ask Members to continue to promote the youth employment scheme to businesses in their areas and to encourage their young unemployed constituents to avail

themselves of the opportunities that are on offer.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his response. If the rate is 40%, that means that 60% do not go any further. There is a belief out there that, to date, the schemes have not provided the type of training required to bring people, especially young people, into employment. Does he not believe that, at this time, we need one effective scheme that deals with all young people and provides effective training that, at the end, allows them to go into the types of jobs that may be available?

Dr Farry: I want to say a number of things in response. First, a 40% rate of placement into employment is good compared with other schemes that we have. For example, the rate for the mainstream Steps to Work scheme for the general unemployed population is below 30%. You can see that there is a very significant uplift in performance in that regard. In an ideal world, we want to have all our unemployed young people in jobs as quickly as we possibly can.

I would not say that we need just a single scheme. We have to acknowledge that people are coming forward with a whole range of issues that need to be addressed. The various projects under the NEETs strategy are the most appropriate for people with particular barriers to engagement with the labour market. The youth employment scheme is there primarily to address those young people who, if it were not for the current economic situation and the recession, would expect to be in employment today. They have gone through a degree of skills and training but often just lack the employability skills to compete with older, more experienced workers for scarce jobs. That is why work experience placements are so important in trying to address the vicious circle that many young people find themselves in today.

Mr Durkan: Is the Minister satisfied that his Executive colleagues are doing all that they can to help to support the scheme?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. As Minister, I have written to all my Executive colleagues and the mayors or chairs of the councils across Northern Ireland about the youth employment scheme and taking placements under Steps to Work. I am pleased to say that a number of Executive colleagues and a number of councils across Northern Ireland have very much risen to the challenge and are engaging with those schemes. I am

happy to provide the Member with more detailed figures on the level of engagement. There are a number of very good examples of Departments taking this forward. It is also important to stress that, given the profile of the labour market and economy in Northern Ireland, the private sector is not yet big enough to sustain this by itself and offer all the required work experience opportunities. Therefore, we need buy-in from the public sector and the community and voluntary sector.

Mr Lyttle: How does the scale of investment in the youth employment scheme in Northern Ireland compare with the rest of the UK and Ireland? How do young people gain information on the scheme online?

Dr Farry: Investment per capita in the youth employment scheme and NEETs collectively is bigger here than in any other region of the UK. That is a reflection of the Executive's commitment to investing in the future of the young people of Northern Ireland. There is an appreciation in the Executive and the wider business community in Northern Ireland that we have to invest in young people. We cannot afford to have a lost generation. That term is often overly dramatised, but, at the heart of this, we are talking about having invested in people's skills and training through colleges and universities or on-the-job training. If those skills are not applied within a reasonable period — say, 18 months — there is a real danger that those skills will be lost. That is of consequence to us as a result of the public expenditure that we have issued to date. There is also a wider issue for the young people themselves. If they feel demotivated from lack of opportunity, they will slip through the net. Indeed, some of them may choose to emigrate and leave these shores, and we do not want to see that happening.

2.45 pm

South West College: Additional Students

4. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he plans to allocate additional student places to the South West College. (AQO 3807/11-15)

Dr Farry: Every year, my Department manages the college development planning process through which the recent performances of individual colleges are reviewed and their targets and budgets for the coming year are agreed. Over the past five years, South West

College's overall budget allocation, which includes further education provision up to level 3, essential skills and higher education provision, has increased from £15.5 million to £16.2 million.

South West College delivers higher education provision for 434 full-time and 987 part-time students. Those figures have increased every year for the past five years, from a base of 230 full-time and 825 part-time places in 2008-09. I previously announced that the MaSN — maximum student number — allocation for full-time higher education across further education regional colleges will increase by a total of 140 additional places by 2015.

My Department is also conducting a review of existing demand for higher education opportunities in further education colleges to determine this year's allocation of the new places. I am committed to making higher education more accessible to those in rural areas who wish to avail themselves of it, and the further education colleges are ideally located to serve higher education students throughout Northern Ireland.

The Department is working with the higher and further education sectors to develop pilot schemes for the creation of university bases in further education colleges. South West College has expressed an interest in being involved in that innovative project, and I look forward to considering proposals that the college is developing.

In November 2012, I launched a pilot higher level apprenticeship programme at the South West College. That two-year programme provides the opportunity for people who are already in work to gain new qualifications by undertaking knowledge-based modules alongside practical elements, leading to a foundation degree in computing.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer. He previously referred to a rural university presence in the context of his higher education strategy. Will he expand on the likelihood of the South West College being part of that? What impact might that have on the number of third-level places available?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. First of all, the rural bases are one of the key projects in the Department's higher education strategy, Graduating to Success. Two colleges have expressed interest in hosting those pilots: South West College and Southern Regional College. We may go for two pilots, depending on the way we look at it. Both of the colleges

are working on proposals in that regard. I expect to receive them next month and hope to make a decision quite soon after. Of course, we will have to give proper scrutiny to what we have received.

The wider issue of the availability of university places will not itself impact on the number of places, because we will still have the two universities with their places across Northern Ireland, and they will have students coming from a range of different backgrounds and locations in Northern Ireland. Also, higher education is a presence in each of the further education colleges. So, HE in FE is something that we are very keen to expand. The Member will be aware that there was a major advertising campaign around uptake of foundation degrees. So, we are very keen to develop higher education across all six of the FE colleges across Northern Ireland.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers. Does he accept that increasing the number of higher education places in the regional colleges provides value for money? Does he further accept that many students, beyond their education maintenance allowance, then have a greater opportunity to avail themselves of college courses at an affordable price for their families?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Byrne for his comments. Further to the case that he has made, I stress that, often, the foundation degrees that are taught in the FE sector are more practical and more related directly to the needs of employers. So, there is a greater chance that employers will find students who have the right skills to take part in their workforce. Also, the students themselves will have the skills that will lead to them having better prospects of sustainable employment.

It is also worth making reference to the fact that we are working on a review of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland. I expect one of the outworkings of that to be a much greater uptake and offering when it comes to higher level apprenticeships. There will be a very clear linkage between those and further progression into foundation degrees.

