

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 21 January 2013
Volume 81, No 1

Contents

Assembly Business	1
Inclusivity, Mutual Respect, Peace and Democracy.....	1
Executive Committee Business	
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013: Royal Assent.....	3
Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2013: Royal Assent.....	3
Assembly Business	
Committee Membership: Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development	3
Committee Membership: Committee for Employment and Learning and Committee on Procedures	3
Assembly Commission: Membership.....	3
Ministerial Statement	
Telecommunications	4
Executive Committee Business	
Business Improvement Districts Bill: Consideration Stage	10
Committee Business	
Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 to August 2012: COFMDFM Report	15
Oral Answers to Questions	
Regional Development.....	25
Social Development	30
Committee Business	
Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 to August 2012: COFMDFM Report (Continued).....	36
Private Members' Business	
Historic Environment.....	41

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)
Molloy, Francie (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

Monday 21 January 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your capacity as chairman of the Assembly Commission, can you inform the House whether it has met to discuss the confidence-building measure of increasing the flying of the Union flag on this Building? If it has not met, why is that and how far has the business relevant to the House been disrupted by the failure to meet?

Mr Speaker: First, that is not a point of order. Secondly, these are issues that the Commission is dealing with. We should leave the matter where it is.

Inclusivity, Mutual Respect, Peace and Democracy

Motion proposed [15 January 2013]:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, peace and democracy; condemns all acts of violence and intimidation against police officers, elected representatives, other members of society, homes and property at all times; and calls on all political parties to support the spirit of the Belfast Agreement. — [Mr Nesbitt.]

Amendment proposed [15 January 2013]:
Leave out all after "times;" and insert

"and calls on all political parties to give full effect to their commitment to the consent principle, which recognises Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom." — [Mr Campbell.]

Mr Speaker: The votes deferred from last Tuesday because of a petition of concern will be the first item of business this afternoon. *[Interruption.]* Order. I remind Members that only the vote on the amendment, which will be the first vote, will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 52.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen,

Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea.

OTHER:

Mr Agnew, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Rogers and Ms Ruane.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>99</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>[47.5%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>[95.9%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>

Question accordingly negated (cross-community vote).

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 64; Noes 33.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr

Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Kinahan and Mr Nesbitt

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, peace and democracy; condemns all acts of violence and intimidation against police officers, elected representatives, other members of society, homes and property at all times; and calls on all political parties to support the spirit of the Belfast Agreement.

Executive Committee Business

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013:
Royal Assent

Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2013:
Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: Before we move on with the rest of today's business, I wish to inform the House that both the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 have received Royal Assent and became law on 18 January 2013.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership: Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: The next two items on the Order Paper are motions on Committee Membership. As with other similar motions, they will be treated as business motions. There will, therefore, be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Robin Swann replace Mr Danny Kinahan as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. — [Mr Swann.]

Committee Membership: Committee for Employment and Learning and Committee on Procedures

Resolved:

That Ms Bronwyn McGahan replace Mr Barry McElduff as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and that Mr Barry McElduff replace Mr Phil Flanagan as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Ms Ruane.]

Assembly Commission: Membership

Mr Speaker: As required by Standing Order 79(4), I wish to inform the Assembly that Mr Barry McElduff has given notice of his resignation as a member of the Assembly Commission, with effect from 18 January 2013. A vacancy, therefore, exists on the Commission, and the next item on the Order Paper is a motion to fill that vacancy. As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. There will, therefore, be no debate.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Ms Cairíona Ruane be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission. — [Mr G Kelly.]

Ministerial Statement

Telecommunications

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on telecommunications in Northern Ireland and to take the opportunity to inform the Assembly of my Department's continuing efforts to improve our telecommunications infrastructure across Northern Ireland and to remind you of our successes to date.

When it comes to broadband or mobile services, I am well aware of the importance of good access for the public and for businesses. It is an important and essential asset for the way that we now live, whether it is for shopping online, booking holidays, young people doing homework, farmers completing government forms or folk e-mailing friends and colleagues at work or home. That is certainly reflected in the significant volume of correspondence that I receive from the public, business and public representatives. I recognise that when people write to me it is because they are struggling to receive a service that is acceptable and meets their needs. Indeed, while living in and representing a rural constituency, I know the particular difficulties that rural dwellers face, whether it is lack of coverage or the cost of incurring unnecessary roaming charges.

Telecoms is one of those sectors where, as the technology develops, so does the demand. These all offer new and exciting opportunities for our local businesses and home-grown entrepreneurs to exploit. It is estimated by the telecoms sector that it has generated £39.7 billion of revenue in 2012.

One of the things that I have observed is that the days when we used our mobile phones only to make calls are long gone. These devices are now used to access the internet, update social networks and listen to music. That all requires faster broadband connections at home, at work and on the move.

Cities have recognised the value of facilitating users and meeting demand, and I was very pleased that Belfast and Londonderry were successful in securing public funding to help make them superfast cities. However, I am equally mindful that, while initiatives like that can help them to become economic drivers in the region, it should not leave other parts of Northern Ireland behind. For my part, while the telecoms industry is privatised, I have continued to lobby, encourage, cajole and, where

possible, offer investment to the sector that would allow it to meet that demand, improve coverage, widen the range of services and enhance our infrastructure.

Members will be aware of what my Department has sought to achieve against a background where policy rests with the Westminster Government and it is not a devolved matter. My Department has limited powers to intervene, and we have a private telecoms sector that makes its investment decisions on a commercial basis. Against that background, my Department has, over the last number of years, provided public investment for a number of significant telecoms projects. They have made a major contribution to improving Northern Ireland's telecoms infrastructure that makes us leaders not only in the United Kingdom but across Europe. You do not have to take my word for it: Ofcom, the independent regulator, recently reported that the percentage of premises with access to superfast broadband services in Northern Ireland stands at 95%, which is the highest in the UK. England is the closest at 68%, and the UK average is 65%. The average speed at which consumers in Northern Ireland access the internet has more than doubled in the last year from 6.3 megabits per second to 14.4 megabits per second. In fact, Ofcom acknowledges that one of the reasons for that growth has been the intervention that my Department has made. However, I do not think that DETI alone can take credit for that improvement. I have to recognise the leadership and commitment shown by companies such as BT, their willingness to work constructively with us and, most importantly, the additional investment that they have put into the region to enhance the services that they offer here — for example, their investment in the UK City of Culture and accelerating their deployment of superfast services into Northern Ireland. Of course, other companies have made and continue to make investments in the region, including Eircom, Everything Everywhere, Vodafone and many others.

I am conscious that to nurture economic growth we need to have a telecoms infrastructure that meets the needs of business and allows it to be competitive, to access new markets and to promote its services and products. Over the past few years, my Department and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Executive have invested some £45 million in improving our telecoms infrastructure, and some £21 million has been specifically used or earmarked to support the improvement of networks in rural and remote locations where there is no likelihood of private sector investment.

We have provided investment to stimulate superfast broadband services; given Northern Ireland its first direct international telecoms link to North America; ensured continued access to a broadband service at a reasonable cost for business and residential consumers who are unable to get broadband by a wire-line solution; and established the free advisory service log on.ni for all businesses to help them understand how they can exploit the new services. However, we are not resting on our laurels or becoming complacent. I know that our infrastructure is not perfect and there is more to be done. The Ofcom report indicates that there are still some broadband "not spots" and that, despite the availability of services, Northern Ireland has the lowest take-up of basic broadband services in the UK at 63.9%. I want to address that, and my Department has plans to further improve broadband coverage. This is of interest and importance not just to me as Minister but to other Executive colleagues, the UK Government and the European Union.

The UK Government, through Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK), have made funding available to allow a basic broadband service of 2 megabits a second that is available to all premises and to further improve the availability of superfast services. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is also interested in improving broadband services for farming and rural communities, and I acknowledge the contribution from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The improvement of broadband services is also a priority of the EU, and, again, we have secured funding from that source.

Some £19 million of funding has been earmarked, and we have conducted a public consultation to help identify the areas where we need to intervene. My Department received over 700 responses, which are being analysed. I thank the public and their representatives for their contribution and obvious desire to be included in the exercise. It is important that we accurately identify the area of intervention, and it is my intention to publish the outcome of the analysis on the Department's website shortly. My officials are also finalising the tender documentation to allow suppliers to bid for the work in the next few months. I expect that the industry itself will also contribute to the project. I am certain that all Members will welcome that support, particularly in these times of economic constraint and pressure on the public purse. With such support from such a range of stakeholders, it should come as no surprise that I want to ensure that what and how that is delivered presents the best outcome for Northern Ireland.

On the question of mobile phone services, I am disappointed that Northern Ireland has the third lowest outdoor coverage of 2G mobile services from all operators of the four UK nations at 88%, which is just above Wales at 84.1%. On 3G services, we have the second worst outdoor coverage at 55.9%, which is just above Wales at 52.4%. This is a priority for me. The mobile market, however, has not remained static and continues to evolve. Providers are consolidating their services and preparing for the introduction of 4G services.

The analogue TV switch off last year created space for more mobile traffic, and an auction has commenced for that space across the UK. I successfully lobbied for Northern Ireland and secured a regional target of 95% coverage here when licences are awarded. There is a lot going on that should see our mobile infrastructure dramatically improve. However, when the dust settles, there may still be gaps. I intend to review the situation later this year, when the position will be clearer.

I have met representatives from the industry and welcomed the investments they are making here. I will continue to encourage them to provide services as widely as possible, especially close to the border, and to draw to their attention any obvious gaps. Looking forward, I want to see them not just complying with but exceeding their roll-out obligations for the new 4G services in Northern Ireland. That provides us all with an opportunity to improve the consumer experience of mobile in the near future.

12.45 pm

It is worth reminding everyone that there are a number of players in the telecoms sector delivering a range of competitive products using various technologies at various prices. Those technologies are evolving, and I want to dispel the perception that broadband can be obtained only through a fixed telephone line and that any other option is inferior. That is not the case. We are seeing lots of new ways to access the internet, whether by satellite, wireless or mobile. I believe that the market across Northern Ireland is largely competitive, and the number of providers is increasing on a regular basis. That should result in lower prices and better choices for many consumers.

I fully understand the expectations and, at times, frustrations of people who do not receive an adequate service, and I and my officials are ready to assist whenever we can. However, Members will recognise that telecoms providers are commercial organisations that make

decisions on economic viability and financial return. We all need to be mindful that what may make sense for one company may not make sense for another. Today, however, I extend a challenge to the whole telecoms industry to step up and meet the increasing demand, to offer value-for-money services and to improve the overall customer experience. Where there is unmet demand, consumers can, in my experience, be very loyal to a good supplier who successfully meets that demand.

It strikes me that there is an opportunity, when the G8 summit comes to Fermanagh and the media spotlight falls on the Province, to positively showcase what we have already achieved across Northern Ireland. No doubt, demand for communications services will increase in certain areas, and, although temporary solutions may be deployed for the event, it gives the industry an opportunity to leave a permanent legacy for the local community's benefit. I would be very pleased to see that happen, and I encourage the industry not to waste the opportunity but to seize it positively.

We should be proud of our telecoms infrastructure and recognise the part it plays in improving our people's lives and contributing to our economic growth. There are still challenges to overcome, and, although telecoms is not a public utility, I realise that Members and the public at large will continue to draw my attention to any shortcomings. I will continue to lobby the industry to do more and intervene when it is sensible to do so. I know that collectively we can make that difference to all the people across Northern Ireland.

These are exciting times for telecommunications with the scope and services ever expanding. I wanted to make this statement to recognise the success we have had to date and to mark the start of a new chapter. In the next year, we will see further investment made to expand the reach of broadband and deliver faster services and significantly improve the coverage of mobile services. I want business to better use the infrastructure we have and every citizen to enjoy the benefits of better access. As Minister, I want to continue to ensure that Northern Ireland is best in class. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as a ráiteas. Thanks very much,

Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her statement.

I was not aware of the scale of it, but I, too, am disappointed by the figures that the Minister gave us about the 2G mobile services here in the North. That is very disappointing. As regards the potential arising from the roll-out of 4G services, the Minister stated that she had successfully lobbied for Northern Ireland and secured a regional target of 95% coverage. Is that indoor or outdoor? Also, did the firms themselves, during their conversations with the Minister, give us any time frame for the roll-out of that project?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman for his question. It is disappointing to see that coverage, but the 2G coverage problem arises from the fact that we did not have those regional targets in place. Therefore, the national targets, which were set by Ofcom, meant that they did not have to do as much in Northern Ireland as we would like to have seen. We now have the 4G target for 95% coverage, and it is my understanding that it is an outdoor target, although that will vary in relation to indoor. However, I am asking the industry to exceed that target and saying, "Let's do that together". We have got the most out of telecoms infrastructure in Northern Ireland when the industry has worked with government intervention as well, so we have added value. Others, not just in the UK but across Europe, have looked to the way we have been able to deliver that in Northern Ireland as best in class.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is a welcome position, particularly at this time of economic constraint. Indeed, the figures generally are extremely encouraging. I do not think that any other part of the UK with a population of 1.7 million or thereabouts has two cities that have graduated to the position of superfast cities. If that were the case, they would be extremely pleased.

The Ofcom report indicates that there are some problems with basic broadband services —

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

Mr Newton: How will the Minister address that issue?

Mrs Foster: We have a number of projects. We want to look at 3G and 4G coverage and at areas where there are gaps in basic broadband. The broadband improvement project is aimed at delivering 2 megabits per second broadband

services to all premises. We have another target for superfast services: 24 megabits per second services or better to at least 90% of premises by 2015, which is in line with the UK broadband strategy. One benefit of having moneys available from Europe, BDUK and the industry is that there is quite a lot of investment at present. We need to see where that investment is going. If there are any gaps, we can intervene with the money that we have put in place. It is a question of all of us working together to make sure that we get the maximum out of all this.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a thug sí dúinn agus as an obair atá aici agus ag a Roinn go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her statement and genuinely commend her Department and the wider Executive for their efforts to date to improve the telecommunications infrastructure.

I turn to the G8 summit and the much-heralded legacy that it will leave Fermanagh. Will the Minister further inform us about the permanent improvements that will be made to mobile phone and broadband coverage in rural Fermanagh, particularly in areas such as Boho and Derrygonnelly, instead of the inevitable temporary benefits that many of us envisage will serve only the great and the good of the world powers who will visit Fermanagh in June?

Mrs Foster: Are we not delighted to see the great and the good coming to Fermanagh for the G8 summit in June? Well, some of us are delighted to see them coming.

The Member makes a fair point about temporary installations that may be used at that time. I have told the industry — Everything Everywhere, Vodafone and British Telecom; I have not had the opportunity to speak to Eircom yet — to take the opportunity to put in legacy infrastructure. We are determined that there should be legacy infrastructure after the event. The cross-departmental group set up to ensure that the event is a success and to deal with all those issues knows my views well on the issues. We have commenced discussions with the relevant stakeholders about venues and telecoms providers and with the national Government about telecom requirements. I will keep pushing and I trust that the Member will keep pushing for legacy investment. Together, I hope that we can make it happen.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for the statement. Telecommunications is an important aspect, and it is of great concern to businesses

and consumers across Northern Ireland. The Minister mentioned that the achievements include Northern Ireland's first direct international telecoms link to North America. At a recent meeting in Omagh, the great benefits that businesses there already experience because of fast broadband were outlined to me.

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

Mrs Overend: Sorry, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister outline how her Department has used that to Northern Ireland's advantage in increasing business in the west of Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Having visited the Innovation Growth Centre in Omagh, I know very well the advantages that have come from its direct link into Project Kelvin. Indeed, Invest Northern Ireland uses the fact that we have that direct connectivity all the time. I am hopeful that we will see some tangible evidence of that in the near future.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. The section about broadband delivery and the commitment to a basic speed of 2 MB per second interests me. The speed is lower than that in the rural areas around Lisburn — in fact, it is not worth having at all because of the state of the exchanges in the area. Will the £19 million make a significant difference to that situation, given that what most people want is a service through their telephone line, particularly for their children?

Mrs Foster: I accept that that is what most people want. However, sometimes, it may not be the best answer for them. I have already said that a fixed line is not the only answer. Many of us use mobile technology to download broadband as we move around our constituencies. Fixed satellite and wireless are other options. We will very much engage, and I am pleased by the level of answers to our consultation: 700 people took the time to respond. That indicates that there are issues. The interest is absolutely huge, so we need to be able to address those difficulties. We will use a range of technologies to provide those answers; I will not stand here and say that it will all be fixed line. I ask Members to work with me and their constituents in educating people about the fact that it may not be possible to have a fixed line. We have other answers for them, and the broadband that they receive will be just as good.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for bringing this positive statement to the Assembly today. The telecoms industry has, over the past years, been very profitable. Does the Minister have any indications from meetings with the industry that it will contribute to the £19 million already earmarked?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his perceptive question. That is a key element. I must be fair to the industry: in the past, when we have put in government money, it has come alongside and invested extra money. I am hopeful that that will be the case in this instance as well. I will certainly push the industry because, if we are going to put in infrastructure, the industry will benefit, so why not put in extra money and get the maximum benefit from it? There is a good pot of money from BDUK, European funds and my core budget. I hope that the industry will recognise that and move forward with us.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement from the Minister this morning. It is important that we all welcome the investment in telecommunications. Where do 2G and 3G fit into the overall strategy given that you are talking now about a 95% target for 4G? I do not want to sound negative, but can you explain whether we need to continue to invest in 2G and 3G while looking at that target for 4G?

Mrs Foster: That is another good point. I have had the opportunity to discuss that with the industry so that, when it looks at the targets for 4G, it will also consider how it implements 2G for customers. It is looking at innovative ways to deal with that. It is a key point that many people will not benefit from 4G and 3G in the near future, so we need to make sure that they have the minimum coverage of 2G. We need to allow time for the industry to put in place its infrastructure. If there are gaps around Northern Ireland, we will then try to intervene to help with those 2G not spots. I accept that those are mostly rural, but some of them are quite close to towns.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her positive statement. I want to ask her about DARD involvement with the farming community. We all know about the increasing demand for and pressure on the farming community to use the internet and computers to help with their business efficiency and to fill in forms from DARD. Will the Minister detail some of the operations by her Department and DARD to encourage farmers to use the internet?

Mrs Foster: Sometimes, we in government are criticised for not working cross-departmentally. This is a good example of working across Departments to make a difference for rural dwellers.

1.00 pm

Of the £19.3 million of funds that are available, £2.75 million comes from my core budget in DETI, £4.4 million comes from BDUK, £7.15 million comes from the European regional development fund (ERDF) and £5 million comes from DARD. So, that is a significant amount of money from DARD, and I think that it is a good investment for rural dwellers, particularly those farmers who have to access computers to fill in forms online. I think that it is money well spent. Hopefully, the rural community will recognise the investment.

Mr Beggs: I also thank the Minister for her statement. When the Chancellor made his announcement of additional moneys to improve broadband, he mentioned that funding would be made available in particular for the A2, which runs through a major part of my constituency. Is she able to advise yet what broadband improvements will be implemented in that regard? What will be done to ensure that some business parks that do not have superfast broadband will be able to benefit in the future?