Higher Education: Online Degrees

5. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the likely impact on local universities and higher education institutions of the increase in the number of degrees which can be studied online. (AQO 3808/11-15)

Dr Farry: That leads on nicely from the previous question in some respects. The need for a more flexible learning environment is a key theme of the higher education strategy, Graduating to Success, and the use of online learning is expanding in traditional campus-based and distance-learning settings. A number of factors are driving change in the delivery of higher education, including projected decreases in the traditional learner population of 18- to 21-year-olds and increasing demands for flexibility from those who wish to upskill and reskill while in the workplace. I welcome any innovation that provides increased student choice and allows students access to higher education that meets their individual learning needs.

One of the projects in the higher education strategy aims to pilot the establishment of university bases at FE colleges, including providing the opportunity for students to undertake distance learning with access to university resources. Northern Ireland's local institutions recognise the opportunities provided by online learning and are responding accordingly. In 2001, the University of Ulster established Campus One, which has some 1,100 students registered on fully online courses. The Open University has been a world-leading provider of distance learning since 1969 and is very active in Northern Ireland, offering a blended learning environment that utilises online components. Queen's University is one of 17 UK higher education institutions involved in the Open University's Futurelearn initiative. Futurelearn will bring together a range of free, open and online courses from leading UK universities, drawing upon the Open University's expertise in delivering distance learning and pioneering open education resources. The Futurelearn initiative does not lead to formal qualifications but is an innovative supplement to existing traditional higher education provision. Technology is changing the traditional campus-based provision, and I am encouraged by developments in online learning, which are enabling our higher education institutions to collaborate, compete internationally and offer students flexibility and choice.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his response. Will departmental action promised by 2018 not be a case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted because so many universities already offer online degrees?

Dr Farry: The very specific target that the Member is referring to in the higher education strategy is one whereby, by 2018, modular learning will be expanded to all students in

higher education. That is, essentially, the backstop by which we expect that every student in higher education in Northern Ireland will have access to online learning opportunities. However, as we move towards 2018, I expect the universities to move rapidly in that direction, and we are more than happy to work with them in that regard. As I have outlined, we have made significant progress. That works for the universities and for students, and my officials are pressing ahead with that project under the strategy.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister outline the financial support that is available to students who undertake online degree courses?

Dr Farry: As I said in answer to the main question, it is important to recognise at this stage that online learning is a supplement to the existing offering, and students are still traditionally enrolled in either the higher education or further education sector. The same basic funding regime is there to support those students as it is for other students across Northern Ireland. It is important that we roll out the flexible learning that is offered through online media because it provides greater flexibility to students. I have no doubt that, for students who are facing difficulties, notwithstanding the support that we offer in Northern Ireland, that flexibility will enable them to engage in their learning in a more efficient and flexible manner. In particular, it may enable those who have caring responsibilities to participate even more fully in either higher education or further education.

Ms Lo: Will the number of students enrolled under this project in online studies be included in the overall cap of student numbers?

Dr Farry: As I said in answer to Mrs Kelly, online learning is a supplement to the traditional forms of learning, so this will be a subsection of the existing enrolments in the higher education and further education sectors. Where MaSN applies, it remains. It is important to stress that a review of MaSN is one of the other key projects under the higher education strategy, and that is scheduled to be completed in 2014. I look forward to engaging with that and reporting that back to the House. We want to review MaSN because, as we move to having people from a range of backgrounds and age groups participating and to having much more part-time and flexible learning, the traditional approach to MaSN, which is no more than simply a means of controlling costs in the sector, needs to be reviewed in light of the shifting patterns of engagement.

Youth Unemployment

6. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the most recent youth unemployment figures. (AQO 3809/11-15)

Dr Farry: Latest estimates show that approximately 24,000 young people are unemployed. This equates to around 24% of the economically active population aged between 18 and 24. This does not mean that about one in four of our young people are unemployed. Rather, it means that almost one in four of young people who are actually looking for work are unemployed. It is important to emphasise that another section of our young people are technically in the "economic inactivity" category, but for more benign reasons, as they are in full-time education. The skills that they pick up will be personally beneficial to their future employment prospects and will be good for the economy overall. Therefore, overall, one in seven of the total population aged between 18 and 24 is unemployed.

It is also important to emphasise that although our current youth unemployment rate is higher than other UK regions, it is lower than that of the Republic of Ireland, at 30%, and is around the same level as the EU average, at 23%. Of course, in certain EU countries such as Greece and Spain, the rate is over 50%. I set out these figures not to excuse our current challenge but rather to present it in its fullest context. I take little comfort from that, however. The numbers have doubled since 2008, and too many young lives are blighted by unemployment. That is why we are taking decisive action to help young people. The Department's Training for Success programme helps to maximise their chances of getting a job by guaranteeing a training place to every 16- and 17-year-old who is not at school, in training or in employment. Already during Question Time, we have discussed the youth employment scheme and the NEET strategy, and these initiatives, among others, demonstrate a very significant commitment on the part of the Executive to improving the life chances of young people who are not in work.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that these figures are absolutely appalling, even if they are not as bad as in Ireland, has the Minister worked with other Departments and even considered such things as enterprise loans or forms of funding that would help young school leavers to start up their own businesses?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Kinahan for his question. We are not running away from these figures, and I assure people that we are being transparent with them and are setting out the scale of the challenge that faces us in Northern Ireland. It is important that we recognise, however, that we are part of a much wider context where there are difficulties in the UK, on the island of Ireland and across the wider euro zone.

We can make a range of different interventions to assist young people, and, indeed, enterprise loans are one such initiative. That was a particular aspect of the jobs and economy initiative last autumn, and support is also available from Invest Northern Ireland for people who want to set up a business. So, yes, there is support for the particular strand of people who want to start their own business, but, of course, we have to maintain the other programmes that we have in place and consciously review those and ensure that they are acting as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Given that one third of those who are economically inactive have no qualifications, how does the Minister propose to close the skills gap and ensure that people who are on registered courses have access to employment?

Dr Farry: The Member is right to draw a correlation between economic inactivity and skills deficits. If you recall, we had a statement last week setting out the baseline study that is informing the drafting of an economic inactivity strategy for Northern Ireland. That sets out in very stark terms some of those conclusions. That strategy will be a very central document for the Executive, and it is a priority not only for me but for other Ministers.

3.00 pm

We will be looking to refresh, within that, the various policies and programmes that are available to address economic inactivity. However, the central message is that we have to invest in skills for people across a very broad front. In doing so, we must give the message that there is no right or wrong answer for young people; it is not about saying that everyone has to go into higher or further education. There are other types of training, most notably apprenticeships, available for people, and it is important that we try to point them in the right direction. That is why individual mentoring is a key element in the NEET strategy. We have to sit down, talk to people, find out their individual

needs and then signpost them to the most appropriate support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. That is the end of questions to the Minister. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. First of all, tá brón orm. I am very sorry; I was not aware that my question 7 had been grouped with question 3. I meant no disrespect to the House or to the Minister. Mar sin, tá brón orm.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the Member's comments. Members may take their ease for a few moments while we change the Table.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

G8 Summit: Security

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing this Adjournment debate to be taken. The coming of the G8 summit to Northern Ireland, and to County Fermanagh in particular, is a huge opportunity for us to sell Northern Ireland and County Fermanagh in a very positive light to show the world that we are in the business of putting on the types of exhibitions and events that it will bring with it, and, indeed, of hosting world leaders. We are extremely supportive and thankful that it is coming to Northern Ireland and County Fermanagh.

I understand that this is the 39th annual G8 summit. The decision to hold it at the Lough Erne golf resort — I assume that it was probably the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom who took it — is an excellent one that will be borne out as time goes on.

There will be a huge focus on the local community and on local security. By and large, local people are very content with it taking place. However, some concerns and queries are raised on a daily basis as to how businesses will continue to operate during that time and in the time immediately prior to it. Local people are concerned that it may have a significant impact on the running of their businesses. I am keen to hear from the Minister about the security aspect.

I should put on record that I am grateful to those who are helping with the organisation of the summit and, in particular, officials from Whitehall, the Northern Ireland Office and indeed local police officers, who have been helpful in telling us, as far as possible, some of the aspects that may affect the local community.

I have heard on a number of occasions that the summit may require the input of 3,500 police officers. I assume that they will not all come from the PSNI. Recently, I read in a leaflet from the police that the PSNI will have what they call "mutual aid". That is quite an unusual term. Apparently "mutual aid" means that the PSNI will be getting policing support from England, Scotland and Wales. It will be interesting to hear from the Justice Minister exactly how that will work. Will those officers be here for a time prior to the summit to be trained in specific areas or aspects of their potential work? Obviously, there will be a cross-border element, because a number of the delegations will be staying in the Republic of Ireland. The gardaí will need to co-operate with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and I am sure that that will happen without too many questions.

Another aspect is the budget for the entire security situation. Who will meet that budget? Will it be met by the United Kingdom Government? How much of it will come from the Northern Ireland Executive and how much of it will come from the other nations that will be involved in the G8 summit? It is important to get some perspective on it and know how much will be required, particularly from our local Executive.

I am also led to believe that a significant fence will be going up around the resort. There are all sorts of rumours in County Fermanagh, as I am sure that you, Deputy Speaker, and others will appreciate. Some of those rumours suggest that the fence will be so high that they may have to put out warnings because it may affect flights going over it. *[Laughter.]* It will be interesting to hear from the Minister about some of those aspects.

There are obviously concerns about protests as G8 summits bring protesters. What level of protests do the security services believe will happen in County Fermanagh, or how much of the protests will be focused in Belfast or other areas of the Province? Maybe the Minister can enlighten us on that.

With regard to public order offences, I know that when legislation went through the Assembly recently in the form of the Criminal Justice Bill, I pointed out some reservations about having the courts open on a Sunday. Although I am not opposed to that in principle, I have some concerns in that the courts can already open on a Sunday to deal with indictable offences, and those offences may be more serious than those that are in the legislation that went through recently. I hope that the security services here are not planning to charge people over the

period of the G8 summit with less serious offences than they could charge them with. Spending an extra night in custody, as opposed to getting bail on a Sunday, may not do them too much harm. It would allow them time to cool off.

We must also look at the convoluted mechanism to trigger that Sunday court opening. The Justice Minister has to seek the agreement of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and there might be a question as to whether those two actually trust each other at the moment. Clearly, they do not trust the Justice Minister to take that decision. Not only does the Justice Minister have to consult the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but he has to consult the Lord Chief Justice and the Chief Constable. God help us if any of those people have to take a break on a weekend when they are required to sign any of those documents. We may not see the courts opening at all at the weekend if that is the case. However, those are some of my concerns around the public order aspects.

We have quite a number of questions, and the most immediate one is the impact that the G8 summit will have on the local community. I have no difficulty with heightened or increased security to make sure that the local citizens and those coming to visit are protected. We want to see an acceptance from the community that there will be some disruption. However, we also want to ensure that all those taking part and all those in the area at the time are given the utmost protection.

Lord Morrow: I, too, welcome this debate, and I welcome the fact that the G8 summit is not only coming to Northern Ireland but to no better place than County Fermanagh. I feel that it is no mean achievement for Northern Ireland and, in particular, County Fermanagh to be hosting this world event. Once again, it demonstrates how Northern Ireland is moving forward, and I strongly feel that the whole of society will welcome this important event coming here to Northern Ireland.

Regrettably, events such as the G8 summit also attract all the malcontents and anarchists not only from our own society but from right across the world, and I suspect that this will be no different when it arrives here in the very near future. They see it as a window of opportunity to express their worst excesses. We just have to look at the despicable behaviour of a loud minority who have raised their heads since the death of the former Prime Minister Baroness Thatcher. I would just like to take this

opportunity to denounce unreservedly those who engage in such low-life activity.

It behoves all of us to show our support for the police and the security services on an occasion such as this. There is a challenge here for everyone who holds public office in Northern Ireland, at whatever level, to show in clear and unequivocal terms that they are on the side of the security forces and the police in their endeavours to maintain law and order when the G8 summit comes.