Mrs Foster: I know that the Member has written to me about the very specific issue of the business park in Larne. As I indicated to him, that really is a commercial decision for BT. However, I would encourage BT to work with the business park to find a solution. Obviously, we want to encourage as many businesses as possible to take up broadband in Northern Ireland. We have sometimes been disappointed by the uptake, so we put Logon.ni in place so that we could go out to small and medium-sized businesses and help them to avail themselves of broadband services.

I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but I will have to come back to the Member on his question about the A2. I am not aware of the detail of that.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I note that the Minister referred to the North American cable link, and particularly to Project Kelvin. I also note that she referred to tangible evidence of results in the near future. Will the Minister give us an assessment of the impact of the Project Kelvin facility, specifically where foreign direct investment is concerned?

Mrs Foster: I think that it is a great tool to have, particularly when we are talking to IT and financial services companies. It is very difficult to say what specific impact it had on some of our big announcements over the past number of years. I am thinking specifically of the likes of the New York Stock Exchange and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. However, there is no doubt that those companies benefit from Project Kelvin and the direct link to the US, because, of course, they work with the US all the time. It obviously adds to the mix of our skills, our geographical position and all the other reasons why people invest here.

When we talk to investors, there is no doubt in my mind that they are very interested in the fact that we have our own direct link to the US with a latency of 70 milliseconds, as well as guaranteed pricing, availability and latency until December 2018. It gives us the opportunity to have something very tangible to go to companies with, and it definitely adds to our proposition whenever we go out to companies in the US and across the globe.

Mr A Maginness: I commend the Minister for her statement and for the work that she has done over a long period in this area. It has borne fruit.

The Minister referred to the G8 summit in Fermanagh, an event that, I think, is close to her heart. Will she explain how we can use that event to showcase telecommunications in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: Hopefully, we will be able to use it to showcase Northern Ireland for a number of reasons, not least telecommunications. I hope that we will very much be able to look at how we, as such a small region, compare with the rest of the UK and Europe. I also hope that it will show the way in which government investment has been matched by industry investment and demonstrate that that is a good model to use in other jurisdictions. So, I very much hope that we will have the opportunity to do that.

Of course, to my disappointment, the G8 summit is not entirely under DETI's control. We will have to work with other partners in Westminster —

Mr A Maginness: It is still in Fermanagh.

Mrs Foster: It is still in Fermanagh; that is very critical. We are aware that there are some gaps in the provision of certain services. They

have been flagged up early to the relevant providers.

We are working closely with event organisers to scope the demands and needs for the event. However, as I said, it is about not just the event but its legacy.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she advise what is being planned to deal with coverage black spots, such as the Hollywood hills at Craigantlet? They are located just behind Parliament Buildings, which is obviously the centre of communication. However, a few hundred metres away from Parliament Buildings, there is poor coverage for homes and local businesses.

Mrs Foster: The prize for today must go to the Member for his constituency references, although others came close.

Again, we will be looking to see where there are black spots, after the industry has invested and we have put in the money from BDUK and other sources. I am sure that his constituents took part in the consultation that has just finished. Therefore, we will be looking at the not-spots to make sure that we can intervene.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will not be surprised by my referring to the rural communities in my constituency, of which she is more than aware, because I take the opportunity to raise them with her.

The Minister referred to the other technologies that are available for broadband provision, and more so for rural areas. Does she agree that it is important that the companies that provide such alternative technologies become better at marketing their products, to ensure that people who depend on BT to sell them its product but are unable to get it become aware of alternative technologies?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments. I do not disagree that some of those companies need to get out and promote their products as being good for the customer. I recognise that some of the companies are small and may therefore be restricted in the manpower or, indeed, womanpower that they have to go out there and sell their products. However, I appeal to them to market their goods more proactively so that people are aware of the available options.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist áirithe agam ar an Aire.

Where, based on their commercial interests, telecoms providers deem it unviable to provide broadband solutions to a particular rural community, what duty has the Department, working with DARD, to resolve those difficulties? What can the Department do when telecoms providers do that? The Minister will be aware of my strong interest in continuing problems —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr McElduff: — in Greencastle, Broughderg and other parts of mid and west Tyrone.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for raising those issues. He and everyone else in the Chamber continue to lobby me on the areas that are challenged in their constituency.

Under European rules, the Department can intervene only when there is market failure. He is right: we first have to see whether there is a commercial solution to the issue. We then fund, as he is aware, other providers, such as Onwave and North West Electronics, to come into the market. We subsidise them to provide another type of solution, whether that be wireless or satellite. They then come in and offer the solution, which hopefully is able to sort out the difficulties. However, I recognise that there is still the residual desire to have fixed/wired broadband, but we really need to try to move our constituents to a place where they are content with other technologies. Hopefully we can move to that position with some of the new money that will be made available in areas that have suffered difficulties.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask the House to take its ease before we move to the Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill.

Executive Committee Business

Business Improvement Districts Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Social Development, Mr McCausland, to move the Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill.

Moved. — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There is a single group of amendments. The debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 2 and 3. Those deal with the definition of "eligible ratepayer" and the approval of related regulations. Once the debate on the group is completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: It is vitally important, Members, when we are dealing with a Bill, that we have clear Ayes and clear Noes as we proceed.

Clause 6 (Entitlement to vote in ballot)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1 it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 and 3. I call the Minister for Social Development to move amendment No 1 and address the other amendments in the group.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Before I move on to the detail of the proposed amendments, I thank the Chair and the members of the Social Development Committee for their effective scrutiny of the Bill and for the timely publication of the report.

The first amendment seeks to bring clarity as to who exactly would be eligible to vote in a ballot on the business improvement district (BID) proposal, as the original wording did not, perhaps, make that explicit enough. My officials advised the Social Development

Committee of this possible amendment on 4 December last year.

The need to make the amendment was identified during Committee Stage, when Committee members asked a number of questions concerning who would be entitled to vote on the BID proposals, and, in particular, whether charity shops, which have an exemption from paying rates, either partial or full, would be included. It is my intention that all non-domestic properties can be included within a proposed BID area, whether or not they have exemptions from paying rates. Therefore, the tenant or the owner, as appropriate, would have an entitlement to vote on the BID proposals. It would be up to the BID proposer to decide which properties to include in the final proposals for ballot.

The proposed amended clause would state explicitly that liability to pay rates is not a prerequisite for having eligibility to vote. That would mean that, where exemptions to paying rates are in place, for a variety of reasons under the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, a tenant or property owner would not be excluded from the pool of those potentially entitled to vote. If the amendment is accepted for inclusion in the Bill, I believe that it will help to remove any potential confusion surrounding which non-domestic properties may be included in the BID area.

The two remaining amendments to clause 19 were discussed and agreed during the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. They relate to the provisions of the Bill that delegate legislation-making powers. The Department prepared a delegated powers memorandum for that purpose, which was considered by the Examiner of Statutory Rules. He advised the Committee that those clauses relating to eligibility to vote in the BID ballot should be subject to draft affirmative resolution, rather than to negative resolution as the Bill stands. Both the Department and the Committee accepted the advice of the Examiner of Statutory Rules on that point and agreed clause 19, subject to the amendment being accepted.

That concludes the amendments that I have tabled at Consideration Stage. I request Assembly approval on the basis that they are non-contentious and will enhance the framework laid out in the Bill for the establishment of statutory BIDs in Northern Ireland.

Passing this legislation will bring us into line both with other United Kingdom jurisdictions and the Republic of Ireland, where BIDs have

existed for a number of years. It is part of a toolkit of measures to help boost our local economy and offer assistance to our beleaguered traders, many of whom are struggling to keep afloat in these tough times. Importantly, it is a scheme that allows businesses to help themselves as well, and to find innovative solutions to local issues in local areas.

In conclusion, I commend the amendments and the Bill to the House.

1.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to move the amendments just to have them on the record.

Mr McCausland: Apologies, Speaker. Admittedly, I failed to do that at the start. I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 3, line 1, leave out subsection (3) and insert

"(3) In this Act 'eligible ratepayer' means a person who on the prescribed date occupies or is entitled to possession of relevant property, whether or not rates are payable by that person in respect of it."

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 19, page 7, line 26, at end insert "() section 6(3);". — *[Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]*

No 3: In clause 19, page 7, line 27, at end insert "() section 17(2)(b);". — *[Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]*

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Obviously, the debate today is really around the amendments, and I want to put on record immediately that the Committee supports them. I am advised that, since this is the first opportunity for debate since the Committee concluded its consideration of the Bill at Committee Stage, you may give me a bit of latitude to outline some context on behalf of the Committee, and I thank you for that.

I thank the Minister for bringing the Consideration Stage forward. I appreciate that, at this stage, it is mainly to consider amendments. I will, as briefly as I can, set out some of the issues considered by the Committee.

The Committee received 16 responses to its call for evidence, and took oral evidence from five stakeholders and the Department. While some had minor reservations about the Bill, it was evident to the Committee that the Bill was very much welcomed by all the stakeholders, particularly retail organisations such as the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association, who wanted the Bill to be progressed as quickly as possible. I place on record our thanks to the Minister, the Department and all the stakeholders who assisted the Committee in its deliberations.

The Committee heard that the BIDs concept is a proven one, as the Minister alluded to. Many have argued that this is because it has been business led or, at least, led by the businesses involved as direct stakeholders. That is important given that it is enabling legislation and further regulations will have to be produced in due course in direct consultation with and considering the views of the key stakeholders.

The Committee agreed that, in this instance, whilst the Bill is an enabling one and we have regulations to come down the line, the balance is probably right in so far as we need to have a Bill that is clear for all concerned but that has enough flexibility built in so that we can build on the improvements as they emerge and develop.

Some members were concerned about the mandatory nature of the BID proposal. Should eligible participants vote for a BID, businesses within that area must pay the associated levy. Members referred to the current economic circumstances, which, again, the Minister alluded to, and the possibility that any additional cost might be enough to force some retailers to close. The Committee was, however, reassured by the democratic nature of the process and the various checks and balances built into the BID proposal process. Fundamentally, if businesses do not feel that a BID proposal is in their best interest, they do, of course, have the option of voting against the proposal. We believe that experience shows that common sense generally does prevail.

The Bill does not force businesses to establish a BID; it provides a framework to support the development of a BID by relevant and affected businesses. The mandatory payment of a levy, should a proposal be successful, will apply to all businesses within the area defined in the proposal, and the Committee recognises that that is, indeed, only fair. It would not be acceptable to have some businesses not contributing a levy yet benefiting from being in a BID area.

The Committee was further reassured that BID proposers will have wide scope to determine the level of the levy and whether they will apply a reduced levy or, in some cases, no levy for certain types of businesses; for example, charity shops. Again, that will be underpinned by a democratic vote.

Members were also concerned about the possibility of duplication of services. Some members suggested that there may be some areas where initiatives have been taken, perhaps via the local council. There are a good number of examples of that nature. It would never be intended that a BID proposal would seek to duplicate those services; that would not make sense. It was also a matter of concern to members that all the BID proposals should obviously have to take on board all other existing statutory frameworks. The Committee was eventually satisfied with the Department's assurances around that. For example, when you move to the review of public administration basis of community planning, the BID proposals will have to take on board the wider consultation exercises in their respective areas.

The Committee also voiced concerns about the inclusion of residents in the consultation process on the BID proposals and, in particular, the inclusion of residents who live close to business areas. We actually do have some areas where there would be residents living within a BID proposal area. There are some main streets and some town centres, for example, where there are residents who live on the front of the street. Obviously, they would not be formal BID members and would not have to pay any levy, because they are domestic, but by the same token they would be directly affected by any BID proposal, so it is important that they are included in all considerations. Again, the amendments that have been introduced clarify the issue of who is an eligible ratepayer, and that has been resolved by the Minister.

One of the other concerns was to do with the level of buy-in from people involved in a BID proposal. Some people felt that the 25% turnout of those eligible to vote was not high enough. We have been advised that there are probably no BID proposals that were not endorsed by a minimum of 40%. However, under the proposed legislation, each of the BID proposers will have the ability to increase that eligibility threshold if they so desire.

On the basis of some of these — and there were other concerns that were raised by members, and we sought clarification from

stakeholders and the Department — the Committee is content to support the rules. That also applies because we did seek, following discussions with the Examiner of Statutory Rules, that future regulations would be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure rather than negative resolution.

Ms P Bradley: As a member of the Social Development Committee I support the Bill and the amendments at Consideration Stage. I declare an interest as a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council.

The BIDs scheme will allow local businesses to take charge and decide how to act for their mutual benefit in improving their respective areas. I believe that BIDs offer local businesses and entrepreneurs the chance to improve their areas for the benefit of local businesses and, of course, local people.

The scheme provides local businesses with a level of autonomy and a means of funding in order to take their own ideas forward and better the communities in which they operate. I believe that the BIDs will produce and harness better relationships between councils and local businesses in a BID area. Therefore, I welcome the Bill at Consideration Stage.

Mr Durkan: I support the Bill and the amendments. The Minister and the Chair have explained the amendments, and we in the SDLP welcome them, particularly the amendment to clause 19 that increases the scrutiny function of the Assembly.

I have previously expressed some concerns about the BIDS legislation — the Chair touched on them as well — and I still think that, in order for it to be truly successful, BIDs will need to be supported financially, at least in the early stages, by the Department or by government. However, I am satisfied with the assurances that the Committee has received that there are safeguards and flexibilities in the Bill to ensure protection of businesses, residents and other stakeholders.

I am glad to support the passage of the Bill with the amendments as a small, but hopefully significant, step towards helping members of our business community help themselves, and each other, in these tough economic times.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill today. Having seen the relative success of existing BID schemes in other cities throughout the UK, and having discussed the potential for BIDs here in

Northern Ireland at length with a number of key stakeholders since beginning my term in the Assembly, I view this legislation as a positive step forward at a time when economic and social factors forced on our local business community are at their most critical.

When we consider that, in 2011 alone, over 1,000 small shops closed across Northern Ireland and that Northern Ireland has the highest high street vacancy rate in the UK at almost 17%, it is clear that there has been a palpable decline in community footfall and prosperity across Northern Ireland.

In my constituency, and particularly in the immediate area surrounding my constituency office, such decline is evident for all to see. Recent independent research has identified high street regeneration as having the most potential benefit for local trading environments.

Established traders' associations in east Belfast, such as the Ballyhackamore Business Association, have already begun to plant strong seeds of communal development and co-operative improvements, engaging local residents and harvesting a renewed sense of community in difficult times. This legislation will surely strengthen such initiatives.

I support the proposed amendments. They are largely technical in nature, but they will help to further clarify the procedural aspects of how such schemes will function in practice.

In conclusion, business improvement districts legislation will provide a formal opportunity for joined-up thinking between businesses that can benefit precincts across Northern Ireland. It is, however, only one of a series of measures that can secure the future of our traders. We need to get out there and support our local businesses. The recent campaign to get back into Belfast must be commended. I also take this opportunity to encourage all listening to shop locally and to put your money where your house is.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Committee Chair and Members for their contribution to the debate on the proposed amendments. There is clearly broad agreement across the Chamber for the Business Improvement Districts Bill and for the proposed amendments, and I am grateful for that.

The Chair touched on the issue of the legislation having clarity and flexibility, and he is absolutely right. He also touched on the regulations that will come forward in due course. Those regulations will be transparent

and unambiguous. However, they will also have the necessary flexibility required to allow different areas to implement their own local solutions. The regulations will be subject to full public consultation. The Chair stated that the other issues will be resolved by the amendments, and that is an indication that we have got the legislation right.

I am delighted with the response this afternoon. Once the Bill has progressed through the Assembly and received Royal Assent, it will represent the enabling framework for the establishment of statutory BIDs in Northern Ireland, which I am sure businesses will welcome.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr Allister: Can the Minister clarify one issue? I note the amendment to clause 6(3). If I understand it correctly, it means that the occupier of a property, who, in other circumstances, would be a ratepayer, may, in fact, not pay rates — it may be a charity or something else — but will be eligible to vote in any proposition nonetheless. That seems a bit dubious to me, but there it is. How does that sit with clause 6(2), which allows the BID proposers to determine which eligible ratepayers are entitled to vote? How will that be policed to ensure that there is no cherry-picking as to which ratepayers can vote? Obviously, it may be in the interest of someone with a proposal to make sure that they include all those who do not pay rates, such as charity shops, to boost the yes vote? What policing will there be of the selectivity that is possible under clause 6(2)?

Mr McCausland: The legislation enables the proposer of a BID to include those who do not pay rates; there is that potential. However, as the Member has rightly said, it is up to the proposer of the BID to decide whether or not they should be included. Ultimately, as with all these things, it will come down to the vote of the member businesses of the BID proposal to decide whether to move forward on the basis that is determined.

Charity shops are the sector most affected by this question. It is true that there are more charity shops than there were in the past; we see that in many parts of the Province. However — I am open to correction on this — I am not aware of any area in which, when you consider the totality of businesses, the number of charity shops is of such a scale that it would

be possible to determine, almost, the outcome of a vote in the way that someone might want. There are significant numbers in some areas, but not on the sort of scale that would alter the outcome. One of the points made earlier is important: when the votes are taken, there is a 25% minimum threshold, but that can be raised. In practice, it generally does not go below 40%, but it is possible to raise the threshold. We will be watching carefully to see how this is taken forward.

1.30 pm

It is important that these things are done on the basis of consensus and that there is goodwill all round. Generally, from what I have heard so far, the desire is there among traders to take these things forward. They really want to see it be a success, and I do not foresee a scenario where people are in an area where there is such a proliferation of charity shops. You are dealing with significant areas. There might be a proliferation in one street, but you are dealing with quite significant areas, so I do not foresee that situation arising.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 7 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19 (Further provision as to regulations)

Amendment No 2 made: In page 7, line 26, at end insert “() section 6(3);”. — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Amendment No 3 made: In page 7, line 27, at end insert “() section 17(2)(b);”. — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Clause 19, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 20 to 22 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 to August 2012: COFMDFM Report

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

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

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA/81/11-15) on Statutory Committee activity on European issues May 2011 - August 2012.

The report that the Committee is today asking the Assembly to note is the second of its type and provides an overview of the engagement of Statutory Committees with European issues and consideration of European policy and legislation between May 2011 and August 2012.

Periodic reporting of Committee work on European issues was one of the key actions on foot of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's inquiry into the consideration of European issues that was approved by the Assembly on 26 January 2010. Action 2 of that report stated:

"The Assembly's statutory committees will be responsible for the scrutiny of all European issues of relevance to the committee. In the autumn of each year statutory committees will be requested to provide a report of activity on European issues to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will formulate all contributions into one report to the Assembly which will be submitted to the Business Committee for Plenary debate."

As a newly devolved European region, Northern Ireland is naturally interested in developments at a European level, and many laws and policies of the European Union have a direct effect on the people of Northern Ireland. The European Union has greatly contributed to economic development in Northern Ireland and

to the reconciliation process, including measures through INTERREG and Peace funding. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has overall responsibility for the development of Northern Ireland's strategic approach to Europe. The OFMDFM Committee has responsibility for scrutinising the Department's work on Europe and takes great interest in the Executive's strategic approach to ensuring that Northern Ireland improves its interaction and engagement with the various institutions and makes the most of the opportunities afforded by the European Union. In July last year, the Committee wrote to all Statutory Committees requesting information on their engagement on European issues between May 2011 and August of last year. The report collates the work of Statutory Committees on all EU issues.