Undoubtedly, many of us will be inconvenienced as a result of this world event coming to Northern Ireland, but I suspect that the inconvenience will not be on the same scale as we have been inconvenienced over the past 35 years when there was a war of genocide and terror being waged here in Northern Ireland, not least in border counties such as County Fermanagh. It will be an opportunity for those who stood on the side of the terrorists on those occasions to stand up now for law and order and declare their position. We will look to them, and we will listen very carefully to what they have to say, not only today but in the weeks and months that lie ahead.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. Perhaps the Member will want to make sure that there are no parades taking place during the G8 summit so that he may not have to question his own stance on the rule of law during that time.

Lord Morrow: If I had known that he was going to be so frivolous, I would not have given way to him. Let me say — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Remarks must be made through the Chair. This is an important issue, and I strongly recommend that we return to it.

Lord Morrow: We will endeavour to comply as we always do.

As I said earlier, it is good to see this good news world event coming to our shores, and I trust that this House in its totality will throw its weight and support behind our security forces in taking whatever action they deem necessary to maintain law and order. That is a big ask sometimes, but I believe that it is not too big an ask. It is the least that the police and our security forces can expect from us.

Sinn Féin will be challenged on this, as it is when it comes to law and order issues, and I make no apology for challenging the party here

today, particularly in light of its weekend events and some of the things that its members said. A sizeable section in the party now say that, to all intents and purposes, they support the dissidents in what they are doing —
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I will not allow Members to shout across the Floor, and I repeat my earlier advice, which is to confine the debate to the Adjournment topic.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have listened intently to what you have been saying, and I am trying to do that because I believe that these things are very relevant to the G8 summit. This House should be put on alert, and its Members, representing the various strands of political opinion here in Northern Ireland, should be ready to declare unequivocally where we stand on law and order issues. Unfortunately, and sadly, there is always a lot of ambiguity when it comes to declaring that.

3.15 pm

The G8 summit will bring many benefits to Northern Ireland. I believe that it will bring much benefit to County Fermanagh in particular. I understand, for instance, that on both sides of the border, you can hardly get accommodation now because it is all booked up in preparation for the G8 summit. I welcome that, and that must be a positive spin-off for Northern Ireland.

I hope that all parties and representatives will see to it that they will not be saying or doing anything that will make the job of the security forces much more difficult. We had an opportunity for this House to support the creation of the National Crime Agency but, sadly, it turned it down. The National Crime Agency would have been a great asset had it been established in time for this summit. However, this House decided that that was something that it could not live with —

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

Lord Morrow: — and those who made that decision should be ashamed of themselves. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My time is up.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As somebody from Fermanagh, I say that it is hard not to notice already, with increased security and police patrols, that the G8 summit is coming to the county. We also

have a bit of a better surface on the A4 — or on most of it — on the way to Belfast, and some buildings have been painted that had not seen paint for many years.

There is increased security, as we know and understand. The security and safety of those taking part in the summit is paramount. Who will be paying for that? I think that Mr Elliott also asked that question. Will that cost, in part or total, come out of the policing budget? A multiplicity of services will be involved because we have some of the biggest states in the world and their security services taking part, so are there clear lines of accountability?

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I would like the Member to tell us whether he welcomes the G8 summit coming to Northern Ireland and is he in full support of whatever initiatives the security forces deem necessary to maintain peace and law and order?

Mr Lynch: Yes, I welcome it; the G8 is coming to the most beautiful county in Ireland. I said that the security and safety of all those taking part was paramount, including those who may want to come on genuine protest. In that sense, I agree with the Member.

Going back to the issue of accountability, have clear lines of accountability been established between the different services that will be taking part in the G8? Will every police officer on the ground be accountable to the Police Ombudsman? In conjunction with what Mr Elliott said, because Fermanagh is geographically sited beside Leitrim, Cavan and Donegal, and we now learn that many of those participating in the G8 are staying in those counties, some as far down as Sligo, has contact and co-operation been established with an Garda Síochána? Has the PSNI been established as the sole liaison between itself, an Garda and all those who will be participating?

There will be disruption to the local population. We think that that should be lessened by local police commanders being in contact with political and community representatives in the area. It is also important that the PSNI gives out as much information as possible about road closures, etc, as well as creating awareness about which roads will be closed. That will also go as far away as the international airport, which is in the constituency of the Member on the opposite Benches. It is not just about Fermanagh.

Finally, all I will say is that I hope that it goes well.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Adjournment debate. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. As a member of the Policing Board, I think that it is very helpful to hear the concerns that colleagues may have about a lot of the operational issues. I think that the House should know that the Policing Board has been receiving briefings and discussing the operational implications of the G8 summit for about six months now.

Many of the issues that have been raised here — I am sure that the Minister will want to address those in his response — are matters that the Policing Board has considered and that have been raised in and discussed by the board. I say that as much by way of assurance to colleagues that we are attentive to a lot of the practical outworkings of this, not least who is going to pick up the bill.

I trust that the Minister will have a similar understanding of this, but, on that point and as stated on three occasions to the Policing Board, it is the Chief Constable's view that the British Government are going to pick up the bill because it is their gig. That is basically that. The great privilege of being able to welcome the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United States, Russia and Japan here to this island, along with, of course, the Prime Minister, as well as the Taoiseach, who will participate in the G8 summit because Ireland holds the presidency of the European Union, is not one that I think anyone in this House would want to turn down. When you look at those countries, you will see that it is interesting to note that many of them have significant opportunities for foreign direct investment in our region. Very many of them are also priority markets for Tourism Ireland. I trust that, and from what I hear, the Executive are well advanced in their planning to ensure that the few days that the leaders of those significant economies spend with us are maximised to market and raise awareness of our region and its potential as an inward investment and tourism destination.

I found some of Mr Elliott's observations about the fence a bit curious. Mr Hussey, who sits on the Policing Board, has been very quiet about the fence. Maybe you will encourage him to talk about the fence more when he is at the Policing Board so that we can get to the bottom of the matter. I have to confess that that is a new one on me; I have not heard anyone yet complain about the fence or its height.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. He will be aware that the Policing Board recently agreed to purchase drones for use at the G8. Is it his view that those drones will be important not only for the security of the G8 but, beyond that, for the security of the citizens of Northern Ireland? Can that security dividend as a result of the purchase be assured?