I shall now briefly outline the work of my Committee on EU issues in the period from May 2011 to August 2012, and I look forward to hearing other Committee Chairs and Members speak to the detail of the work of their respective Committees. In June 2011, the Committee established a European advisory panel to help to inform consideration of European issues by Committees and by the Assembly. The panel comprises Northern Ireland's three MEPs, our representatives on the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, as well as officials from the EU Commission office in Belfast, the Executive's office in Brussels and local government. Chairs of Statutory Committees were also invited when the subject of the panel meeting related to their Committee work. They made valuable contributions.

In November 2011, the panel focused on the Commission's CAP proposals for 2014 to 2020, which the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is considering. In March 2012, the panel considered regional transport and cohesion proposals and, in particular, the possibility of Peace IV funding. In June 2012, the panel focused on the opportunities available in research and development through the proposed Horizon 2020 programme. The panel meetings were welcomed and well attended by participants, and I thank Committee Chairs for their contributions and all stakeholders and departmental officials who participated.

In October 2011, the Committee visited Edinburgh and Brussels. During the visit, the Committee gained a useful insight into key EU issues, particularly on structural and cohesion funds, by meeting those with expert knowledge of those issues. Members found the visit beneficial and will seek to build on the contacts

and networks established. The visit also helped the Committee to gain an understanding of how countries holding the rotating presidency of the EU developed the agenda for their six-month presidency and the possibilities of influencing that agenda or benefiting from it. That was timely in the run-up to the current Irish presidency of the EU and our membership of the EC-UK forum. In January 2012, the Chairperson attended a meeting of that forum in Edinburgh. The EC-UK forum is a twice-yearly meeting of the Chairs of UK Committees with responsibility for European issues. At that meeting, a number of issues were discussed, including the euro zone crisis, the European Commission's work programme and subsidiarity. I hosted the most recent EC-UK forum meeting here in Parliament Buildings, and, with the agreement of other Chairs, we invited the Chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs, Mr Dominic Hannigan TD, to attend as an observer. At the same meeting, Chairs were briefed by the Irish European Minister, Lucinda Creighton TD, on the forthcoming Irish presidency. On foot of this engagement, the Committee intends to visit Dublin in the near future to meet the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs, and I have been invited by Mr Hannigan to attend as an observer the meeting of the Conference of European Affairs Committees (COSAC) that he is hosting in Dublin on 28 January. COSAC is the conference of the EU committees of the national Parliaments of EU member states.

During the reporting period, the Committee played a key role in the review of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Executive's work in Europe, including the work of the Barroso task force, and considered and responded to the Executive's draft European priorities for 2012. The Executive have appointed four new desk officers in Brussels to take forward the thematic areas set out in their European priorities, namely competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate change and energy; and social cohesion. In July 2012, the Committee sought an update from the head of the Executive's office in Brussels on the progress of the four desk officers and the work of the Barroso task force. The work of the task force, at Commission level and at working group level, remains an area of interest for the Committee, and it will focus on this area when it visits Brussels at the end of this month and meets the head of the Brussels office and those four desk officers.

The Committee, in its report on the draft Programme for Government, agreed that the

PFG should make greater reference to Europe and the opportunities that it offers. In particular, it should reference the Executive's commitment to increasing the uptake of European funding by 20% over the period up to 2015. The Committee also agreed that it would like a commitment in the Programme for Government to greater engagement in Europe and with the European institutions. It also agreed that the European priorities document would provide the milestones and outcomes for that commitment. The Committee was pleased to note that the Department included a commitment to increase the uptake of competitive funds by 20% across all Departments.

Between March and June 2012, the Committee considered the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations 2012, brought forward on foot of the threat of infraction proceedings by the European Commission. Similar regulations were introduced at Westminster by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The regulations would remove the right of employers employing seafarers to pay them different rates on the basis of a seafarer's home port. The differentials in pay on the basis of nationality amounted to indirect discrimination, as most of those affected were migrant workers. The Committee raised with the Department two main concerns about the proposed order. The first concern was the lack of an accurate estimate of the cost of implementing the order or, indeed, broadening its scope and the lack of information about its possible effect on the fishing fleet. The second concern was the scope of the order in that it would still leave some foreign seafarers without protection, specifically those beyond the European Economic Area (EEA). Given the imminence of EU infraction proceedings, the Committee agreed that it was content with the order, and the Department's commitment to come back to the Committee in the new session with further information on the issues was welcomed. Indeed, we are scheduled to have that briefing at this week's Committee meeting.

On the general issue of the timing of the Department's introducing draft regulations to give effect to EU legislation or, indeed, decisions of the European Court of Justice, as recently was the case with gender-neutral insurance premium regulations, the Committee has now written to the Department to ask for details of areas where the Department is aware that such regulations will be required this year and next. It is important that such draft regulations are brought forward in a timely manner so that Statutory Committees have

sufficient time to consider them and their full implications.

1.45 pm

Following on from the Committee's inquiry into the consideration of European issues in January 2010 and from the Northern Ireland Assembly's European engagement strategy of February 2011, the Assembly appointed a European project manager to consider the Assembly and Committees' engagement with the European Union and to develop options for improving our work. That work is ongoing, and a report to the Assembly Commission is due in June of this year.

As part of that work, Committees are considering the Research and Information Service's analysis of the European Commission's work programme. It was published in early November and includes details of proposed actions for the year ahead and provides an early indication of forthcoming activity. As a pilot project, the OFMDFM Committee commissioned an analysis of the work programme by the Research and Information Service and asked it to prioritise items falling within the remit of each Statutory Committee on the basis of significance for Northern Ireland, the potential for the Committees and the Assembly to influence or engage on an issue and Committees' current areas of interest. The relevant section of the analysis was sent to each Committee in December, and it is envisaged that Assembly researchers will engage with Committees this month and early next month to discuss the analysis and to facilitate Committees in setting their own European priorities for 2013. Following consideration of that analysis, Committees are asked to identify and agree EU priority issues, as well as the steps that they plan to take to engage on those issues. The OFMDFM Committee looks forward to hearing back from Statutory Committees on their European priorities.

Throughout this process, we look forward to seeing the Assembly and its Committees enhance our engagement with the European institutions and ensure that our respective Departments and their arm's-length bodies work effectively both in Europe and at home, so that Northern Ireland seizes the opportunities afforded by Europe and European funding programmes and realises concrete benefits for them.

I thank the members of my Committee and Committees generally for their input to the report, and I look forward to hearing from

Chairpersons and members on their Committees' work. I commend the motion and the report to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Mr Moutray has five minutes.

Mr Moutray: I wish to contribute to the debate concerning the work that has been done and continues to be done with Europe. Obviously, the period that we are specifically looking at is outlined in the motion: May 2011 to August 2012.

The report outlines clearly the work that each Committee is doing. This form of reporting back to OFMDFM has given each Member a clearer picture of the ongoing work. It also allows us to see gaps in the system and issues that need to be explored further.

At the outset, I highlight my party's belief that our position in the EU should be voted on, given that the last time that the people of the United Kingdom had their say was some 37 years ago. We contribute extortionate amounts to the EU, and unfortunately the return is a far cry from the investment. It is time to give the people a say in this important matter. However, while we are in the EU, it is vital that we in Northern Ireland ensure that we extract as much financial benefit as possible.

I support the call to note the report and continue with the ongoing work. I intend to keep my remarks to a minimum, but I wish to mention a few pertinent points in the report.

Europe cannot be discussed without our immediately thinking of the rural dwellers, particularly farming families, who very much depend on their single farm payment, especially at this difficult time, when banks are not lending as they once did. I commend the Committee for its focus on this matter and particularly that on the financial corrections levy. I also note with interest from the report that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has been working hard to familiarise itself with the CAP reforms and is in a strong position to fight the corner for our farming community. That Committee has been engaging with all the relevant stakeholders and gathering evidence so that it can be in a strong position to respond. I also believe that the evidence that it has gathered will undoubtedly assist the Committee when it lobbies Simon Coveney, the Irish Agriculture Minister, on the Irish presidency's agriculture policies. At present, this is the biggest issue facing us from Europe, and, if it is not handled correctly, it will have a serious impact on all our rural communities.

The report from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure notes clearly the need for further interaction, and I support that. However, I welcome its more recent work in this regard. I will be asking specific questions around the creative industries matter highlighted in the report, given the focus of the Programme for Government. I also believe that the Committee should continue to work with local government to ensure that it maximises funding and utilises its position to the maximum.

In many ways, the Department of the Environment is one of the Departments that has the most interaction with Europe, because of the fact that many of the rules and regulations around the environment emanate from Europe. The House is all too aware that European legislation underpins much of what is enacted here whether we like it or not. I note that the Committee for the Environment has been active in contacting the Department regularly to find out how much money has been drawn down from Europe and what it is doing to help other applicants. That is certainly welcome, and all Committees should take note of that point and carry out a similar activity.

I commend the Committee for its scrutiny of the Strangford lough special area of conservation and for its report on the approach that DOE and DARD have taken over the years and the fact that a restoration plan for the lough had not been put in place. That left Northern Ireland facing an infraction fine from Europe. That situation highlights the need for a more joined-up approach.

The Environment Committee's report also notes the wild birds directive and the fact that the Committee felt that the Department was not doing enough to meet the requirements. Given the directive's importance, I welcome the fact that the Committee has been working on that matter, as we do not want an infraction fine.

As regards the report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the most pertinent point that it is pursuing is its work with DFP on the development of future Peace and INTERREG programmes, given the problems that there have been in the past and the need to make improvements.

As I draw my remarks to a close, it would be remiss of me not to mention the fact that threaded throughout the report is the need for further work from the House and from each Department on the drawing down of funding from Europe. Let us not shelve the report. Let us build on it and continually review it.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag labhairt inniu mar LeasChathaoirleach. I am speaking as the Deputy Chair.

The Committee for Regional Development is a very strong advocate of engagement in the European Union. The Committee has engaged in and sought to influence the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), particularly as the proposed policies would have seen the island of Ireland further isolated in Europe, with the very real potential of our being unable to access the significant transport budgets that were and still are being negotiated. In my opinion, it was just as well that we did.

On visiting the European Parliament and the Commission, members of our delegation were shocked to discover how little was known or understood about the North of Ireland and its transport infrastructure. There was a belief that, because the North is seen to be part of Britain, we could be easily accessed by rail from mainland Europe through the channel tunnel. Members had to resort to unfolding an AA road map to show that Ireland was geographically separated from the rest of Britain by the Irish Sea. On top of that, the rail gauges in Europe, the rest of Britain and Ireland differ significantly.

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

I stand to be corrected, but I believe that, for the first time, representatives of a Committee of the House were afforded the opportunity to talk directly to the rapporteurs gathering evidence for TEN-T and CEF proposals. Following that initial contact, the Committee was invited to attend a rapporteurs' stakeholder event, which was attended by Mr Moutray and me and afforded us full opportunity to influence the rapporteurs and other members of the EU Transport Committee. We were then able to feed our experiences and contacts into the Department. The Committee is aware that, since then, the Minister has had at least two visits to Brussels and Strasbourg to meet other key European politicians.

I am delighted to conclude this contribution to the debate by advising the House that this engagement, along with that of our MEPs and Ministers, has brought about changes to key parts of TEN-T and CEF proposals that are of benefit to the North and to the rest of Ireland. We will be exempt from having to meet costly rail infrastructure standards, specifically because the island of Ireland has an isolated

rail network. This represents a significant saving to our future budgets. Secondly, we have increased our potential for accessing CEF funding opportunities for projects that will improve hinterland connections to the ports of Larne and Belfast. These successes would not have been achieved without a collaborative approach by the MEPs, the Minister and members of the Committee for Regional Development. They are an example of what can be achieved for the benefit of our infrastructure and, most importantly, for the benefit of our constituents.

I encourage members of other Committees to go to Brussels, meet the politicians and discuss the issues that are important to us. We do not intend to rest on our laurels, because there is still much that needs to be done, but we are encouraged that what we do and what we say gets listened to, gets acted on and brings benefits. The Committee for Regional Development commends the report.

Mr Eastwood: The report is a detailed demonstration of the breadth and depth of the influence on and relevance to our own politics of European issues. There are those — some of them are in the House — who would suggest that the European project is a malign influence and an intrusive interference in our decision-making. This report sweeps away such uninformed ignorance. The substance of the report gives clear evidence that, on the major themes of infrastructure, agriculture, Peace moneys and business development, the EU and its impact play a massively positive role for the people of the North. Access to a single market, the continued audience that we receive at the highest levels in Europe and the various funds that we avail ourselves of ensure that we are massive net beneficiaries from the EU. The evidence of all those benefits can be seen across the North today. Many of our highest profile projects, such as Derry's Peace Bridge and the Maze/Long Kesh, have sought and received European moneys for their implementation.

The SDLP has been the only major party consistently advocating for 30 years the benefits of the European Union. The Euro-scepticism of others has not helped in this legacy of all-round benefit. Of course, there are directives that appear and undoubtedly are, at times, cumbersome, restrictive or even irrelevant, though such is the nature of any institution of such size and complexity. Amidst the speed of change currently engulfing the EU, there should be a chance to solve some of the negative aspects of its bureaucracy.

The overall picture of the report is of European opportunities that we have only begun to discover. If grasped, there exist many avenues of co-operation that could act to significantly improve our economic and social fabric. We have some way to go in our expertise of applying for European funds. The recent failure in the application for the Titanic Quarter is a very high-profile and high-cost example of that. There is not a Department in the Executive that should not be preparing to submit applications to the Horizon 2020 fund, for example. As evidenced from the recent IDA report, the South is already a long way along that road. My SDLP colleagues will speak in more detail later about the issues in their Committees, such as CAP reform, the common fisheries policy, single farm payments, structural funds, TEN-T and other issues.

As the British Prime Minister intends to instigate a possible long goodbye from the EU, it is all the more important that we emphasise the great benefits that the EU has provided for this part of the world. David Cameron and the Tory Party's assessment of the EU is very much an English analysis based on the English experience. The Irish experience is one of infrastructural investment, huge advancements in agriculture and consistent commitment to the principles and policies of peace. At these times of crisis and change for the EU, it is all the more important that our experience and voice are heard.

2.00 pm

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): On 5 October 2012, the Committee for the Environment provided a report to the OFMDFM Committee on its activity on European issues between May 2011 and August 2012.

The Committee wants to see more done to secure European funding. Members are particularly disappointed by the poor uptake of LIFE+ funding, which is available for major environmental projects. The Committee also maintains pressure on the Department to avoid European fines by requesting quarterly updates on potential areas of infraction and monitoring the Department's implementation of the required EU legislation. With that in mind, the Environment Committee has maintained a watchful eye on the Strangford lough special area of conservation, which, I think, Mr Moutray mentioned. The failure of DOE and DARD to implement a restoration plan for the lough left us on the brink of huge fines. Last January, Members tabled a motion to voice their concerns, and I am pleased to report that a new

restoration plan has been prepared, which the Committee will continue to monitor.

Ensuring that EU legislation is introduced and implemented properly is only one aspect of Committee scrutiny. Over the past year, the Environment Committee has become increasingly engaged in trying to get involved in and influence European proposals at a much earlier stage so that they deliver the benefits intended by the Commission in a way that minimises any detrimental impact here in Northern Ireland. The Committee has been advised that there is an early warning system to let Assembly Committees know about new EU proposals, but that is clearly failing, as the Environment Committee has been receiving information far too late to influence EU policy through official channels.

Last July, the Assembly's EU scrutiny co-ordinator told the Committee that the European Commission was introducing proposals that would radically change MOT testing here. The proposals were aimed at improving road safety across Europe, but, as drafted, they would have seen small businesses in Northern Ireland incur significant costs, while probably not reducing road deaths at all. The Committee was disappointed that the Department had failed to inform it about the proposals, because it left the Committee insufficient time to make its concerns known through OFMDFM. Instead, the Committee spoke directly to the Chairperson of the House of Lords EU subcommittee dealing with the proposals. Our concerns were subsequently referenced in its report to the Secretary of State for Transport, thereby contributing to the official UK position on the proposals. I am pleased to say that a working group has since amended the proposals, and they now largely address our concerns. That shows that Northern Ireland Assembly Committees can influence European policy, provided that we are given sufficient notice. Accordingly, the Committee welcomes and supports the work of the Assembly's European scrutiny officer, who is currently looking at methods of improving the processes for early engagement. In the interim, the Committee will continue its rigorous scrutiny of the Department's uptake of EU funding and the implementation of EU legislation and, most importantly, will monitor closely forthcoming EU policy at an early stage.

Mr G Robinson: The junior Minister Mr Bell informed me during OFMDFM Question Time last week that the drawdown of European funding for Departments is well on track to meet, if not exceed, the £53 million target. I welcome that positive news. That shows that

Departments are seeking full use of available European funding that is relevant to them. A drawdown of £53 million over the four-year period 2011-15 provides a much-needed financial injection for our economy.

One of the pillars of our economy is agriculture. While the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has been subject to financial corrections over single farm payments, it is essential that we maximise the work done to support our farmers. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has examined EU directives regarding agency workers. The Assembly supported the Committee's position of ensuring that temporary workers are treated in an acceptable manner and that the costs to business are minimised.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has continued to work on drawing down regional aid. That, again, is a practical issue as it directly reduces Executive costs in some capital expenditure projects.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has also had direct dealings with EU bodies on Peace III and INTERREG programmes, and the development of Peace IV. Those are just a few examples of how the Executive continue to seek the best for Northern Ireland through Europe. I urge all Ministers to keep their eye on all possible funding for their Departments. I support the report and urge a continuation and expansion of all existing efforts.

Ms McGahan: This report provides an overview of the Statutory Committees' engagement with European issues and consideration of EU policy and legislation.

In January 2010, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister issued a report on its inquiry into the consideration of European issues, calling for enhanced engagement and improved communication with European institutions. That was approved by the Assembly.

OFMDFM has overall responsibility for the development of the North of Ireland's strategic approach to Europe. Twelve action points were brought forward by the Committee relating to the Statutory Committees, and 17 recommendations for the Speaker, all about gaining a better understanding of the mechanics of EU programmes and policies, and being proactive in seeking opportunities for Ministers to be actively engaged.

This is an important area of work, as many laws and policies of the EU have a direct impact on the people in the North of Ireland. The EU is making decisions that affect us. I read that 70% of legislation that the Assembly deals with originates in Brussels, so it is important that we are in there shaping and influencing decision-making in Europe and not, as someone said, gold-plating legislation.

Some of the reports show in a tangible way the improved interaction with EU institutions. Playing a more active role in shaping EU policy will enable us to benefit from the opportunities it provides. One good example regarding the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) keeping a watching brief on the 'Creative Europe' programme 2014-2020 was that it was notified of a creative industries funding call and informed the Arts Council of that opportunity. It was grateful for the Department highlighting that important issue.

To have an effective route it is important that Statutory Committees are developing and fostering that channel available to us via the Executive office in Brussels. We have to ask ourselves how we harness and use that important position in Brussels. How do we engage more effectively with that office, which is vital? Statutory Committees need to identify which policies are the most pertinent and useful and have most impact. We need to move from being reactive to being proactive to shape and influence. Obviously, that will be very difficult and demanding.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has implemented a number of actions in its European report. The Committee argued for the Executive to increase the uptake of European competitive funding by 20% across all Departments. That was agreed.

Integration, co-ordination and communication are vital to making an impact. It is important that Statutory Committees keep evaluating how their relationship can be improved and how to maximise and improve communications with the Brussels office regarding matters that are relevant to their Committees. The Assembly Committees have to be responsible for all EU issues of relevance, as is their duty. What you put in is what you get out. I commend the report.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion on the report into Statutory Committee activity on European issues. The report illustrates just how much local business, farming, health and everyday life are impacted

by decisions made in Europe, and how vigilant this House must remain to ensure that Northern Ireland plc is fairly represented.

The report displays the amount of work taking place in our devolved Administration around EU development and the significant role of OFMDFM in ensuring that we deliver on actions and recommendations, as well as in putting a vital voice into future policy. Various issues are covered in the report, and I wish to highlight just a few that I believe require additional focus.

I am sure that many farmers in my constituency, Lagan Valley, will welcome the fact that my party has been fighting in Europe to ensure that Northern Ireland's agrifood sector is adequately funded. There is still a need to continue to argue that CAP reform must promote policy that encourages profitable food production with less EU red tape. There are still many issues around the single farm payment, as has already been raised today. Like, I am sure, those of many other Members in the Chamber, my constituency office has been inundated with farmers who are either receiving incorrect payments or no payments at all. We must continue to push that issue and ensure that our local farmers are getting the correct entitlement during these difficult times. The Minister must ensure that her Department makes speedy and correct payments. While I must acknowledge that targets are being met, the process for inspected farms must be expedited.

Although not mentioned in the report, there is a need to further understand and readdress the plight of agriculture on a pan-European basis. That is in the light of the failing summer weather, cash flow and profit issues, suppressed farm gate prices, and the topical issue of fair pricing, especially in relation to what many large retailers are prepared to pay for local produce.

I have some issues with the lack of EU funding being accessed to help support the development of medium- to large-scale environmental projects. While it is important to note that bureaucracy impinging on the fund may be off-putting, more needs to be done to ensure that potential applicants are fully supported throughout the entire process. This is a time when we are looking for environmental projects that will help raise recycling rates and promote landfill reduction and much-needed innovation in relation to the potential infringement fines. That fund could be vital, now and well into the future.

Looking to future developments, it is vital that all Departments, their respective Committees, this Chamber and elected EU Members push the EU on the issue of the potential Peace IV funding, regional transport and cohesion proposals, and the Horizon 2020 framework programme. I believe that Horizon 2020 may provide much-needed help to our Government in tackling societal challenges by bridging the gap between research and the market, helping innovative enterprises to develop their technological breakthroughs into viable products with real commercial potential.

An injection of further Peace funding would allow us to invest in more projects that promote integration and social cohesion among our local communities. While previous funding has been warmly received to help tackle social deprivation and promote a shared future, I am sure that many will agree that the establishment of a future fund would help to tackle some of the difficult challenges in our society, cementing greater peace and stability amongst those who are striving to create a lasting legacy.

I welcome the report. I note the great work that has been done to date. However, we must ensure that we strive to maximise the potential for Northern Ireland and our citizens within the European Union.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Chairman for bringing the report on European affairs to the Assembly. Potentially, a very important range of issues is being debated at this time. The SDLP has always been in favour of EU growth and development. Indeed, the SDLP would contend that Europe has been good for Northern Ireland.

There are some points I would like to raise, regarding agriculture in particular. Given that Ireland has taken up the presidency of the EU for the next six months, the current negotiations on CAP reform are crucial for Northern Ireland agriculture and, indeed, the regional economy. We are lucky at this stage that Ireland has started its six-month hosting of the presidency. Hopefully, the negotiations will go in favour of our interests.

2.15 pm

Agriculture contributes £378 million directly into our local economy. That is over double the UK GDP average for the region. Nearly 47,000 people are employed directly in agriculture. The single farm payment is crucial for farmers; it is one of the most important EU farm support grants that pertain. Many depend on it; none

more so than those in the less-favoured areas. The LFACA, which is the less-favoured area compensatory allowance, has always been important to farmers from Northern Ireland, particularly those with higher level ground and less productive land. There is a need to retain a connection between area-based support, such as the single farm payment, and actual farm production, such as the LFACA.

The cross-compliance issues in the proposed discussions from Brussels regarding greening and environmental factors are a cause for concern. There is concern about increased bureaucracy. It could result in many leaving farming, which would affect our wider agrifood sector in Northern Ireland. We cannot allow greening to take over. Farm production must be allowed to grow. Greening could affect the diversity of agriculture. Farmland across Northern Ireland varies in quality and productive capacity. Therefore, CAP support needs to be tailored and tweaked in the interests of the Northern Ireland farming community as a whole across the region. Some of the environmental issues of pillar 1 are already achieved through the agrienvironmental measures of pillar 2. That could be built on to provide enough safeguards for the environmental issues alongside farm production.

Food security is an important part of the agenda, as we need to sustain our own food production. It is important for Northern Ireland, in particular, as its agrifood sector is central to the economy. It is the biggest contributor to our local economy: the agrifood industry, overall, totals a £4 billion industry. It is a very big GDP contributor. Food safety is also very important for consumers at home and abroad. The recent controversy about beefburgers and the horse DNA that was present in some products that were tested is a reminder of the importance of food safety and security.

Some of the wording of the draft proposal from Brussels is open to interpretation. One example is "permanent pastures". The soils are designated as carbon-rich, and thus permanent pasture would not be able to be ploughed. That could lead to a contraction in the range and extent of farm production here in Northern Ireland.

The common fisheries policy is also very important to Northern Ireland. The recent conclusion of the 2012 discussions on fishing for 2013 has been relatively good for Northern Ireland. The prawns increase by 6% means that a £17 million industry in Kilkeel can have some certainty for the next number of years. We want to see a stronger common fisheries

policy that meets the needs of the regional economy here in Northern Ireland to make sure that the three fishing ports are sustained and can grow into the future.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the strong representation that was made by representatives of the fishing industry, along with our Agriculture Minister, brought results this year? That is in contrast to other years, when it was always the other way around.

Mr Byrne: I thank Mr McCarthy for his point. I accept that those with fishing interests who operate from Kilkeel have developed a very strong lobby. That has been important for Northern Ireland.

Rural development is crucial for Northern Ireland. There have been some excellent rural development projects through EU funding over a number of years. The countryside management scheme has also been important. However, I think that it is fair to say that farmers feel that the modulation moneys that are attributed to them have been used for some community development projects that they would question the merit and value of to the farming industry. CAP reform negotiations are a major issue, and the interests of the farmer must be protected. As all MLAs who represent rural areas will verify, much of their caseloads are taken up by farmers and the single farm payment problem —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Byrne: I commend the report. We hope that, over the next six months, the negotiating strategy of the Executive will benefit our regional economy to the maximum.

Mr Givan: I am pleased to speak to the motion today on behalf of the Committee for Justice. Since the Committee was established, it has consistently and diligently scrutinised European issues relating to justice and home affairs matters. The Committee has welcomed some of those interventions from Europe. However, Europe makes other interventions, particularly in respect of human rights, that we regard as interference in the sovereignty of the United Kingdom and that we do not like or appreciate. That is why we support the changes that need to be made in Europe so that it properly takes account of the sovereignty of this kingdom.

Members will be aware that the Lisbon Treaty, which was ratified by all 27 member states of

the EU in December 2009, established the principle of increased legal co-operation based on mutual recognition. That is predicated on member states acknowledging that the decisions adopted by other legal systems in other member states are valid and applicable. The treaty also enables the European Union to develop and propose legislation that relates to civil and criminal justice and security measures. Once a measure is adopted, member states will be bound by it and will be required to implement it nationally. The aim is to enhance mutual legal assistance between member states and provide a minimum standard of protection to EU citizens in civil and criminal proceedings.

The United Kingdom Government negotiated an opt-in protocol in the Lisbon Treaty that enables them to decide, within three months of an EU initiative relating to justice and home affairs being published, whether to opt in. When considering whether to opt in, they seek the views of the devolved Administrations, and the Minister of Justice consults with the Committee on any proposals. To assist with the consideration of proposals, the Committee has asked the Department of Justice to provide relevant information on the likely implications for Northern Ireland. EU proposals for legislation that the Committee has considered during the period being reported on include a proposal for a European procedure for freezing bank accounts in civil proceedings with a cross-border element; a proposal for recognition and enforcement of judgements in civil and commercial matters; a proposal on the freezing and confiscation of the proceeds of crime in the European Union; and a proposal relating to the 1980 Hague convention on child abduction.

As well as considering proposals for EU legislation, the Committee has spent considerable time looking at the legislative and other changes that are required as a consequence of the decision to opt in to the EU directive on human trafficking. The Committee recently completed the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice Bill and supported the inclusion of two new offences that are necessary to ensure compliance with the EU directive. The new offences cover UK residents who have not previously been trafficked into the UK being trafficked within the UK — for example, from London to Belfast — and allow for the prosecution of UK nationals who have trafficked someone anywhere outside the United Kingdom. The Committee also continues to scrutinise and discuss the approach being adopted by the Department of Justice to implement other aspects of the directive, and our consideration has been informed by a research paper that we commissioned on the

legislation and procedures that are in place, or being taken forward, by other EU countries to implement the directive.

The Committee also looked at the framework decision on the mutual recognition of probation measures, licence supervision and alternative sanctions across member states of the European Union. Following a consultation exercise, the Committee agreed that the Minister should legislate —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: In one second. The Committee agreed that the Minister should legislate in the next justice Bill to permit the mutual recognition of judgements and probation decisions. I will give way to the Member.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I have listened intently to the range of very important issues across child safety and child protection that the EU has the potential to act on. I welcome their inclusion. Does the Member share my disappointment that none of the four Ministers who could have been here to answer the Committees' enquiries and respond to the report is present?

Mr Givan: Are any of those Ministers from my party? If not, those Members should, quite rightly, have been here. If they are from other parties, Members should, quite rightly, be annoyed, but if any of them are from my party, I take it all back. *[Laughter.]* Other issues that the Committee considered include the initial implementation plans for the 2007 Hague Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and Other Forms of Family Maintenance; a statutory rule to amend the Carriage of Explosives Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, to take account of an EU directive; and a proposed consultation to limit costs for environmental judicial review applications, to meet the requirements of the EU public participation directive. The Committee also explored what measures the Department of Justice has taken to target EU funding streams and what engagement it has had with the Barroso task force.

As I have illustrated, the Committee has demonstrated a keen interest in EU issues relevant to justice, and it recognises the importance of scrutinising them to identify any particular implications for Northern Ireland. The Committee will, of course, continue to place great importance on this aspect of its work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Dolores Kelly.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

A5: Funding

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development for a breakdown of how the funding for the A5 will be allocated within the project. (AQO 3164/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): The Member will be aware of the ongoing legal challenge to the A5 project. I can advise, in that regard, that a substantive hearing is due to commence on 12 February, which is in the middle of next month. I recognise fully the importance of the A5 project to the Executive's key objective of growing the economy. I also recognise the benefits that the project will bring for journey times and jobs, both in the short to medium term and the longer term. Roads Service will, therefore, continue to robustly defend the legal challenge.

A total of £330 million has been allocated to construct the sections of the A5 between Londonderry and Strabane, and those between Omagh and Ballygawley. However, my Department will have to await the outcome of the legal challenge before the levels of funding that are needed in each financial year can be determined. I am pleased to confirm that co-operation between my Department and Department of Finance and Personnel officials has enabled some reprofiling of expenditure, which will allow for the deferral of the A5 allocation until it is required.

In addition, at my prompting the Finance Minister has secured flexibility from Her Majesty's Treasury to carry forward £50 million of reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing power into 2014-15. That additional flexibility is immensely helpful in managing the ongoing delay to the A5 project.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's response, and I certainly welcome the commencement of the judicial review. In the light of that, should the legal challenge be protracted, what steps are being taken to ensure that money that has been ring-fenced for the job goes to that specific project?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister — sorry; I thank the Member for his supplementary

question. That is an early promotion for you in January, but not at the expense of the Ulster Unionist Party.

The short answer is that we are maintaining a strong defence of our actions on the A5 project, and we very much hope that that will successfully conclude and allow us to move forward.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, Minister. Recent figures that were produced through a freedom of information request showed that, during the period 2005-2010, there were nine deaths on the A4. That figure became zero after the road was dualled between 2010 and 2013. Does the Minister believe that the proposed A5 western transport corridor will help to reduce the number of road accidents and improve safety for road users?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I sympathise with those who have known the tragedy of loss in recent days as a result of road accidents or, indeed, related incidents. I certainly think that there is substantial proof that safety issues are helped where we improve the overall road infrastructure, wherever that may be. One of the reasons I continue, and want to continue, to bring forward projects all over Northern Ireland, is so that we can not only enhance the strategic road network but improve safety at key locations.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Given the A5 legal challenge, has any preparatory work been able to have been undertaken?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am pleased that, after the preliminary hearing in December on the A5, advance works, including fencing, vegetation management, archaeology studies, service diversions and ecology works, commenced and recommenced to prepare for the overall scheme. If things go well with the legal matters, we hope to begin the scheme in April this year.

Mr Dickson: Minister, further to your answer, do you think, given the protracted delays in the legal challenge, that it would be appropriate for your Department to bring forward projects — for example, the A6 at the Dungiven bypass or the A55 dualling at Knock — that have been approved?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. Of course, he will be aware

that works have commenced on the A8 scheme and, within a relatively short period, they will commence on the A2, which, of course, he will know about.

I continue to bring forward schemes, and I encourage and instruct my officials to bring forward schemes, such as those that he mentioned, in preparation for the next round of available finance. I am looking beyond spending the money on the A5 that has been allocated. As roads Minister, I want to see the infrastructure improved overall. To that extent, I am keen to bring forward projects, such as the ones that he mentioned, and others.

A6: Dungiven Bypass

2. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the proposed funding for development work on the A6 project will prioritise the Dungiven bypass. (AQO 3165/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Northern Ireland Executive Budget 2011-15 allocated funds to continue development work of a dual carriageway from Londonderry to Dungiven, including a dual carriageway bypass of Dungiven, as one overall project. I am highly supportive of that particular scheme and, indeed, of a number of other significant projects, including the A26 Glarryford dualling, the York Street interchange and the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson.

I can confirm that planning development work for the complete Londonderry to Dungiven project is well advanced. Following the publication of draft orders for the overall scheme in December 2011, I approved the holding of a public inquiry to give objectors, supporters, Roads Service and others a fair opportunity to be heard and to put the case for and against the scheme. The public inquiry sat for six days between 24 September and 2 October 2012. The inspector expects to complete his report before the end of March 2013. Having given careful consideration to his findings and recommendations, I will, in due course, issue a response in the form of a departmental statement.

Construction of the Londonderry to Dungiven project, including the Dungiven bypass, will be dependent on other competing priorities, such as those that I referred to earlier and future settlements.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the

Minister for his answer. Can he give any overall indication of any of the delivery time frames for any of the component parts of the A6, including the Dungiven bypass and the Castledawson to Randalstown stretch?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary. As I stated, planning for the scheme is well advanced. I hope to have all scheme development issues resolved by early 2014. The next stage would be to move to the procurement phase. It normally takes at least one year to go through the assessment procedures required to appoint a contractor.

The focus of the strategic road improvements in the current Budget period to 2015 is on the delivery of the A8, A5 and A2 dual carriageway schemes. Therefore, the A6 will be dependent on other competing priorities and subsequent budgetary settlements. As I said, I am a firm supporter of it and other schemes. There is clear logic and proof that if you improve the overall road infrastructure, it helps business, helps move tourists and helps everybody else.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister clarify whether he is aware of the impact on health and well-being that any delay to the Dungiven bypass will have on the local and wider commuter population?

Mr Kennedy: I am, and I thank the Minister — sorry, I thank the Member. There are a lot of Ministers floating about today.

Mr McNarry: There are a lot of vacancies now.

Mr Kennedy: There are no vacancies, by the way.

There will be substantial benefits from the Dungiven bypass scheme, not least the improvement of air quality and a reduction of something like 60% in the heavy vehicular traffic that goes through Dungiven.

For all those reasons, I am aware of the representations that have been made by Members, Limavady Borough Council and others. The scheme would be well worth doing. If the Member wants to approach the Minister of Finance and Personnel to assist me in delivering it at the earliest possible stage, I will not stand in his way.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the Minister willing to reverse the decision of the previous Minister for Regional Development to decouple the Dungiven bypass?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. We have made it clear that, if necessary, we can and will decouple it. We are not yet at that stage; there are processes to go through, and we will continue to progress both elements of that scheme, realising the potential benefits.

Car Parking/Public Transport: Christmas Support Package

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact of the relaxations on parking restrictions in town centres during the Christmas period. (AQO 3166/11-15)

9. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the success of the Christmas support package for shoppers and traders which he announced in November 2012. (AQO 3172/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will reply to questions 3 and 9 together as they concern similar or related issues.

I remind the Member that my Department did not introduce any measures of the type implied in his question. However, on 5 November 2012, I announced a package of measures aimed at providing assistance to shoppers and traders in the run-up to Christmas. In the main, those measures related to park-and-ride services in Belfast, Lisburn, Newry and Londonderry as well as public transport provisions.

In Belfast, the Metro £2 Saturday offer led to significant increases in patronage. For example, on Saturday 22 December 2012, Metro buses carried over 64,000 passengers, which was an incredible number. That was a clear signal that passenger journeys were up, in the run-up to Christmas in Belfast, by over a half, and revenue was up by over one third compared to the corresponding Saturday in 2011. Belfast was well and truly open for business, as it continues to be.

The park-and-ride offers also led to an increase in the usage of facilities, especially in Belfast, on Saturdays. In addition, the extra trains on the Belfast to Coleraine railway line proved very popular and resulted in increased usage. In Belfast, the success of the Christmas package added to recent improvements in the city, including the first phase of the Belfast on the Move project. So, compared to October and November 2011, Metro passenger journeys

increased by around 1,500 a day and the use of Belfast-based park-and-ride sites increased by approximately one sixth.

Mr McNarry: The Minister has given an interesting answer, which I hope will be taken note of. In light of what he has just said, would he look favourably at new fare concessions to attract shoppers into Belfast at a time best suited to benefit the shops, cafes, restaurants and businesses in general, as well as stretching himself with selected relaxations on parking restrictions in Belfast and in our other town centres?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I have highlighted the very clear success of the reduced Saturday Metro fares. That is an operational matter for Translink, but were it to ask me, I would advise that if there is a way to continue the £2 promotional ticket, the traders in Belfast would certainly welcome it.

We continue to look at positive measures whereby we can help not only traders in Belfast but those in the towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland. We are in the business of making government work and making town centres work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Danny Kinahan for a supplementary question.

Mr Kinahan: Are you calling me? I am sorry; I was not here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have been called because it is a grouped question.

Mr Kinahan: Yes; I was not aware that it was grouped.

When the Minister was looking at parking plans for our towns and villages, he quite rightly decided not to have special parking schemes for certain areas. How has that performed?

2.45 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary — I think. *[Laughter.]* We brought forward a package of measures that were clearly designed to encourage trade in Belfast and other key centres. The Member will know that we have already announced that we will not be implementing on-street parking charges in towns across Northern Ireland; that remains the case. Indeed, I battled very hard and argued very strongly, and was very pleased

that the Executive accepted my arguments that there should be a moratorium on price increases at car parks until 2015.