Mr McDevitt: A decision was made to support the purchase of, I think, nine unmanned aerial vehicles, which are quite small things that can be operated only in the line of sight. That decision was made with the strong caveat that it be fully reviewed after one year. There are three issues that we need to think about in that regard. One is a technical issue. If you go on the internet, you will see that the jury seems to be out on whether these things fly when they are meant to fly or, like the best kit that we all played with when we were kids, where they are meant to fly.

The second issue is the equally important and probably more serious matter of the legislation under which they will operate. That legislation is likely to require the Office of Surveillance Commissioners to report on the use of drones every time that they are used.

The third issue is value for money. If we make this investment and get use out of the drones, and if they assist in the detection of crime or in the management of large public events, that is great. However, if, as it happens, they do not really work out, I think that we would all need to be big enough and grown up enough to say that we should not commit further expenditure to them.

I will make two further points on the G8, which I think are important to make. The Policing Board has paid a lot of attention to the question of mutual aid and police officers from Great Britain spending time here. They will not be here for a huge amount of time. Most of the training has been done in GB, for obvious cost reasons, and they will come here to spend the duration of the summit here, give or take a few days. One of the issues that Mr Lynch rightly raised, and that we have been very concerned about, is the question of accountability. It is clear to the Policing Board that those police officers will be accountable to the Chief Constable when they are on the ground here. It has also been very clearly stated to the Policing Board that none of them will be operating outside of the direction of the PSNI. In fact, all officers from outside our jurisdiction will be led by a PSNI officer on the ground and none will have any command role in the operation. That is important, because we are policing a rural

community. It is our own country and our own region, and we want the certainty that it is going to work out well.

Any complaints will go to the Police Ombudsman, who will investigate and produce a report. However, an issue may arise if the ombudsman recommends discipline or further action. That falls to the Chief Constable of wherever an officer comes from. Some 40-odd constabularies in England, Scotland and Wales are volunteering people, so there is a bit of ironing out to be done. Perhaps the Minister can update us on that —

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

Mr McDavitt: — to assure us, and on this point I will conclude, that if someone needed disciplined in England, Scotland or Wales, and let us hope that that does not arise, they of course would be.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad to take part in the debate, and I thank Mr Elliott for securing it. It is very timely, and it is welcome, in that it gives us, as local representatives and those who have an interest in this area, the chance to raise our concerns directly with the Minister and put them on the record. I declare an interest as a citizen of Fermanagh.

Our position on the G8 has been fairly clear since the start. The most important aspect of the G8 summit is not its location. Although that is important to us, as citizens of Fermanagh and as people who live in the area, the location is not the big, important part of it. The most important aspect of the G8 summit is what it actually delivers for people around the world and how its main players and those involved deliver on eradicating poverty, creating sustainable growth and jobs around the world and enhancing the rights of citizens. That is what the important part of the G8 summit needs to be.

However, there is a very important aspect outside the G8 for those who have a message that they want to send to the leaders. It is important that they be given the opportunity to engage in sensible, peaceful and lawful campaigns from which they can send a clear message to the world media and the G8 leaders and that they can be facilitated in doing so. I think that many people's big concern about the G8 is that the legacy and the message that goes around the world will be based on how the genuine campaigners who come to Fermanagh, or who may stay in

Belfast, are treated. Not everybody who is coming to campaign or protest at the G8 wants to engage in violence. The vast majority of people who are coming to send a clear message want to send that message using peaceful and lawful means. They have to be facilitated. I would like to hear from the Minister what efforts are being made to ensure that that is the case, because we still have not received any information about where demonstrators, campaigners, protesters — whatever word you want to apply to them — will be based or facilitated, nor do we know what types of activities will be organised to try to make their stay in Fermanagh or Belfast as productive and peaceful as ever.

That having been said, the G8 is coming to Fermanagh. We need to live with that reality and try to militate against any potential disruption for local people and those involved in business in the county as far as possible. A considerable amount of work has been done behind the scenes, involving a wide range of statutory agencies, since the date on which the summit was announced, and probably from before it was announced. It is important that that work continue, but it is also important that those in the local community be clearly informed about what is happening with the G8 and with such minor issues as what roads are being closed and how people are going to be facilitated to move around the county. That is the big fear for people at the minute, and those concerns need to be addressed.

3.30 pm

I have had some engagement with local police. They have made considerable efforts to reassure me and others that they are in control of the situation and that it will be local police who are to the fore in the policing operation at the G8. They are involved in all the discussions about that, so it was good to get that reassurance from them. However, how they plan to police potential protesters, demonstrators or campaigners has not been clearly outlined. That is one of the main areas of contention that still needs to be clarified.

One of the other big concerns is that the week of the G8 is in the middle of exams for GCSE and A-level students. There is a very tight time frame for people to get to exams. If people arrive at a school and go into the examination centre more than half an hour after the exam has started, they will not be able to do the exam that day. They could be faced with repeating a year because of that. I know that considerable work is going on involving library boards to provide transport to a range of schools in

Fermanagh, particularly for those from the west of the county, from where a substantial number are transported into Enniskillen. It is important that action is taken to resolve that matter, so that buses and people can travel around freely during that week, when people are doing exams at a very important time in their life.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will, surely.

Mr Givan: I am waiting for the Member to follow the lead of his constituency colleague, who has welcomed the event. Does Mr Flanagan welcome it? Does he think that it should be embraced as an opportunity for the constituency that he represents, rather than majoring on what he views as a lot of negatives around it?

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for intervening, because he said that he was waiting. My five minutes have just run out, so I am glad for the extra minute to actually get to that point in my remarks. I am grateful to the Member for that. I have a number of minor points to make, and then I will get onto the positive aspects.