All those measures, combined with our special Christmas measures, particularly in relation to park-and-ride and Metro services in Belfast and other places, shows the commitment of myself, my Department and, I hope, the Executive to seek to do whatever we can to encourage trade in towns and cities the length and breadth of Northern Ireland.

Mr Campbell: Is the Minister prepared to convene a meeting of Translink senior officials and his own officials to look at a package of measures in the run-up to Christmas 2013 — now is the time to do it — whereby car park charges are not just frozen but reduced to give hard-pressed town-centre traders right across Northern Ireland a break at the busiest time of year?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. I am happy to meet, of course. However, I suggest respectfully that we should also ask the Finance Minister to come along so that he can write the cheque for that. I am not against the idea in principle, but there are reasons why parking charges are applied. They help with the movement of traffic and avoid block parking and gridlock. The range of measures that we brought forward in 2012 were taken in clear consultation with chambers of commerce and other business organisations. We will continue to seek to do that as we move forward in the coming year.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Has the Minister consulted with chambers of commerce on the matter?

Mr Kennedy: I am not clear which chamber of commerce the Member is referring to. However, I can tell him that there are ongoing exchanges with members of Belfast Chamber of Commerce, other chambers of commerce and business organisations. My door is open. I am always pleased to meet and speak to representatives from the business community, whether it is Belfast Chamber of Commerce or other chambers of commerce throughout Northern Ireland. It is important that I, as a member of the Executive, listen to the concerns that are out there and try to do something about those to alleviate some of the pressure that small businesses, in particular, are clearly under.

Car Parking: Lagan Valley

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development what revenue his Department received from parking enforcement notices issued in the Lagan Valley area in 2012. (AQO 3167/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Effective parking enforcement provides important traffic management benefits in cities and towns right across Northern Ireland. It contributes to improved road safety, helps reduce congestion and increases the availability of parking spaces in town and city centres for shoppers, promoting economic vitality in town centres.

I advise the Member that although revenue figures for penalty charge notices (PCNs) are not compiled on a town or constituency basis, the total 2011-12 PCN revenue figure for the whole of Northern Ireland was some £4.6 million. I also advise that the total cost of providing parking services exceeds the income generated from parking charges and PCNs. Figures for 2011-12 show a deficit of some £7 million in the provision of the service.

The main aim of the increase in the cost of a penalty charge notice, which I announced last year, was to deter illegal parking. In Lisburn, early indications show that the measure is having the desired effect. The number of PCNs issued in Lisburn reduced to 6,125 in 2012 from 7,626 in 2011, which is a reduction of 1,501.

Mr Craig: Given the high number — and it is quite a high number — of people being charged for parking offences in the town, can the Minister not look at some reduction measures? For example, making the first half an hour or hour of parking free in the city of Lisburn. The town centre is going through a very hard period, with high numbers of shops not being occupied, as the Minister well knows from his visit to the town.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I well remember that I paid a visit to Lisburn at the latter end of last year. I met traders and local representatives, and very useful it was, too.

Happily, the trend in the overall number of PCNs being issued is downwards. In 2012, from January to December, there were something like 112,700 penalty charge notices issued. That is a reduction on the 125,900 issued the previous year. So, the number issued is down 13,200 overall, it is down in Lisburn, and there is a consistent downward

trend in the number issued in a great many of our town centres across Northern Ireland, including Belfast.

The Member suggested that we make the first half hour or first hour free. It is possible to do that, but there are costs involved in it. Obviously, we could not just do it in Lisburn; we would have to extend it across Northern Ireland. The envisaged cost of that would be £2.5 million, but there would also be a reduction in revenue to the tune of £3 million per year. When all those services already cost £7 million for taxpayers in Northern Ireland, we have to balance that against either adding to those costs or providing opportunities whereby, at least, we can point to significant success in that the overall numbers are down.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister gave figures for the number of PCNs issued in Lisburn in 2012 compared with 2011. Was there a decrease in Northern Ireland as a whole? If so, by how many?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for that supplementary. I just covered that point. Obviously, I am pleased to get it out there that the number of PCNs issued is down by 11% — over 13,000. That is good news, and it proves that we are not simply in the business of putting tickets on cars or vehicles for no reason at all. There is a genuine attempt here to regulate traffic: it is not simply to cause nuisance or inconvenience. I very much hope that those figures continue to fall and that people will park properly and not illegally.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Following on from what the Minister has said, is any of the revenue generated through parking enforcement used for the likes of road maintenance or road safety measures? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. Generally, the income that is derived is fed back into the parking services that we provide, the upgrade and maintenance of car parks and other such measures. The Member will know that the road maintenance budget is something that I am particularly keen on enhancing, and I anticipate and hope that the Finance Minister, when he makes his statement on January monitoring, will give some alleviation and assistance to road structural maintenance.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that enforcement penalty charges annoy a lot of

people, particularly in provincial towns? Does he agree that an exchange rate of 57 pence sterling to €1 is a very heavy penalty for those paying in euro in car parks?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He made a representation to me expressing his concern about the current exchange rate. That has not been looked at or reviewed for quite some time, and I will be in correspondence with the Member about that issue.

Ballywillan Road, Larne

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Regional Development why the decision was taken to close the Ballywillan Road in Larne. (AQO 3168/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Officials in Roads Service, having due regard for the safety of road users and contractors working on its behalf, took the decision to close the Ballywillan Road on Monday 7 January 2013 to allow urgent repairs to be carried out to the verge and carriageway that had subsided. The full road width was required to provide a safe working area for the contractor and his equipment and to allow excavations to be made without causing further damage to the already weakened roadside verges and carriageway. The Member will be aware that works were completed and the road was reopened to traffic on Thursday 10 January 2013.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. The Ballywillan Road forms the main arterial route between Carrickfergus and Larne, and because of the nature and positioning of that route, it is open to many environmental issues. Can the Minister and the Department give an assurance that the future stability of that route will be a priority?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Safety is paramount, and I am grateful to the staff in my party colleague Roy Beggs's office who informed Roads Service of the subsidence on that section of road. The Department moved quickly to deal with that, and as maintenance issues arise on any road, be it Ballywillan or others, we have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that repairs are made as quickly and effectively as possible.

Mr Beggs: Closures of roads, such as Ballywillan Road, may be necessary on occasion to protect the public safety,

particularly where there are geology and geography issues at hand. Can the Minister provide an update on road closures in another part of Larne, at Garron Point, where other challenges have effected possible road closures?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. As he will well know, the A2 coast road in Larne at Garron Point closed on Thursday 3 January for 12 weeks to accommodate the installation of rock face containment netting. That work involves a specialist rock netting contractor and aims to install a further 7,000 square metres of netting at two areas off Garron Point. Roads Service apologises for any inconvenience that the road closure may cause to road users during the works, and to minimise disruption, the adjacent Tower Road is signposted as a diversionary route. Roads Service will ensure that all works are completed in a sensitive manner that is appropriate for that area of outstanding natural beauty, and I understand that the works completed earlier this year were well received by elected representatives and the public, and no complaints were received about the 10-week road closure or the site works.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister comment on another type of road closure, namely permanent road closure and the abandonment of roads? Does he consider the process in place for abandonment to be unnecessarily cumbersome and a bit too long, or is he satisfied with the process as it is today?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. We are a very long way from Ballywillan Road or, indeed, Garron Point in Larne. I assume that the Member has not been on horse burgers.

The issue is important, and I am looking at whether there are ways and means by which we could shorten the length of time and the processes involved. However, as the Member knows, in a democracy, people have to have the opportunity to put forward objections in a particular area for a particular reason, and that can potentially lead to a local inquiry.

So, all those things have to be carefully considered, and I will write to and update the Member on my current thinking on it.

3.00 pm

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 6 have been withdrawn, and written answers are required.

Fort George: Redevelopment

1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the current and future development of the Fort George site. (AQO 3178/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): There is much current and planned work for the Fort George site in Londonderry in 2013 and, indeed, in future years. My Department is continuing work with the North West Regional Science Park in the delivery of a 50,000-square-foot office complex that will establish a commercial and research centre in Londonderry as a satellite of the internationally acclaimed Northern Ireland Science Park. On the current programme, the science park expects to start construction work on the new facility in June 2013. My Department is also working with Roads Service in the delivery of a park-and-ride car park facility at Fort George, which will help to make a positive contribution to the UK City of Culture parking requirements for 2013. Work is currently under way and is scheduled to be completed by the end of February 2013.

Remediation work is expected to start on the site in spring 2013. The precise timescale for this work will, of course, be dependent on when the Northern Ireland Environment Agency agrees the remediation strategy for the site. In July 2012, Ilex submitted the development framework for Fort George to the Planning Service as an application for outline planning permission. The consideration of the planning application is ongoing. The implementation of the development framework will involve infrastructure works and the engagement of private sector partners to construct the planned development. The Department plans to begin this implementation phase in 2014, when the remediation work is complete.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I welcome the commencement of work at Fort George. The success of the development of the Ebrington site, as seen by so many last night, shows exactly what potential exists at Fort George. What, if any, business interest has there been in the site and the science park,

and what is being done to promote it to investors?

Mr McCausland: I think that the Member was at the launch of the North West Regional Science Park, which I also attended, in Londonderry some time ago, and he will be aware that we are some distance down the road yet from development. The remediation work has been completed, and construction work is to start in June. That will take a period of time, so, in due course, I will keep the Member informed about any business interest. As yet, my Department has not been involved in that.

Mr D McIlveen: What is the current position with the planning application for the development framework?

Mr McCausland: Given the significance of the site and the development proposals, the application is being processed as an article 31 project. This means that it is with DOE Planning Service headquarters for assessment, and I await the decision of the Minister of the Environment in that regard.

Fuel Poverty: Gas Network

2. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of tackling fuel poverty for people in Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes by connecting them to the gas network where available. (AQO 3179/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive's current heating policy is to install gas central heating where gas is available. Where gas is not available, oil is the preferred option. The Housing Executive currently has a total of 36,394 properties with gas central heating. A review of the Housing Executive heating policy is currently being prepared for consultation. Any proposed changes to the heating policy must be approved by the Housing Executive board and by my Department.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he advise whether the phase 2 scheme at Hospital Lane in Limavady will include heating installation?

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the planned phase 2 heating installation scheme for 57 dwellings at Hospital Lane is programmed for June 2013, with an estimated duration of 12 weeks. Subject to consultation with the tenants, all the properties will then have had gas central heating installed,

which will complete the Housing Executive heating programme for Hospital Lane. You may wish to note that phase 1 of the scheme for Hospital Lane, for 45 dwellings, went on site in October 2012 and was completed in December 2012.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister agree that the recent reduction in the overall proportion of households currently considered as being in fuel poverty from 44% to 42%, which is still significantly more than the 34% in 2006, is so insignificant that it is hardly worth boasting of?

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

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister agree that it is now clear that the direction he has taken and the strategies that he has often spoken of are failing to tackle the substantive causes of fuel poverty?

Mr McCausland: I do not agree. If the Member pays more attention to the issue and looks into it in more depth, she will come to understand that we are doing some important things with regard to fuel poverty.

As the Member is aware, fuel poverty results from three things: the energy efficiency of a home; the cost of fuel; and the level of income in a home. A number of things contribute to a higher level of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, one of which is the high level of dependency on oil, and the work that my colleague in DETI is taking forward on the extension of the gas network is fundamental to addressing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

As well as continuing to deliver mainstream schemes — the warm homes scheme, the Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme, the benefits uptake campaign and the winter fuel and cold weather payments — my officials are working on other projects. In September, I announced the new boiler replacement scheme for owner-occupiers, following on from a successful pilot that ended in March last year. It offers up to £1,000 towards the cost of replacing an old, inefficient boiler to owner-occupier households with an income of less than £40,000. The Housing Executive has already received thousands of expressions of interest in the scheme, and applications are being processed. So a huge amount of work is being done on boiler replacement, which is extremely important for energy efficiency and fuel poverty. In one case, I visited a home in which an elderly gentleman was able to tell me that the scheme had

reduced the number of his fills of oil a year by one entire fill. That is very significant. On top of that, we have undertaken work to ensure that all Housing Executive properties by the end of this Assembly's mandate will have double glazing. That also improves energy efficiency, and more than 6,000 double-glazing installations —

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

Mr McCausland: — had been started by the end of December.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Has he taken on board and considered the fuel poverty report produced by the Social Development Committee?

Mr McCausland: Yes. The Department is looking at many of the things that the Committee looked at. It is clear that everyone, right across the Assembly — my Department, the Social Development Committee and the wider membership of the Assembly — recognises that the issue is a priority. We are already working on many of the suggestions and proposals and are keen to work further on them with the Committee's support.

Personal Independence Payments

3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Social Development whether the assessment procedure for transfer from disability living allowance to personal independence payment will be monitored and scrutinised to avoid the difficulties experienced with work capability assessments. (AQO 3180/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I fully understand and appreciate that existing working age disability living allowance claimants may be anxious and concerned about the introduction of the personal independence payment. My Department, through the Social Security Agency, will be working to support people fully as they encounter the new benefit. I can confirm that the assessment process will be subject to robust monitoring arrangements to ensure that we get it right from the outset.

As I had previously called for a delay, I therefore publicly welcomed the recent decision by the Department for Work and Pensions to postpone the reassessment of existing disability living allowance claimants with indefinite awards for personal independence payment from January 2014 to October 2015. This delay

will give the new benefit time to bed in and will ensure that the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland are properly protected. The first independent review of how the personal independence payment assessment is working will be completed by December 2014, long before commencement of the managed reassessment of existing DLA claimants. That will provide an additional safeguard and ensure that any emerging concerns about how the assessment process is working can be addressed prior to the reassessment of existing DLA claimants commencing.

I recognise the importance of ensuring that what is in place in Northern Ireland delivers a positive experience for claimants, and I am committed to having a transparent and empathetic claims and assessment process for the personal independence payment.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give a guarantee to the Assembly that medical evidence will have primacy in the new assessments?

Mr McCausland: I believe that the new arrangements will produce a good outcome for claimants. I mentioned that it is our intention that there will be an empathetic approach to assessing claimants. As for the issues that will be looked at during the assessment, of course, medical evidence forms a crucial and central part of that. That has to be the case. However, it is also about the impact that the particular circumstances of the individual will have on that person's life. The core of this is about ensuring that we take into account fully the impact that a person's condition has on them. I noticed from newspaper cuttings over the weekend that people had raised issues about that and asked whether enough account will be taken of people with mental health problems and so on. Some of the things being said about the way forward are unnecessary and unfounded. In fact, one cutting from a north Belfast newspaper at the weekend did not know about the postponement that I just referred to. It was not even on their radar. Yet, after an interview with a community worker, that newspaper put out information that was totally wrong. So it is important that we get the information right and take the utmost care in moving forward.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a chuid freagraí go nuige. I am definitely intrigued by the Minister's

assessment that there will be a good outcome for claimants. What assessment has been done by his Department of the impact of the mobility component of the personal independence payment and the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria, reducing the minimum from 50 metres to 20 metres, and of how many people are likely to be affected?

Mr McCausland: The change from 50 metres to 20 metres is intended to clarify the criteria after strong feedback in the consultation that the moving around activity in the final PIP assessment was unclear. We have taken that clear and strong feedback into account and noted it. Individuals who can move more than 20 metres can still receive the enhanced rate of the mobility component if they cannot move that distance safely, reliably, repeatedly and within a reasonable time. That provides a significant protection for individuals. Although these terms are not in legislation, they will apply to all activities in the assessment and will be included in guidance for the decision-makers and assessment providers.

3.15 pm

Mr Campbell: The Minister alluded to misinformation that is being circulated on the changes. Will the Minister undertake to examine the degree of misinformation that is out there and perhaps look at the Department's establishing very clear guidelines that could be distributed to people to ensure that they are clear about the changes, who they will impact and when they will take effect?

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Member's question. We have devoted quite a bit of time and effort to trying to ensure that good information is put out there. We have had strong engagement with stakeholders, and there has been regular communication with them throughout the process. There has also been engagement with the media. That is dependent on the media taking that up and disseminating the information accurately. Unfortunately, as the Member indicates, a lot of totally inaccurate information is going out. That is a challenge, because it creates unnecessary and unfounded fears. I saw that particularly when David Freud was over some time ago and we met people from the victims' sector. I am glad that we have been able to make a response to them, and there has also been a response from the Victims' Commissioner. So, a lot of work is to be done to get accurate information out there about all aspects of welfare reform. That is difficult, because,

unfortunately, there is a tendency for some folk to be rather cavalier with information.

Ms Lo: Has the Minister had any discussions with Westminster about the difficulties experienced with the work capability assessment?

Mr McCausland: Professor Harrington has reviewed the work capability assessment regularly. Virtually everything that he said should be done has been done, but I think that one or two issues that he raised are still being worked on. In fact, he has been quite positive about the way in which we have responded to his recommendations. He is the independent expert. We are dependent on his advice, and it is right that we have proper professional expertise and a proper review of the process. So, virtually everything that he has said should be done has either been done or, in one or two cases, is still in progress. That is the method by which you get change, and these are things that we can do ourselves. We need to have strong engagement with Westminster on the forthcoming changes, but work on the current work capability assessment has been ongoing through the contact with Professor Harrington.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the number of applications received for the boiler replacement scheme. (AQO 3182/11-15)

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the total number of approved applications for the boiler replacement scheme. (AQO 3184/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 5 and 7 together, as they raise similar issues.

There have been 10,040 applications received and 2,364 applications approved for the boiler replacement scheme.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his brief answer. Why is there such a differential between the number of applications received and the number of approvals that have been issued?

Mr McCausland: Whenever the Housing Executive receives an application from the

householder, it carries out initial checks to verify income and home ownership before it can proceed to the next stage of the application process, which is to issue a boiler installer form. Of the 10,040 completed application forms received by the Housing Executive, 6,651 have moved to the second stage of the process; that is, the Housing Executive has issued installer forms to applicants. Some 2,829 of those have been completed by the installer and have been returned to the Housing Executive, which verifies that the boiler being replaced is over 15 years old. The Housing Executive will then issue an approval form to the applicant to carry out the works. Currently, 2,364 approvals have been issued.

Mr Beggs: I notice that the successful early advertising for the replacement scheme, along with the latent demand, has created a backlog. When will that backlog be fully dealt with? When will the Minister be able to concentrate further on ensuring that the most vulnerable, who will benefit from more efficient boilers, are aware of the scheme and how it will benefit them?

Mr McCausland: The scheme has been in operation for only four months, so it is in the very early stages. As the Member notes, it is significant that there has been such a tremendous response to it. That says to me that it was the right scheme and the right way to spend that money. Every application is an endorsement of the scheme. I am quite confident that the funding allocated to the scheme for this year will be spent, owing to the number of applications already received. The scheme will run over a number of years, and I believe that we are making good progress.

On the timescale for an individual to get a response, what you find with these sorts of schemes is that, because they are so popular, there is a sudden surge of interest at the very start. We are making good progress, but a number of factors lead to delays. As the Member will be aware, there may be an issue if people who are offered a replacement boiler have to come up with some additional money or find the balance themselves.

At this early stage, it is hard to know exactly how the scheme will progress over time. However, the clear indication is that the money will be spent this year, and that is the priority.

Mr Agnew: Has the Department calculated the payback period for owners of, say, an average three-bedroom house who receive different levels of grant? That will obviously be a factor

for homeowners when deciding whether it is in their interest to take up the scheme.

Mr McCausland: I do not have detailed figures for the payback period, because that will obviously depend on so many different things. A person's level of income will determine the level of grant that they receive and therefore the amount that they have to make up. It will also depend on other factors to do with the nature of the house in which the boiler is being installed. I gave the example earlier of what is effectively a one-third reduction in someone's oil bill. The Member will be well aware of the cost of oil at present. Therefore, if you save one third in a year, you will quickly get a payback.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn, and question 7 has already been dealt with.

Housing Executive: Staff

8. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister for Social Development, following his announcement on the proposals for the future of the Housing Executive, to outline how many jobs in the different business areas might be lost as a result. (AQO 3185/11-15)

12. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps his Department has taken to ensure the rights and entitlements of Housing Executive staff during the proposed process of change. (AQO 3189/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 8 and 12 together, as they raise similar issues.

My proposals for new housing structures are about providing a better service for tenants, better housing and a structure and system that ensures good value for money for the taxpayer. In essence, it is about creating a system that is sustainable. This is not about reducing staff, cutting back or saving money. In fact, the Member, who sits on the Social Development Committee, will be aware that the review was never about cutting jobs or saving money but about getting the structure right for Northern Ireland moving forward.

It is important to realise that there is still a need within the new structure for the functions that the Housing Executive performs, and staff will be required to continue to deliver those functions and services to tenants, albeit potentially within different organisations. NIPSA will be consulted as a key stakeholder representing the views and rights of staff

throughout the process at a local and higher level. We must be cognisant of the fact that we are at a very early stage of a major project and there is still much work to be done on the design of the new structures and the impacts on staff. That is high on the agenda of the programme board, of which the chief executive of the Housing Executive is a member.

Let me be clear: it would be pre-emptive and totally wrong to start speculating at this stage. The fact is that I have stated repeatedly that this is not and never has been about culling jobs.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. After I submitted my question, he came to the Committee last week and provided a bit more clarification on the statement, for which I also thank him. I am sure that he understands that people fear for their job when there is such major change.

Will he give a bit more detail on the potential benefits of the new landlord function being outwith the public sector?

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware that this affords an opportunity to address a major problem: we need more houses built, and we need better quality. Some Housing Executive stock — the older properties — need a tremendous amount of work done to them. We are talking about £1 billion of work in the short term to get all that stock up to the standard that we should be able to expect and that tenants should be able to expect. That sort of money is not available at the moment, but, if we move the stock eventually over to, effectively, the housing association sector, it will enable them to borrow money so that the work can, therefore, be funded.

I want to come back to one point: the concern of staff. I understand that. I have written to every staff member in the Housing Executive already, and there will be communication with the trade unions. I know that the chief executive of the Housing Executive has been writing to staff as well. What does not help is misinformation, and this comes back to the issue of welfare reform, which was raised earlier. If somebody had picked up one of our local newspapers on Saturday, they would have read that I had announced that the Housing Executive is to be broken up and its range of roles transferred to housing associations. In actual fact, that is not the case. If we go down this road, we will create a regional housing body, staffed by housing professionals to carry out the regional services and roles. It is total misunderstanding. That sort of misinformation

going out does not help and creates fears. If someone working in the Housing Executive reads that nonsense, I can understand why they would be concerned. There is a responsibility not just on politicians but on the media and others to get their facts right about these things. I am sure that the Member would agree with me in that regard.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Aire as ucht an fhreagra. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he keep the trade unions fully informed of what implications there will be for staff throughout the process of the Housing Executive changes?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for the question. Following the release of the written statement, my permanent secretary wrote to the general secretary of NIPSA advising that the Housing Executive will be asked to work with my officials in the development of this programme and that there will be consultation with trade union side representatives throughout the process. Indeed, work on this has already begun. Shortly after the issue of the written statement, my officials held an initial meeting with the chief executive and the Housing Executive's director of personnel and management services to address primary staff concerns and to agree to work jointly to allay staff anxieties. An invitation has also been issued to Alison Millar of NIPSA to discuss staffing concerns and anxieties with me, the DSD and Housing Executive officials.

Mr Dunne: Does the Minister recognise the good work done by Housing Executive staff, especially at district office level? Perhaps he will give us some assurance about what impact the changes will have at district level.

Mr McCausland: I hesitate to respond to that question in that we are at the very start of a long journey and there is a lot of work to be done over the next couple of years. It would be premature, presumptuous and pre-emptive of me to make categorical statements, because the work has not yet been carried out so that we know exactly the final shape of this new architecture or structure. What I will say is that the sort of functions that are being done by the Housing Executive now will still have to be done, and there will have to be engagement between people at local level and their housing provider. So, there is a need for us to be patient before we get to the point where we can actually spell out things in detail. As soon as we have information, it will be communicated,

and there will be ongoing consultation with the Housing Executive at all levels and with the trade unions.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 to August 2012: COFMDFM Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA/81/11-15) on Statutory Committee activity on European issues May 2011 - August 2012. — [Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister).]

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, and congratulate the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on bringing the motion to the House.

As other Members have said, over 70% of legislation here is influenced by or a direct result of the European Commission. Therefore, it has huge relevance to the lives of everyday people. A number of Members highlighted in their contributions the influence that the EU has across the environment, agriculture and, indeed, a number of justice and child safety issues.

I join my colleague Mr Joe Byrne in wishing the Irish Government well with their EU presidency in the six months ahead. Like other Members, I believe that that presents us in the North with an opportunity, particularly at this time, when the CAP proposals are being examined. The debate around the budget is critical, not least to our farming community.

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

Like others who contributed to the debate, I am somewhat disappointed at the lacklustre and, indeed, derogatory comments some Members made about the European Union. It was, after all, an historic agreement, which resulted in an absence of conflict on the scale that had been seen in the previous century. We would do well to remember why and how it came about. Many Members will know the influence of the European Convention on Human Rights. Over the past decades, a number of individuals in the North of Ireland have had to take their cases to Europe to get support. The European Union

has had a significant contribution to make to the lives of ordinary men and women.

There is a great opportunity in the work of the EU, through Horizon 2020. Unfortunately, under the seventh framework programme (FP7), we did not see enough of a take-up in some of the research and development opportunities that were available to us. An awful lot more has to be done, in the Civil Service in particular, across all Departments. However, that has to be led by Ministers. As a previous member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I recall the welcome that the Barroso task force got, and the comments Mr Barroso made on the opportunities presented to us subsequent to the restoration of devolution. It is unfortunate that those opportunities have not been maximised by the current Executive. I reiterate my disappointment that, even though there are four Ministers in OFMDFM, none of them has chosen to make themselves available for the debate.

The other experience I have had of the work of the EU was as a member of INTERREG organisations, which produced quite good results on a North/South and east-west basis. One of those opportunities was to build relationships, not only on the island of Ireland but between Ireland, North and South, and Great Britain; in particular, the axis with the coast of Scotland, where there are specific programmes. Again, I do not think that those opportunities have been maximised, partly because of the recession and the difficulties some Governments have in finding match funding. Indeed, some of that has been within the private sector. That is something that ought to be exploited. I would like to think that our MEPs are taking that particular case to Europe, to show ways in which, at this time of recession, other methodologies can be used to draw down funding.

Like, I am sure, all other parties here, it is fair to say that we remain very optimistic that Peace IV will be realised. We should all be singing off the one hymn sheet in so far as the Peace IV objectives are concerned, particularly when we look at how fragile —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — our peace process is. I hope that the message from this place to the EU is that we value the relationship and want to build on it.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na cainteoirí eile as páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo. My thanks to other Members who have contributed to the debate. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment considers European issues in areas relating to the economy and tourism. It is often difficult to consider European issues in isolation because they are integrated into the wider activities of the Department, Invest NI and the Utility Regulator. Indeed, because of the difficulties with recession, many of us look positively to Europe for some of the support and some direction as we seek to provide a positive future for many of our young people.

During the course of the past year, the Committee undertook its inquiry into innovation, research and development. The inquiry considered the programmes and opportunities that exist locally, on an all-island basis, from Britain, and, of course, on an EU and international basis. From an EU perspective, the Committee highlighted the need to increase involvement in EU programmes, such as what has already been mentioned: the seventh framework programme for collaborative programmes in research and development. During the course of that inquiry, we saw the reduction in red tape — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to check that there are no phones on, even on vibrate mode. There is an irritating noise that is distracting Members. I ask Members to check their phones. There should not be any phones on in the Chamber.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will repeat that: from an EU perspective, the Committee highlighted the need to increase involvement in EU programmes, such as the seventh framework programme for collaborative programmes in R&D. Throughout the course of that Committee inquiry, there was the requirement for a reduction in red tape, increased access to information, and making it generally more workable and accessible, especially for the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector and microbusinesses.

The Committee also identified and highlighted the need for an integrated and focused approach to Horizon 2020, which is the next framework programme for R&D. It commences in 2014. Some of us have already spoken to Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn in respect of Horizon 2020. She has sought further research

and information around some of the difficulties that people had in accessing the first tranche of funding.

Following the announcement of a network of EU envoys to support the interests of small and medium-sized enterprises, the Committee took oral evidence from the office of the SME envoy and held an event for SMEs to engage with representatives from the office of the envoy. That resulted in an Assembly research paper to highlight the local perspective and inform the EU SME envoy of the particular needs and issues that are faced by local SMEs. The Committee has taken a particular interest in the revision of the Industrial Development Act 1982, and responded to the consultation from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

From the energy perspective, the Committee has closely followed the implementation of the EU third energy package — IME 3 — which is designed to support the integration of gas and electricity markets. The Committee recognises that many difficulties may arise as a result of the proposals, both locally and on a cross-border basis. That includes the need to strengthen the electricity grid and improve interconnection for gas and electricity. Since August 2012, the Committee has followed up on its actions in those areas, and it will continue to do so.

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am very grateful to all the MLAs and Committee Chairpersons who have contributed to the debate on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's report on European engagement. It has been a very helpful debate. I place on record the Committee's thanks to the Northern Ireland representatives in Europe, including the MEPs, the members of the European Economic and Social Committee, and the members of the Committee of the Regions. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, I am sure, all other Committees have had the benefit of briefings from a wide range of key European bodies and stakeholders. I thank them for their input also. They include the European Commission's office in Belfast, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum, OFMDFM's European division and Belfast City Council's European department.

I now turn to Members' contributions to the debate, and I think that we heard a large degree of consensus on the importance of

engagement with Europe across a number of key issues. The Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister stressed the importance of engagement with Europe for economic development and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. He detailed the Committee's visits to Edinburgh and Brussels, which were particularly helpful in seeing how other Parliaments appoint at least one staff member to monitor European issues closely and at an early stage. We now have four desk officers for the Northern Ireland Executive in Europe and, of course, the Barroso task force. I also think that the appointment of the Assembly's European engagement officer will be useful in helping MLAs and Committees to engage with issues in Europe at an early stage.

Stephen Moutray MLA referred to the single farm payment and its importance. He also said that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development had paid particular attention to CAP reform and stated that that was the single biggest issue facing Northern Ireland from Europe at the moment. He also mentioned the engagement that had taken place with the Irish Agriculture Minister. From the perspective of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, he referred to the importance of Creative Europe 2014-2020, and he stated that the Environment Committee's scrutiny of Strangford Lough and the wild bird directive had been particularly helpful.

Seán Lynch MLA, the vice Chair of the Regional Development Committee, stressed how important engagement with Europe was for European transport policy and budgets. As he has done previously in the House, he referred to the relatively poor knowledge of the geographical location and infrastructure network of Northern Ireland in Europe. He also said how important it was for the Regional Development Committee to engage with Brussels to gain access to improved funds for transport and better policy for this region and our citizens.

Colum Eastwood MLA, a fellow member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, referred to the way in which European funds had contributed to some vital projects in Northern Ireland, not least the Peace Bridge in Derry. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the city on the launch of the City of Culture 2013 last night. Unfortunately, I did not receive an invitation to the 'Sons and Daughters' concert, but it seemed to be a fantastic night. I wish everyone in that city and in Northern Ireland who is going to be involved in that well for the year ahead.

Colum also referred to the Maze/Long Kesh project and how important European funding for the peace and conflict resolution centre at that site could be to ongoing efforts to bed down a shared future in Northern Ireland. He also mentioned Horizon 2020, and I know that the Minister for Employment and Learning, our universities, our colleges and our businesses are collaborating to access improved funding from the research and development funds that are available from Europe.

Anna Lo MLA, the Chair of the Environment Committee, stressed how important Committee scrutiny of our Departments' engagement with Europe is. She detailed how scrutiny of the Department of the Environment had shown that the area of special conservation in Strangford Lough was in danger of being damaged and how, through that engagement, the Committee was able to instigate work with DARD and DOE to put an appropriate restoration plan in place and ensure that that area was preserved.

Anna Lo also stated how important it was to have early warning systems for EU proposals to make sure that we can influence policy on behalf of people across Northern Ireland in a positive way. She gave another example of changes to MOT legislation that had the potential to cost SMEs across Northern Ireland and the work that her Committee did to connect with a House of Lords EU subcommittee and the UK Secretary of State for Transport. That demonstrates how Committees in the Northern Ireland Assembly can influence European policy in a constructive way.

3.45 pm

George Robinson MLA stated how £53 million of EU funding had been targeted for 2011-15 and that that funding was on track. He said that there was an opportunity to support our farmers and to make our employment practices consistent with those across Europe. He cited the example of overseas agency workers gaining improved conditions of employment as a result of directives from Europe.

Bronwyn McGahan MLA said that EU policy has a direct impact on all citizens across Northern Ireland and, indeed, that some 75% of legislation that affects us originates in Brussels. She said that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee had examined the Creative Europe funding pot from the EU and was able to connect the Arts Council to that vital funding. She stated that we should be much more proactive rather than reactive in our approach to Europe.

Brenda Hale MLA stressed the importance of engagement with Europe to our farming and agrifood sector and said how important CAP reform will be to this region in making sure that we have profitable food production with less red tape but speedy and correct payments. From keeping in close contact with my Alliance Party colleague in Castlereagh Borough Council, Councillor Tim Morrow — himself a farmer — I know that it is hugely important to ensure that those payments are speedy, correct and put the least possible pressure on our farmers at this difficult time. Mrs Hale also said that elected representatives must work together to maximise funding from potential streams, such as Peace programmes and research and development funds.

Joe Byrne MLA emphasised, again, the significance of Europe to farming in this region, how vital CAP reform will be to the region and the need for us to influence it to meet the needs of farmers, their families and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

Kieran McCarthy, Alliance MLA for Strangford, spoke of the importance of EU engagement by MLAs to this region's fishing industry and of how positive outcomes were achieved for fishermen in this region by MLAs working together to lobby Europe on that issue.

Paul Givan MLA and Chair of the Committee for Justice started by raising concern about European Union human rights legislation and then welcomed the adoption of EU-wide directives on human trafficking by Alliance Minister David Ford. He spoke of how that had improved action taken against that heinous crime in Northern Ireland.

Dolores Kelly MLA raised the matter of her disappointment that none of the four Ministers at OFMDFM was available to respond to the many substantive issues that have been raised today. She also echoed the words of Jane Morrice, of the European Economic and Social Committee, about the vital role of the European Union as a living, breathing, conflict-resolution project and spoke of the benefit that she had gained from working on inter-regional social and economic projects across the UK and Ireland.

Patsy McGlone MLA and Chair of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee referred to the Committee's inquiry into research and development. As Chair of the Assembly and Business Trust, I had the pleasure of meeting EU Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn and seeing the great work that the Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Committee did to raise key points on how we could improve our engagement with and drawdown of research and development funds, by working in co-operation with the commissioner and the rest of the European Union.

In conclusion, then, Europe clearly has a significant impact on lives across Northern Ireland. It is important that Assembly Committees engage with our own Northern Ireland Executive Departments to ensure that Northern Ireland's voice is heard on issues that directly affect this region. I assure the House that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue to work and co-operate with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with a view to improving our engagement on European issues and fulfilling its responsibility for European issues. Indeed, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will very much rely on the work of other Statutory Committees at the Assembly in scrutinising their respective Department's work in Europe. I, therefore, reiterate the Chairperson's thanks to the Committees and encourage them to continue their hard work in that regard.

I will speak briefly as an MLA and member of the Alliance Party. European engagement — social, economic and environmental — is vital to the future of all in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has benefited significantly as a result of European engagement and assistance; not least, as we heard today, via vital EU Peace programmes that have made a unique and leading contribution to building peace and addressing divisions in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is hard to see what other level of investment has been made in that field, not even by our own relevant Department, OFMDFM.

Despite DUP scepticism about Europe, its party leader and First Minister will be in Brussels next week to support the work of EU Peace programmes in Northern Ireland and, I presume, to support calls for an EU Peace IV programme.

European freedom of movement and the European market have also allowed many local businesses to address skills gaps and assist trade and export in our region. My party colleague Employment and Learning Minister Stephen Farry will continue to work on European social fund projects, of which, I understand, there are approximately 82 in Northern Ireland at this time, dealing with vital projects such as apprenticeships and youth

employment schemes, and engaging with those furthest from the labour market.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that Northern Ireland has an excellent opportunity at present, simply because of our neighbour's presidency of the Council of the European Union for the next six months? There is enormous sympathy for us not only south of the border but across the UK, and this is an opportunity that Northern Ireland simply cannot afford to miss.

Mr Lyttle: I absolutely agree, and I welcome the fact that all Assembly Committees appear to have been preparing for the Irish EU presidency in the preceding months and years. It is important that we take advantage of that to keep all the key issues that have been raised in today's debate on the agenda of the Irish presidency to see whether we can make progress and engage with Europe as much as possible to the benefit of Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party believes in the importance of promoting Northern Ireland as an active region of the European Union, where we not only enhance the benefits and the drawdown of funding for Northern Ireland but become more involved in the development of important legislation and policy that has a direct impact on all our citizens, sharing our experiences and learning from other regions in Europe.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and an Alliance MLA, I recognise the key role that Assembly Committees play in that process. I commend the report to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA/81/11-15) on Statutory Committee activity on European issues May 2011 - August 2012.

Private Members' Business

Historic Environment

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

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the publication of the report 'A Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment'; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to work with Executive colleagues to examine ways in which the report's recommendations could be implemented.

I thank the Business Committee for selecting the motion. I thank the Minister in advance for his presence and, more importantly, his reply. This is a great opportunity for all of us to celebrate something special and positive about Northern Ireland: our rich historic environment. Although the report referred to in the motion was published in June last year, and it is now January 2013 and several months have passed, it is a significant and valuable work that is still worthy of debate and discussion in the Chamber today.

What I probably like best about the report — never mind the detail, which I will get into momentarily — is the fact that it shows that the environment and the economy are not mutually exclusive. All too often, debates in the Chamber, in the media and in wider society pit the environment, on the one hand, against the economy, on the other hand, as if people make a choice for the environment against the economy or for the economy against the environment. The report shows that if things are done properly, the environment can reap significant economic benefits for Northern Ireland. There have been opportunities, and no doubt there will be in future, to talk about how renewable energy and waste management can reap economic benefits, but our historic environment has a huge economic benefit for Northern Ireland, and perhaps we did not realise or appreciate its extent.