The accountability mechanisms have been raised. The Minister told me last week that he had no doubt that they would be in place in time for the summit. Perhaps he will give us another update on that. It has been reported in the media that farmers with livestock in the area have engaged with the police. I would like to hear from the Minister how farmers with farm holdings or livestock in the area will be dealt with.

I come back to the Member's point about the positive aspects of the G8. It is a huge opportunity for the people of Fermanagh to send out a very positive message about how our county operates and how great it is. There is also an opportunity to create a lasting legacy from the G8. It is important that that opportunity is taken. None of us wants to see scenes of rioting going round the world and being the lasting legacy of the G8. It is important to major on the positive aspects of all these things coming to Fermanagh. That is what we need to work towards.

Mr Lunn: I also speak as a member of the Policing Board. I do not, in any way, want to overshadow what the Minister might say in response to the many questions that Members have raised, so I will follow Mr McDevitt's lead and try not to do that.

Mr Elliott raised the point about mutual aid. I will just say that it is the same as if the Metropolitan Police needs reinforcement from Yorkshire. It works across the country. I believe that the figure of 3,500 that was mentioned is, more or less, accurate. That is 3,500 extra policemen coming into Northern Ireland, but they will operate under the operational control of the Chief Constable. We have had that confirmed. The situation about the ombudsman, if he is required, I will leave to the Minister.

The fact that the G8 is coming here really has to be the biggest opportunity for Northern Ireland — Fermanagh, in particular — that I can remember. You could start to compare it with the Titanic year, the World Police and Fire Games, the City of Culture for Derry or the Italian cycle race that Mrs Foster was so pleased to get —

Lord Morrow: Or Her Majesty's visit here.

Mr Lunn: Fair enough. None of them comes even close. In terms of exposure, the world media follow these people around the world. The fact that David Cameron, who, I am sure, made the decision, chose Northern Ireland and went beyond that and chose Fermanagh is a terrific vote of confidence in this country and in the ability of the PSNI, in particular, to deal with all eventualities.

The Chief Constable has assured us that he is confident in the resources that he will have and in the venue. Until today, I had not heard about this fence, which is an intriguing prospect. Is it a fence around the Lough Erne resort or round Fermanagh? I would like to know.

Mr McDevitt raised a point about the drones. What are they called? Unmanned aerial —

Mr McDevitt: Vehicles.

Mr Lunn: Vehicles. To my mind, a vehicle is something that carries somebody. These things are like small model aircraft. The point about them is that they cost only about £150 an hour to run, whereas it costs 20 times that to run a helicopter, which is the alternative. The PSNI has contracted to buy nine of them. They must be flown within the operator's line of sight, and an intriguing question is what happens if they happen to go out of the operator's line of sight. There is some apprehension about what would happen then, because they would be of control and would eventually fall. These are not the type of drones that the Americans can control from Omaha and use to drop nasty

things on Afghanistan. They are operated purely by somebody who can see them and are an invaluable tool for observation but nothing else.

The Chief Constable and ACC Finlay have had only seven months from the announcement to prepare for this. The normal run-in time to prepare for a G8 summit is probably two years. However, they are perfectly confident that they can deal with it. This will be an opportunity for people from around the world to observe the PSNI's expertise, which has been widely called on in the past number of years. The PSNI has probably exported that expertise to most of the countries that will be represented and an awful lot more besides.

I am glad that this short debate has been so positive. After being probed a bit on their views, Sinn Féin Members welcomed the fact that the G8 is coming here. I cannot imagine why they, as constituency representatives, would do anything else.

I will leave it at that. I am glad of the opportunity to say a few words about this and to welcome it absolutely. I look forward to hearing the Minister's answers to some of the questions that have been asked about security.

Mr Givan: My interest in this is more related to my role in the Justice Committee, but, obviously, I am not speaking in that capacity.

This obviously has implications for all of Northern Ireland, beyond County Fermanagh, and I would be interested to hear the Minister's assessment of that. What preparations are being made to ensure that any protests are minimised and our main arterial routes across the Province are not disrupted? It would be helpful if the Minister could outline some of that information for us. Can he also reassure us that the necessary training is taking place and is ongoing? Obviously, Northern Ireland police officers have particular skills and abilities in dealing with rioters, but we need to be assured that those from across the water who are coming here as part of the mutual aid will also have sufficient skills and abilities to deal with the difficulties that all of us hope will not occur. It is prudent that preparations are made for any eventuality.

Also, will the Minister outline whether, in a scenario where there is significant disruption, there is enough capacity in our custody suites and prison establishments to keep individuals where they need to be? Obviously, there are significant pressures on the prison establishment because of capacity issues, so, if

significant numbers were required to be kept in our prisons, what would the implications be? What contingency plans are there in the event that pressure is placed on the prison establishment for cells to be used?

Will the Minister also outline what work is taking place to prevent anarchists who are not remotely interested in any form of legitimate protest in respect of some of their beliefs and just want to come here to cause trouble coming to this jurisdiction from within the United Kingdom and to thwart those who want to come into Northern Ireland through the Republic of Ireland? It is one thing to recognise the legitimate right of people to protest; it is another to facilitate those who are well known to the police forces as having the sole intention of causing violence. What efforts are being made to ensure that they are not allowed to enter Northern Ireland and cannot carry out the activity that they would wish to?

I note the comments from Sinn Féin and the SDLP about seeking assurances that police officers will be held accountable for all their actions. Of course, police officers should never be a law unto themselves. However, it is important that we get the balance right. People who join the Police Service of Northern Ireland and police officers from across the United Kingdom do not join the police to break the law; they join because they want to uphold the law. The incessant focus of Sinn Féin and the SDLP on the actions of police officers does not do them much justice in where the focus should be, which is on the perpetrators and those who will cause problems.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Yes.

Mr McDevitt: The Member clearly has not been listening to the Chief Constable. At the last public meeting of the Policing Board, he stressed the need to ensure that there was a clear and visible accountability mechanism. Having in place a good and robust accountability mechanism for police officers is about doing what the police want to do, which is to encourage everyone to live within the rules, whether they do so at work — policemen and policewomen have much more power than your average citizen — or in society.