We all know that we in Northern Ireland are blessed with an exceptional historic environment. We could all probably talk about our own constituency. In my Strangford

constituency, sites such as Nendrum, Greyabbey and Scrabo are landmarks known not just in the area but further afield across Northern Ireland. Scrabo in particular is instantly recognisable to everybody in Northern Ireland, no matter where they are from. We have wonderful historic buildings, castles and sites right across Northern Ireland. We have Carrickfergus castle, Dunluce castle and others too countless to name in the time available during this debate. We all know that they are fantastic sites. We all know that they are very valuable. We all know that we are very blessed in Northern Ireland to have them, the history and heritage that go with them and the many stories that they all tell. However, I do not think that, until the publication of this report, we would ever have appreciated the annual economic contribution that they make to Northern Ireland. That is why the research is incredibly valuable.

Obviously, there are headline figures. There is, for example, the £532 million annual economic output that is attributable to all those sites. There are 100,000 full-time equivalent jobs that can be accounted for by the historic environment in Northern Ireland. Everybody likes to talk about the multiplier effects of the investment of public sector money. The fact that there is a multiplier effect of between £3 and £4 from the private sector for every £1 of public sector money spent on the historic environment shows that this is something worthy of consideration for investment in the longer term.

The historic environment also has broader policy implications. It underpins our economic strategy and particularly our tourism strategy for Northern Ireland, especially in respect of signature projects. I mentioned Greyabbey and Nendrum in the Strangford constituency. They are part of the Christian heritage and St Patrick's Trail. Other sites will feed into other aspects of our signature projects and our tourism strategy as the latter is developed and pushed across Northern Ireland.

Our historic environment also adds value, in many cases, to regeneration schemes in towns, villages and cities across Northern Ireland. It can, because it differentiates us from other places, help to attract businesses to Northern Ireland. Businesses make investment decisions on a raft of considerations — principally on skills, taxation, and so on, but people also like to see that the country that they are coming to in order to invest or work has something about it culturally, and the historic environment plays a small part in that, too.

It is very clear from the report that the potential for more economic value from our historic environment is there. We only have to look at the experience of our near neighbours. If you compare Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland or Scotland, it is clear that even though there is significant economic value from our historic environment, it is not as good or high as the others. If you look at economic output per capita, you will see that it is estimated at £160 in Northern Ireland; in the Republic of Ireland, its output is closer to £500, at £491; and in Scotland, it is higher again at £943. In Northern Ireland, the historic environment accounts for three jobs per thousand of the population, but the figure is 8.1 in the Republic of Ireland and 11.8 in Scotland.

The GVA — gross value added — contribution per capita is £75 here, £270 in the Republic of Ireland, and £496 in Scotland. Although we can celebrate the fact that half a billion pounds of economic output is being gleaned from the historic environment annually in Northern Ireland, it is clearly not as good as it is in the Republic of Ireland or in Scotland. I would not argue that our historic environment is better than theirs or that they are without heritage in their built environment, but I think that ours is every bit as good. Therefore, there is something not quite right about the output that we in Northern Ireland get versus that of our near neighbours.

We know that we have a good historic environment. So when we look at the experience of our near neighbours and the economic value that they get from their historic environment, how do we get to the same level or close the gap between us and the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England and others?

There are four broad areas in which that needs to be done. The first is that a strategy that sets out how to do that needs to be developed. Obviously, that lies within the Minister of the Environment's purview, but there is a lot of connectivity between his responsibilities and those of other Ministers, hence the terminology and the language in the motion. I think in particular of the Department for Social Development (DSD) and its work on regeneration, as well as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and its responsibility for tourism. There is also a role for local councils and other organisations and bodies, such as the National Trust, which would also have an input.

4.00 pm

The second area is, undoubtedly, resources. We cannot develop, implement or promote any strategy without having sufficient resources behind it. Sometimes the arguments for doing things that are good environmentally are made just because they are good environmentally. There is so much focus on the economy now and on creating growth and generating new jobs. The good thing about the report is that it is a piece of evidence that says that, if we invest in a part of our environment — in this case, the historic environment — we can create economic output and growth, as well as jobs and employment. So, there is a compelling case to be made by the Minister in his discussions with Executive colleagues about investment in this area.

The third area that I want to talk about is branding and marketing, which is incredibly important. The research in the report shows that there is an urgent need to enhance the presentation of sites and to have clearer signage at sites. The connections between sites need to improve so that, instead of just going to one site, visitors can be directed to others in the immediate vicinity and can take part in a wider range of activities. Websites, literature and social media also need to be improved. I have gone to quite a few of the sites that I have mentioned, and I have to say that the interpretive signage at them is not always as good as it could be. It could be improved by increasing the number of languages used, and the use and accessibility of modern technology such as apps to interpret sites could also be improved.

Activities are important. By that I do not mean the “Disneyfication” of sites, but some sites have been very successful. I commend the Down County Museum in Downpatrick, for example, which has actors performing stories about prisoners who were in the jail in the past. That brings it to life for adults and children. It is an enjoyable experience, and people get a lot more out of it.

In the time that I have left, I will talk about the fourth area, which is structure. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is currently responsible for thousands of sites, including all those that I mentioned at the beginning. The agency does sterling work under its environmental protection remit, but I am not convinced that it is the right vehicle to take forward our historic environment, if we are to use it as a part of our tourism offering and to create the economic output and employment that I talked about. The evidence suggests that it is not. The agency's website is not bad, but the built and historic environment is very much

a secondary issue for the Department on that website. Access to it and the opening for sites shows that the agency does not have the budget or the capacity to do the job properly. Let us look at other jurisdictions. Scotland has the levels of output and employment that I talked about. It has Historic Scotland, which is doing this job —

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

Mr Hamilton: It has a brand that is seared into the local consciousness, the national consciousness and beyond. So, we need to look at having a new body that is in either the private sector or the public sector or has trust status.

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

Mr Hamilton: This has huge potential, and I ask the Minister to look at it in conjunction with his Executive colleagues.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an mholadh seo. I welcome the motion and support it.

It is funny, because when I looked at the report, I automatically thought that there should already have been a proper tourism strategy that included the historic environment. Having read the report's recommendations, I can see the potential that lies in it and how we can move forward with it. However, I do not think that we can move forward unless we look at how we can gather all the groups together. Local authorities operate in silos on their own, as does NIEA, although I know that it has the responsibility for these matters. I can only talk about my experience of Armagh City and District Council and how it has tried to encourage tourism in the district and use its assets to their full potential. The report, with its six recommendations, has great economic potential. I will refer to some of the recommendations.

The first recommendation is the strategy. I would like to hear from the Minister how he proposes to tie all the groups together to formulate a strategy. We have a good opportunity, but we have missed a trick. Last year, we had the promotion of Our Time Our Place. That should have been done on an all-island basis and should have taken into consideration "The Gathering", which has serious potential. The report talks about the USA, Canada and everywhere else. We need

to look at the diaspora and try to encourage all that. We also need to look at what is in the motion about the historic environment, both natural and built. I hope that the Minister will make some reference to that.

The second recommendation concerns private sector investment. I have to mention Armagh jail, because it would be a good signature project for the area. It will not go ahead unless there is serious private investment. I would like to think that the Executive will look at that, because it would create jobs and boost the North. I would like the Minister to outline in his response whether there are any ideas in that regard.

Next is recommendation 3. Mr Hamilton referred to signage and everything else. I saw enough signage in a small area of the Lake District to cover the whole of this island. I hope that we can be more imaginative on the whole idea of advertisement and signage. I hope that we can have more than just a brown sign stuck at the end of a road pointing in the direction of a certain thing.

I do not propose to go into recommendation 4, which concerns social media. There are a lot of opportunities there, and we need to work with other bodies and other Departments on those.

I have talked about recommendation 5, which is about expanding linkages. We need to look overseas and to historic monuments across the world and try to tie those in.

I want to talk about Armagh city and district in my last 50 seconds. We have huge potential with Emain Macha, the Navan fort. I also want to draw the Minister's attention to a wee village outside Armagh called Milford. It has a serious built heritage. It is a lovely wee setting, but there is a proposal to build an anaerobic digester in the middle of it. I do not know how, but we have missed a trick over the fact that William McCrum invented soccer's penalty kick in Milford. Football generates billions of pounds across the world.

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

Mr Boylan: Every man, woman and child knows what a penalty kick is. I am just using Milford as an example. We have an opportunity to promote Milford village and the penalty kick. We have a multibillion-pound industry, but we are not making good use of that.

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

Mr Boylan: I would like to hear the Minister's views on that.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the chance to speak to the motion and to support it. I welcome the comments that have been made so far. As you all know, this subject is close to my heart. I have to declare an interest — a financial interest, albeit often a negative one — given that I live in a 400-year-old house. I also declare an interest in that, until a few years ago, I had been chair of the Historic Houses Association for Northern Ireland for five or six years. That body represents privately owned houses throughout the UK. I also worked for Christie's for 18 years, going around historic houses and art collections and dealing with antiques and other things on both sides of the border. I thought that I ought to share my comments on this matter.

The historic environment is not just buildings, and it is not just art and antiques. It is everything that goes with those things. It is the woodlands, it is the gardens, but, most importantly, it is the people. It is the families, the communities and how they all work together. Those are the stories, and that is very much part of what we should look at in the future.

Others have touched on the approach being a disjointed one, with the Departments and the councils working in different ways. Minister, I want to see the approach being pulled together so that we have a body that pulls together the history that intertwines everything and pulls us together. That way, we will not just be relying on the figure that we hear today but will be able to improve on it well into the future. So, it is really asking for a partnership and a body that will pull it together. It goes wrong occasionally. In Waringstown, there was a debacle over the developer getting rid of the heritage stone that was going to be the key to the centre. That is why we have to pull everything together in one line and under one story, giving every community a future.

I welcome the far-sightedness of the Minister in increasing funding to houses and to maintenance and seeing the importance of that to our economy. I congratulate the Department on all its hard work. However, there is a well-established principle that I am sure many are not aware of: if you receive money or grant from the Government, you have to open your house or make it a benefit to the public. So, although what is given with one hand is not taken away, you have to do your share in return. I ask that that is kept through everything that we do.

I go back to my point that the environment is the living family, the community and the history that comes with it. If you look at today's debate and see the £532 million benefit to our economy, with a possible £230 million added to that, you see that it is vital that we get the balance right.

Whether it is a historic site, whether it is Celtic, Irish, British, Northern Irish or more, our history goes back hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and we should look at all of it and pull it all together. That way, we might find that we all have much more in common than we thought we had. Could it be a cabin, a farm, a chapel or a mill? It is the woodlands, it is the rivers, and it is the environment. It is the areas of outstanding natural beauty, the Ramsars etc. It is gardens, and it is libraries. It is also collections. One council has a toy collection, another has a machinery collection, others have books and another has clothes. All of those are just little parts of that web. Most important are the people, whether they are academics, soldiers, writers, painters, industrialists and even politicians. All of the above are part of a story. So, Minister, I hope that we will see a web of tourism, with the themes pulling everything together.

In Antrim, they had a clever string of pearls linking the lough shore to Junction One to the courthouse and much more. We need to go out and find the people, find the houses, find the history and build on what we have got today. We need to look at the problems, whether they are in finance, health and safety or insurance, because there are a whole lot of things out there stopping a mass of our historic buildings and their gardens being opened. It is about pulling everything together and actually going out to them. That is what I would like to see happening in our policy. So, we need joined-up government that is proactive and goes out and tries to improve Northern Ireland's environment.

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

Mr Kinahan: Thank you.

Mrs D Kelly: I congratulate Mr Hamilton on bringing the motion to the House. It is very timely, particularly when we see a new series on television, 'Ulster Unearthed', coming to the fore. As Members will know, the Minister has been a champion of built heritage for a considerable time. It was only today that the website for the preservation of townland names was launched in this very Building. So, a sense of place is something that, for many, goes down

to our bone marrow; it is nearly innate genetically. So, this is a timely debate, and, as many Members have already said, it presents economic opportunities that have, thus far, been underestimated and undervalued. Therefore, this debate is very timely.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. You mentioned the townland names. Will the Member or perhaps the Minister assure the Assembly that his Department uses townland names when replying to —

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): We do.

Mr McCarthy: Good, excellent.

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. Keep to the topic under discussion, please.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Member's intervention. I can assure him that the SDLP has been at the forefront of townland name preservation. I recall many difficult meetings in Craigavon council at one stage, but now everybody is on the same page on townland names.

Northern Ireland-wide, there is a plethora of sites that deserve investment. The motion calls for Ministers to work together, but I am unclear about the budget that has been set aside in the four-year term of this Assembly and whether or not there is sufficient flexibility to move money across as opportunities arise. I spoke to the Minister, and he met campaigners for the Gilford mill. Indeed, I hope that he will soon visit the Hilden mill in the neighbouring constituency of Lagan Valley because there are opportunities there. One of the obstacles to developing those sites is when there are community group-led initiatives or it is in the hands of private developers, because the ceiling at which moneys can be drawn down demands a huge investment from the promoter of the project, and that is unrealistic in today's economic climate. I hope that the Minister can persuade colleagues to allow a greater percentage of grants so that there is less private investment, at least in these recessionary times.

It would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to talk about Ireland's rich Christian heritage, particularly the fact that the grave of St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is in Downpatrick. Members will know that Margaret

Ritchie has, for many years, been a very strong campaigner and champion for that investment to be realised. In my town — Lurgan — Brownlow castle merits consideration as a building that could be used for greater investment. Unfortunately, there are difficulties with the trustee board and how the money can be drawn down because of some of the rules and regulations that apply.

I know of some places where there are ancient raths on private land, and many people who live outside the immediate vicinity do not even know that those places exist. Therefore, there is a need, as Mr Kinahan says, for greater collaboration and co-operation not only across Departments but from local government and central government. Some time ago, I had occasion to ask the Department about the ownership of some sites, and I was referred to a website. It needs more than that. There needs to be a concerted effort from local and central government to maximise any opportunities that exist, either through lottery funding or, if there is any such funding, through the EU.

Some Members attended last night's City of Culture 'Sons and Daughters' event in Derry. The Committee for the Environment recently visited Derry, and we were very impressed by the rich heritage. We visited the walls of Derry and saw the opportunities around the deanery basement. There is still a need for investment in that area. I do not think that there is a visitor interpretation centre, but that was an idea to link the two. I understand that there is a dedicated officer for Derry, but it was of concern to the people in Derry that that officer was based in Belfast. The Minister might give an undertaking to look at that situation, because it is clearly not what the people and the promoters of the Derry project want. I urge the Minister to use his influence and to look at a better model for delivery.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and commend the Members for bringing it to the House. The report provides quantitative evidence to support what many people have instinctively recognised for years: Northern Ireland's historic environment is a precious asset that contributes to our social and economic well-being. Over the past couple of years, I have seen and heard of a number of examples where this is the case. For example, last year, I was invited to the launch of a book about the excavation of the 17th-century town at Dunluce. The Minister was also there. Unfortunately, due to the terrible weather and ongoing work, I was unable to see the dig for myself, but I was told all about this ambitious, exciting and engaging project.

The excavation, interpretation and conservation of this early town will certainly add to Northern Ireland's already rich heritage. I am sure that it will draw people to visit and stay and spend, creating much-needed jobs, and I commend the Minister and the Department for his approach to this project.

Similarly, I am looking forward to a visit to the excavation of the Drumclay crannog in Fermanagh, and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee is coming with us. Due to its location, this may never become the same focus of attraction as Dunluce, but the magnitude of the discovery will leave a legacy of information and artefacts that will revise understanding of early settlements in the area. Last year, I participated in a debate on a motion seeking policy changes to ensure that archeological artefacts were recorded and stored for the benefit of this and future generations. How much better if we can draw in tourists and generate revenue and jobs at the same time?

As this report clearly identifies, there is still much more untapped potential for our historic monuments to contribute to the economy. Last year, I visited the largest monument in state care in Northern Ireland — the city walls of Derry/Londonderry — which Dolores Kelly mentioned. During the visit, I was informed that, although the Northern Ireland Environment Agency maintains the walls, they are not promoted as a monument in their own right. In fact, it was suggested that NIEA took a "detached" approach. Planning rules protect the walls from destruction, but decisions are based on the view from the walls not of the walls, and this has led to developments that obscure the walls from view or are used, as we saw only too well, as a legitimate billboard for road signs. This is an clearly an example, probably among many, of where we are letting the potential of Northern Ireland's historic environment slip through our fingers. I recall visiting the Great Wall of China with busloads of tourists travelling for miles, taking hours, to get to the Great Wall and, obviously, bringing huge economic benefits to the area. It is such a brand name that people visiting Beijing feel that they have to drive for so many hours to go out and see it.

I support the call for the Minister and his Executive colleagues to examine the ways in which this report's recommendations can be implemented to maximise the economic potential of all our historic monuments.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. My constituency relies

heavily on its historic past to attract visitors and tourists, hopefully to all other areas of Northern Ireland so that we can all benefit from the financial spin-off that most tourists contribute to our hard-pressed economy. Within half an hour of Limavady, we have the electricity power house in Roe Valley country park, Mountsandel fort in Coleraine, the Martello tower in Magilligan, Hazlett House in Castlerock, the Limavady workhouse, Mussenden temple in Downhill and Cutts House in Coleraine. Of great tourism importance to the Limavady area would be the return from Dublin of the much-acclaimed Brighter Gold, either on a temporary or a permanent basis. There is also the training dome of RAF Limavady at Aghanloo and the many historic attractions in the city of Londonderry.

We have an area that is rich in history, but I argue that it is sometimes underappreciated for the value it can bring to our local economy.

In the report 'A Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment: Summary Report', I welcome recommendations 1 and 2, especially as the other recommendations are dependent on those being in place. Recommendation 1 addresses the need for:

"a coherent strategy and implementation plan"

to maximise the economic value of our historic environment. That is much needed, as many of our historic gems are not fully utilised. Recommendation 2 is perhaps more problematic in the current economic climate, as it calls for greater public expenditure. Although I appreciate that there is great potential for growth in this sector, I am mindful that funding will always be an issue for the Executive. However, I ask the Minister to see what he can afford to address the recommendations, as that would have an impact on employment in the construction, tourism and retail sectors.

Considering those issues, I hope that the Minister will do what he can, so that Northern Ireland gets full value from its historic sites as a way of helping us out of these harsh economic times and helping us to move forward towards the future. I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The report that is the focus of the motion identifies the significant contribution that our historic environment makes to the economy in the North. Similarly, the Heritage Council report, which relates to the

rest of the island of Ireland and is entitled 'Economic Value of Ireland's Historic Environment', was released in May 2012 and emphasises the many thousands of jobs supported by our historic environment nationally.

I refer to the two reports together from the outset of my contribution because I want to make the case for shared marketing and promotion of our historic environment on a single-island basis. Our historic environment on this island certainly predates partition and knows no borders. The benefits of our historic environment are cited in both reports as being direct and indirect. Direct benefits include expenditure by core organisations with a particular role in managing our historic environment; the building trade or the construction industry in repairing and maintaining monuments and the built environment; and the money spent by visitors and tourists coming here primarily because of our historic environment. Other benefits are more indirect and are induced, and the value of those is not always understood or fully appreciated.