Mr Givan: I agree with the Member: police officers should be held accountable. However, the SDLP and Sinn Féin go on ad nauseam about that issue. In doing so, they imply that they do not trust the police. People on this side

of the House have a natural confidence in the police to do their job; the default position of the Members opposite is that they do not trust the police. They need to move beyond that and recognise that the police will do a good job; that is always their starting point. I have confidence in the Chief Constable. Members opposite —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is straying very far from the subject under discussion. Continue.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The police are preparing for the event. I have confidence that the Chief Constable will make the proper preparations to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland. Other Members need to reflect on their position.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the preparations for the summit was last week's meeting of the G8 Foreign Ministers. One of the resolutions that they passed was very clear: they stated in absolute terms their condemnation of terrorism. Given that the G8 is coming to County Fermanagh, it is to be welcomed that, before coming, they have made it very clear, particularly in light of yesterday's events in Boston, that terrorism, from wherever it comes, cannot be clothed in anything other than what it is: terrorism. That is why the G8 —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Storey: — is welcome in County Fermanagh.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, Mr Givan; Mr Storey has used up all your time.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I will endeavour to respond to a variety of points that have been raised from all round the House. First, I congratulate Tom Elliott on securing the debate, which has attracted more interest than is normally the case for an Adjournment debate.

As the Prime Minister indicated when he made the announcement on 20 November — he certainly claims that it was his decision — the fact that the G8 is being hosted in County Fermanagh reflects well on the county and on Northern Ireland as a whole. It illustrates the massive changes and improvements that have been seen in recent years. I am acutely aware of the potentially huge benefits to the Northern Ireland economy and our international reputation that hosting the G8 brings. I am well aware that the Chief Constable and his senior team share that view and are committed to making it successful. The Adjournment debate

is focusing on security, but I note that the Executive as a whole and many others are working to make it a success in every sense.

3.45 pm

Ordinarily, the host police service would have a number of years to plan for such an event. In comparison, the PSNI has had a few short months to address the mammoth police undertaking associated with the G8 summit alongside its other responsibilities this year. I congratulate the Chief Constable and his officers at every level on stepping up to the task, grasping that responsibility and taking on the challenge in such a short time. There is certainly more work to be done, but they are rising to the challenge.

As Members will be aware, the development and delivery of policing plans for the summit is essentially an operational issue for the Chief Constable, but I know from the regular updates that I receive from ACC Finlay and from my recent visit to Fermanagh to hear at first hand the scale of the plans from the local police commanders that the police are well aware of the importance of the task and have a comprehensive police strategy in place. I noticed that local Members, I think, universally praised the district commander and her team for their work. Regrettably, we have also seen recent security alerts in Fermanagh and beyond that highlight the fact that there are those who remain determined to drag us backwards and to cause disruption and worse, with no thought for the local community or, indeed, for the efforts being made by so many people across Northern Ireland to get the maximum benefit from the summit.

Alongside praising the commitment of the PSNI, I reflect on the fact that, as Members highlighted, there is a cross-border element and continuing excellent co-operation with an Garda Síochána, which is undoubtedly helping to make people safe in Northern Ireland and in the Republic.

Let us look briefly at the preparations in practice. It is assessed — this has been referred to here today — that the summit and various events are likely to attract some mass protest groups, and there are already some indications of that planning. Police are planning for major security operations at the summit venue, Belfast International Airport and other locations. Planning is well advanced for each of those locations, although the final itineraries of each of the world leaders are not yet fully established. Indeed, we are not aware of the precise likelihood of protest arrangements at

this stage. I can assure Mr Elliott, however, that the plans do not include fences high enough to disrupt the operation of St Angelo Airport, nor even the UAVs that some Members referred to.

The Police Service has been engaging with a broad range of members of the community, the business sector and partner agencies to mitigate the potential for disruption to community life as much as possible. That effort is particularly well developed in Fermanagh, around Aldergrove and at Belfast City Airport, and it will continue. In response to Mr Flanagan, although he is no longer in his place, I say that that will also include the facilitation of lawful, peaceful protest by those who have a point to make.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: Yes.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister clarify something on that point? Surely, for the citizens of Northern Ireland, we have the draconian Parades Commission, which requests and requires notification of protests. Will those who are going to protest at the summit have to fill in a form and apply to the Parades Commission?

Mr Ford: The Member would not expect me to agree with his description of the Parades Commission as draconian. Of course, anybody who wishes to organise a parade is required to submit the 11/1 form. Those, however, who engage in static protest are not required to submit the form. We have all seen demonstrations on a variety of causes — for example, at Belfast City Hall — and those do not require notification to the Parades Commission. We certainly recognise that there are many who will wish to engage in legitimate and entirely peaceful and lawful protests, and those will be facilitated.

Previous G8 summits have seen the closure of city centres and major airports. I reassure Members and the wider public that it is the intention that both our airports will remain open to the travelling public throughout, and significant effort is being expended to ensure that security arrangements cause as little disruption as possible. The likely primary cause of disruption remains the unlawful activities of those who would seek to disrupt the summit.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: I will give way to the Member briefly.

Mr Allister: I note what the Minister said. Can he say whether any property is being sequestered and taken over by the authorities and what are the arrangements for compensation in that regard?

Mr Ford: I will deal with that in a minute or two, but I need to push on given how the clock is running down.

Members referred to mutual aid, which, as Trevor Lunn highlighted, is an entirely normal concept among police services in GB. It is unusual in Northern Ireland, but, because of the scale of what is planned, approximately 3,500 mutual aid officers will deploy to Northern Ireland from forces in GB. All of them will be under the direction, control and operational command of the Chief Constable. Work is also ongoing to ensure that the Police Ombudsman has the ability to investigate complaints made both against the PSNI, as usual, and against those providing mutual aid. A very significant logistics operation is being set in place that includes, for example, the training of mutual aid officers in GB, with armoured vehicle driver training having taken place for 800 officers. Although public order officers are trained to a common UK national standard, the PSNI is also delivering the additional training that takes our local officers beyond that standard.

The PSNI has already begun security operations at most sites essential to the delivery of the operation. The impact has been minimised as far as possible, and consultation has taken place with those who may be affected. That engagement has been led by local police with the local community, but the details of how it will impact on points such as land requisition are being worked through between my officials and the police. They are also liaising with schools in the Western Education and Library Board area to ensure that any disruption to exams is minimised.

The Chief Constable has submitted a detailed resourcing plan for the operation, and my officials are working closely with the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Office, DFP and the Home Office to review those resource requirements, finalise costs and determine where the additional funding will be sourced. I am committed to ensuring that the PSNI has the resources that it needs and that that funding is not a charge on its normal budget. At this stage, it is not possible to state what the costs will be, but there should be no additional costs to the PSNI because those should be picked up by the national Government.

I am sure that Members will agree that the security preparedness required is a significant challenge for the PSNI in the time available. However, it has been grasped and is being worked on. I have no doubt that policing will be delivered in a professional manner.

Work is also being done to deal with the courts. On Mr Elliott's earlier point, most people who are charged with public order offences are charged with relatively minor offences such as obstruction and disorderly behaviour. That is why provision has been made to allow for Sunday courts if they are required. We have to face the fact that, at Gleneagles eight years ago, there were over 300 arrests on the first day. That is why arrangements are being made to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation in prisons and there are additional temporary detention facilities under police control. On Mr Givan's point, the issue of who is allowed to travel is very much an intelligence-led operational issue for the police.

Members also need, however, to look at the significant opportunities that hosting the G8 gives us. DETI is leading the Northern Ireland Executive's co-ordinating group to ensure that we facilitate a successful summit. It has been collaborating with Invest NI, the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to ensure that all its agencies capitalise on the unprecedented opportunities that the summit presents not just for trade development but for changing perceptions, creating awareness about Northern Ireland, stimulating a sense of civic pride and driving up visitor numbers. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is keen that we get the opportunity to look beyond the immediate needs of the G8 and encourage a more permanent legacy. It is looking at issues such as the telecoms infrastructure to seek to improve the long-term position for Fermanagh and urge the relevant telecoms providers to review their investment plans.

I believe that the G8 summit will give Northern Ireland enormous and unprecedented exposure. The association with the G8 sends out a clear signal about our capability, ambition and stature, and it highlights what Northern Ireland, its people and its business have to offer the global community. I share Tom Elliott's wish that the people of Fermanagh will be able to witness the events in safety as they showcase the best of their county.

Adjourned at 3.53 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Further Allegations

Published at 4.30 pm on Tuesday 16 April 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly to update members on the outcome of the investigation into further allegations made against the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS).

In my statement of 1 November 2012 I advised members that I had received a number of further allegations about potential fraud, theft or other irregularities in NIFRS and that I had tasked the Departmental Accounting Officer with the responsibility of ensuring a satisfactory and independent investigation of the material specific allegations that have been made. These allegations were in addition to those included within the reports published by my Department on 16 October 2012.

The Department of Social Development's Corporate Investigations Unit investigated the majority of the material allegations. Allegations relating to the World Police and Fire Games were investigated by the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure. Other allegations, which related to operational or HR issues and which fell outside the expertise of the DSD Corporate Investigations Unit, have been forwarded to the NIFRS for the consideration of its recently appointed Director of Human Resources.

I am today placing the DSD Corporate Investigation Unit's Report on my Department's website.

None of the allegations investigated to date have been substantiated and I will advise you should ongoing work change that position.

I know that members had expressed particular concern about the allegations relating to the supply of woodchip to Orange Halls. The DSD team has considered the correlation of the

amounts of woodchip purchased by the NIFRS against the likely amounts used in confirmed burns. While this cannot be an exact science, it has found no clear evidence to suggest any theft of woodchip material.

Similarly it has found no evidence of unauthorised use of NIFRS vehicles to transport woodchip.

The DSD investigation has, however, highlighted shortcomings with NIFRS internal control systems and identified the need for additional capacity within its Internal Audit Team. These areas have previously been identified in other reviews: stock control in the second Whistle blowing Report which I published on 16 October 2012 and the capacity of Internal Audit in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report published on 8 April 2013.

I have, therefore, asked the NIFRS interim Chief Executive to urgently consider the recommendations in this report and develop an action plan to address the issues raised. I have also asked him for a report on how he intends to progress the ongoing internal review of the NIFRS Internal Audit function.

The Report also recommends that the Department should make clear to the NIFRS Board and Audit Committee the extent and nature of their responsibilities with regard to the oversight of the NIFRS Internal Audit Function and I have again tasked the Departmental Accounting Officer to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of NIFRS Board and committee members are clearly explained.

The DSD team also considered whether the Department had been made aware of concerns about the Fire Authority management dating back to February 2002. It found that two of the issues had been referred to the then Minister on 26 February 2003 as part of supporting information about ongoing performance issues; that the Department appeared to have focused on those issues and that there did not appear to have been a specific investigation of the allegations.

The Report again draws attention to management failures which the NIFRS should already be addressing. None of this reflects on the courageous team of firefighters who continue to protect the whole community. I know, however, that as the public face of the organisation their morale may have been affected by the ongoing criticisms of the corporate governance arrangements within NIFRS. I know all Members would support me,

therefore, in supporting and applauding our firefighters and the dedicated work that they do.

The Report is published on the Department's website today. I am very grateful to the Department of Social Development's Corporate Investigations Unit for its commitment in working through these allegations.

As I have said previously, I fully support anyone who has issues of concern to raise them through their line management or through whistleblowing procedures. This investigation has not substantiated the allegations but it is also consistent with previous reviews in identifying a number of shortcomings in corporate governance.

In that respect, following the PAC hearing on 24 April, it is vital that the organisation is able to move on and address the recommendations made, and thereby improve the effectiveness and efficiency of NIFRS HQ. I believe that the senior management team and the Board are committed to doing so and my Department will give them every support in this challenging agenda.



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

TSO
PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN
Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 600 5522
Fax orders: 0870 600 5533
E-mail: customer.services@tso.co.uk
Textphone 0870 240 3701

TSO@Blackwell and other Accredited Agents

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
© Copyright Northern Ireland Assembly Commission 2013

ISBN 978-0-339-50613-8