Other Members have, quite rightly, drawn attention to rich historic environmental assets within their constituencies, and in this NIEA report, I would like to have seen greater emphasis on the rich historic environment in County Tyrone. On page 11 there is reference to Lissan House. However, on page 13, table 2.1, which lists, details and outlines 21 separate examples of heritage assets that provide wider economic benefits, could have mentioned, but did not, the beautiful landscape of the Sperrins or the ancient inauguration chair of the O'Neills, which is the northern equivalent of the Hill of Tara. It has recently come to my attention that, following direct lobbying from MLAs, including Francie Molloy, Minister Michelle O'Neill has handed over land near Tullyhogue to the Department of the Environment for the purpose of developing the ancient inauguration chair of the O'Neills.

We have, of course, the Beaghmore stone circles; Lough Fingrean, near Loughmacrory, where a crannog is visible on a dry day —
[Laughter.]

Mrs D Kelly: When is that? Once every 1,000 years?

Mr McElduff: We do not get many dry days — [Laughter.] — but for those that come along, we are very grateful, because you can see the crannog in Lough Fingrean. I commend Loughmacrory Community Development

Association and Declan McAleer MLA, my West Tyrone colleague, for all the work that they are doing to take forward that initiative.

In Carrickmore, we have the Nally Stand, which used to sit overlooking Croke Park, and which now overlooks St Colmcille's Park. We have other assets, including Castle Hill in Dungannon and the headstone over the grave of the poet Alice Milligan in Drumragh old graveyard. I personally fought to oppose the delisting of that headstone or monument — the things that would happen if you were not watching.
[Laughter.]

4.30 pm

I am drawing attention to two reports on the value of the historic environment, one of which was produced in the South. In the west, people promote places such as Westport House and the Ring of Kerry, and Kilmainham Gaol hosts schools and tourists. There are very many privately owned and National Trust buildings in the North, along with the Sperrins and the Mourne, Glenveagh National Park and the Giant's Causeway. We should not market those separately, and there are reasons for that. We should take advice from the Our Time to Shine conference in Belfast last March. The chief of the Seattle-based Destination Development International, Roger Brooks, said:

"I had to type in the city so I typed in Belfast and then I put in the address of the Merchant Hotel and then do you know what it said? It said there is no Belfast in Ireland. So then I went: let me type in Belfast, United Kingdom, and it said there is no Belfast in the United Kingdom. But we found one in Ohio."

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

Mr McElduff: We need to market these things singly throughout the island of Ireland.

Mr D McIlveen: "Follow that" is what I have to say.

I welcome the opportunity to speak. It is probably fair to say that during the past seven weeks of the regrettable scenes that we have seen on our streets, the question that has been coming out again from businesses is this: what are the Assembly and the Executive going to do to help us? Unfortunately, when it comes to some of those questions, we have to rely very much on anecdotal evidence. However, with regard to this report, we have hard facts to work

on and clear direction can be given as to how we can move forward with its proposals and findings. For example, one analysis point is that for each £1 invested by the public sector in the historic environment, £3 to £4 will be spent by the private sector. That is something that we cannot ignore and something that provides a very clear reason for giving the matter our full and serious attention. We can also note from the report that Northern Ireland is, at best, at a third of its capability in this sector, and, in some cases, we could be at an eighth if we compare ourselves with Scotland. When that is transferred to the analysis of where we are currently, 11% of that money goes to the Northern Ireland construction industry — an industry that is on its knees. If we could increase that 11% to 33% through increasing our capabilities — even at the worst possible increase, comparing us with the Republic of Ireland — we should do so. We must seriously consider what the Executive can do under the guidance, instruction and advice, I am sure, of the Minister of the Environment, and we have to look very seriously at how we can do that.

It is important not to underestimate the economic value of our historic environment. I will try not to veer into an advertisement for my constituency. Mr McElduff felt that his area had been neglected. However, unlike him, we were quite included in the report, and I am glad that areas such as Dunluce, Glenariff, Bushmills, and so on, were given recognition. I want to see that continue.

However, we have to be realistic. Some of what has been suggested in the recommendations is incredibly simple to deliver: recommendation 3 suggested that clear signage should be used on the way to and in a site. That is really basic marketing that we could probably deliver at a very small cost to the public purse.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Member for giving way. While we are on signage, does the Member agree that limiting brown signs often prevents sites from getting the numbers of visitors that they need to improve them?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree, and I will give a real-life example. In my constituency, the Dark Hedges at Stranocum has been the set for a number of film and television productions, and it has been the cover story of a number of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's advertising

campaigns, yet it was only after representation to Moyle District Council from me and a number of my colleagues in the past few months that we have managed to get brown signs. That site is arguably becoming one of our most famous tourist attractions. It is something that we have to get a hold of. We have to step up to the mark and be positive about Northern Ireland. People are hearing so much around the world about the bad things that can happen in Northern Ireland, and those are issues that we will have to deal with more and more in the future to get this issue moved on, but we have a lot of positive things to promote. Our Time Our Place was very successful, and as we move through 2013, we will have many events, such as the World Police and Fire Games and the G8, that we have a reason to be positive about in Northern Ireland.

What do we have to do? The buzzword of the day is "cross-departmental", and we use it a lot in this place. Coming back to this issue, I believe that a bigger conversation has to take place in the Executive. We have to get hold of the benefits of this and make sure that we do not miss opportunities and that for every pound that the public sector invests, ultimately, there is a return to it. I believe that we have the proof in the report that that will be the case.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. First, I congratulate those who tabled the motion. It is a very important one. The report is very good, and the six recommendations present the way forward. Hopefully, the next stage is to move into the operation of it. It is an ideal time because the new councils coming into operation is an opportunity to link historic environment tourism with the councils, with them maybe being involved in the maintenance and preservation of some historic sites.

It is very important that the council has a role to play in that, and we may need a different policy than we have at present for looking after some of the sites. I was down South visiting Fingal council some years ago. It rebuilt Swords Castle and reinstated the timberwork and structure of the building using apprentices and skills that are often lost. Here, we have a policy where you cannot put a brick or stone back into place if it has been moved out of place. To some extent, a lot of historic monuments are falling apart because there is no proper maintenance. What is wrong with restoring them to their original state, instead of allowing them to continue to deteriorate and without making a modern building out of them? We need to look at the trades and skills that can be brought in before those trades and skills are

lost and to use it as a training scheme, as well as bringing new ideas into operation.

We also have the opportunity to use European funding, and, unfortunately, I understand that Britain has not signed up to the European heritage label. Maybe we should use our subsidiarity issue of the Assembly being a regional Assembly to draw down funding from Europe to support the environmental heritage for the future and to move into a different era of looking after the environment and looking after those sites. As Barry McElduff said, there are a number of sites that are not listed or labelled. We need to look at what is here at present and at how we list that to preserve it for the future. Rather than just looking after a site that has been here for the past 1,000 years, how do we create a new set of structures, with a realistic view of change in design, structure and activities, so that it will be there for future recognition? That is very important.

It is the same with signage. In England, Scotland and Wales, there is signage on the motorways for nearby locations. We cannot get Roads Service to do that here. It will not allow signage on motorways indicating that historic monuments, fixtures or features are close by, even though that would be of benefit because it would draw people to such places.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned that we were in the Lake District. Does he agree that we saw an overabundance of signage there that spoilt the countryside and that we need a more balanced approach to where we put signage? Also, should we not have a proper advertising strategy to promote these sites?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Molloy: Yes; we must have a plan rather than sticking signage all over the place. In the Lake District and other national parks, as they are termed, we saw a multitude of signs all over the place that destroyed the area. That is one of the arguments against national parks, although I am sure that the Minister does not want to hear that.

On the issue of directional signage, which is used to direct people to a site, along the M1 at Dungannon, for instance, they will not allow a sign that points to O'Neill's castle and the site on which Dungannon council spent £5.5 million. They will not allow that to be indicated so people do not know to go there and see that. They did not even allow signage on the

motorway for the hotel when that was open. We want to give people the opportunity to visit some of those sites so we need to give them directions and signage.

Simon Hamilton mentioned signage and bilingual signs. Unionism needs to look at the role of the Irish language in the use of signs. It is historic. It is also an environmental issue. We need to use that in a multilingual and bilingual situation to ensure that we have proper signage. Across in Scotland, where Ulster Scots and all the rest came from, Scots Gaelic is used on signs to identify streets. Even in the Parliament, it is widely used. Let us get over these wee blips, move to a new situation and accept that that is where it is. Let us all benefit.

The one thing about our historic environment is that it is shared, and we cannot change that. There is no point in rewriting history, but we should take the most out of it. We might not have benefited much from it previously, but let us now try to see whether we can benefit our communities and the environment by creating tourism attractions that will draw people in to look at our historic environment —

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

Mr Molloy: — and maximise that in the future.

Mr Agnew: When seeking to double the tourism revenue that Northern Ireland generates, there is no doubt in my mind that putting our historic environment at the heart of the tourism strategy is key and that that should be the unique selling point of Northern Ireland. We have a place that is rich in natural and built heritage and that offers a genuine attraction to tourists. If we promote it, they will come.

I welcome the report and the degree of consensus around the Chamber that we should promote these aspects of Northern Ireland and what are sometimes seen as valuable natural environments in and of themselves, and recognise the economic potential that our historic environment holds. I do, however, have a few words of caution. I ask the Minister and the Executive to ensure that in seeking to maximise the economic potential of our historic environment, we do not destroy, damage or harm it. Protection of that environment has to be maintained if we are to promote it.

4.45 pm

We must also ensure that we do not create a Northern Ireland for tourists and forget about

the people of Northern Ireland, the people who truly value and care about this place. Ultimately, they will be the ones who will sell this place when they travel abroad and tell people to come to Northern Ireland. Again, I just urge caution. The proposer of the motion mentioned the term "Disneyfication". We should be wary of that. When we promote our environment, we should do so in a way that is sensitive, considered and not overly commercialised, although we should realise its economic potential.

The marketing of our environment is important. That may be the area in which we are lacking, but we can do more to preserve our natural environment. The valuable and rich built environmental heritage in our public Departments is an area that they should highlight. I raised concerns with the Minister about, for example, the courthouse in Bangor, which will soon no longer be used by the Department of Justice. I share the concerns of conservationists and Bangor residents for the future of that listed building. Our public Departments must lead the way in properly preserving and protecting our historic environment. When a building is no longer of use for one purpose, we must find a new purpose for it to ensure that it is preserved and that we are not just maintaining a derelict building.

The proposer welcomed the report and said that it shows that there does not have to be a conflict between those who care about the environment and those who want us to promote our economy. I agree with him to a large extent and, indeed, have been making that point for a number of years. However, there will be conflicts. One example is my disagreeing with the Minister on the proposal for a golf resort at the Giant's Causeway. I believe that the proposed hotel and golf resort does what I warned against: putting the realising of economic benefit over and above the need to preserve and protect our heritage. That is where the planning system will be the key. Indeed, although there is a degree of consensus —

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

Mr Agnew: — around the Chamber, we will see when the Planning Bill plays out that we are, to some extent, agreeing two different things.

Mr Attwood: I very much agree with David McIlveen, Simon Hamilton and others that this is a very timely debate. This is a debate that

says what is best about Northern Ireland, which contrasts with the images of what has been the worst of this part of Ireland over recent weeks.

Simon Hamilton, in his opening remarks, said that our heritage was "every bit as good" as that of the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. I do not want to contradict him, but I believe that the scale, wonder and beauty of our built, natural, archaeological and Christian heritage are unsurpassed in any parts of these islands. However, that is not only my view. Coming as I do from a democratic nationalist and republican tradition, in June last year at a public event in Armagh planetarium, I asked an important person whether he agreed with me that the scale and wonder of our built and natural environment in this part of this island were unsurpassed in these islands.

I left the podium, and Prince Charles stepped forward. Although he avoided answering the question in the first instance, at the end of his speech, he answered affirmatively that the scale and wonder of what we have here is unsurpassed. I am sure that the Member will stand corrected on that. That is what I believe. If you look at the report, you will see that the scale of the natural, built, Christian and archaeological heritage that we have is unsurpassed.

I agree that we have not, either around the Executive table, in the Chamber or beyond, fully acknowledged that the Department of the Environment's role is, to go back to what Mr Agnew said, to be the leading environment Ministry. However, it is also a leading economy Ministry. It is around our built and natural heritage that we will be able to grow our tourist industry to a £1 billion-a-year industry. Compared with Scotland, the Republic of Ireland or Wales, we have a lot of catching up to do. Six of the 10 most popular visitor attractions in the North are in the built and natural heritage, so it is around that product that we will grow our £1 billion-a-year industry, as well as opportunity and jobs. As we do so, decisions will have to be made that, among other things, recognise that economic advantage is one of the features that give rise to planning decisions. Without prejudicing the environmental need in planning applications, there will be times and places where the particular economic advantage will make a difference in making decisions. As Mr Hamilton outlined, you can reconcile the environmental and the economic. In my view, people outside the Chamber do not fully recognise that. Go and look at SeaGen in Strangford lough. Those are the most protected waters in Europe, yet you have there the world birthplace of modern

tidal power. That is what SeaGen tidal plant is: the only plant of its scale in the world that feeds into a national grid anywhere in the world. What has it been able to do? It has been able to reconcile economic and energy needs with environmental requirements. If we can do it there, we can do it in a lot of other places as we make the argument going forward for the built and natural heritage.

Mr Hamilton captured June's document in four themes. I want to touch on those four themes. First is the need for a strategy across government. I could not agree more fully. That is why, in response to the document, in October and November I circulated two papers to my Executive colleagues. The purpose of those papers was to argue for a greater joined-up strategy in the principle of heritage-led development as a key economic driver going forward and to protect the heritage that everyone in the Chamber spoke about today. To go back to what Mr Boylan said, part of the 21 proposals in that document was the regeneration of Armagh jail. The idea was, on the one hand, to protect the heritage of the jail, and, on the other, to be an economic driver. So, in taking forward the report, we took forward 21 different projects. I said to my Executive colleagues that we should embrace heritage-led development in a much fuller way going forward because of the economic opportunities that that would produce. It would also protect the heritage that is so much part of the character of our lives in this part of the world. That is still a work in progress. Although there has been some shift of resources into DETI and a little into DOE through grants for listed buildings, a vast area of work is yet to be taken forward to put facts and figures and strategy behind those proposals. However, the argument has been engaged and made around the Executive table.

At the same time, I circulated two papers on the built environment, arguing for money to go into all council areas across the North so that the decay and dereliction that could affect the quality of heritage in each council area could be dealt with. That is a strategy to improve the look of places, improve trading conditions and create economic opportunities going forward.

Although I have been taking forward the report's recommendations, we will, as I have done in many other instances, convene a summit that will gather together all the relevant interests inside and outside the Department, including green NGOs and others, in an effort, on the built and natural heritage side, to do what we did with the good beach summit, heritage crime

summits and so on and take forward all that is needed in the ways that I said.

If we are to achieve that objective — this is the second theme that Mr Hamilton touched on — it must deal with resources. To do that, there is a need for a strategic shift, which has three dimensions. First is a strategic shift in law. If we believe that the quality and character of our built and natural heritage is unsurpassed in this part of this island compared with any other part of these islands, we need to have law in place that reflects that principle. That requires innovative and different thinking when it comes to the protection of heritage. That is why I continue to make the argument — I hope to do so this Thursday — for a marine management organisation (MMO) as part of the Marine Bill going forward. That is why I believe in an independent environment agency. The law should reflect the importance of our heritage and protect, best promote and positively develop it.

Secondly, it will require a strategic shift in policy. That policy has to be informed by the ambition of this part of the world being a world leader in carbon reduction. That means that we need to have waste strategies, ambitions when it comes to emissions, and a renewables strategy and energy policy that reflect that. In that way, we will protect our heritage and use it positively. Thirdly, there will be a need for a strategic shift in money. There needs to be money to protect the natural heritage and grow the jobs that we have been speaking about.

The third theme that Mr Hamilton and many others touched on was branding and marketing. You will not have any argument from me that the NIEA and government generally need to up their game to have coherence around our branding and marketing. However, it seems that the indicators are good and strong in that regard. Look at how DOE and the NITB have joined up on the Causeway coastal route and St Patrick's Trail. Look at how, over the past three years, there have been new exhibitions at Dunluce, Greyabbey and Nendrum. Again, the NITB, DETI, the NIEA and DOE have worked together. Look at the fact that, over the past year —

Mr McMullan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. Look at the fact that, over the past year, 28 of our 175 monuments in state care have had new interpretive panels. Look at the fact that four of those monuments have new interpretation booklets. Touching on the theme of a Member who spoke earlier, I can say that two of those

are in two foreign languages. We have turned a corner with marketing and branding, but we have a lot further to turn. I will take the Member's intervention.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that the fact that the British Government did not take part in the European heritage label initiative — they were the only member of the European Union not to do so — has cost us money here that we could have claimed or gone for to promote our natural heritage? I agree with what the Minister said about it being a matter of resource, but that is a resource that we have lost out on. We were given no consideration by the English Government at all as to whether we wanted to join in.

Mr Attwood: Whatever about the failures of the London Government and whatever about their failures regarding European branding, it did not stop Northern Ireland being the lead part of the European Union when it came to openings on European heritage open days. Northern Ireland, compared with any other part of these islands and — I stand to be corrected on this — any other part of Europe, showed the way forward by opening up heritage buildings and other monuments for visits on European heritage day.

5.00 pm

Northern Ireland is not punching its weight when it comes to accessing European funding. That is a huge issue, and I have made that point repeatedly. Whatever the responsibility and failures of London, we have a responsibility to draw down significantly more moneys from Horizon 2020 when it arises, FP7 over the next two years and all the other environmental streams of funding that are open to Northern Ireland. We are missing enormous opportunities in that regard.

I have two further points to make. The first concerns Mr Hamilton's fourth theme. He said that the NIEA is not the right vehicle to take forward these works, and I have some understanding of that argument. However, if we are going to borrow from the experience in other jurisdictions, let us acknowledge what that experience is. In England, they have an independent environment agency, an independent heritage organisation for buildings and an independent NDPB to deal with natural heritage issues. If we are going to have a conversation going forward — I very much think that we should — let us have the conversation about whether we believe that, when it comes

to protecting our natural and built environmental heritage, the best model to protect it is with independent agencies doing that work and that promotion. That is the lesson from England. Although a mixed message is coming from England and Wales, nonetheless let us look at the independent model as well as upgrading the in-house models that Mr Hamilton may have been speaking about. I will give way to the Member.

Mr Hamilton: That is a point for another day; your time is fast running out. The argument that I made was that the fourfold increase in output and employment in Scotland has been overseen by an agency of the Scottish Government and not an independent environmental protection agency. There is an independent environmental protection agency, but Historic Scotland is directly accountable to Ministers in the Scottish Government.

Mr Attwood: That is why the Scottish experience might offer an insight as well as the English and the English and Welsh experiences. In the Department, I have demonstrated that I do not accept that the structures of the NIEA are fit for purpose. That is why, a couple of months ago, we gathered the marine function of the NIEA together for the first time to create coherence in marine management going forward. There is a need for further work like that — maybe more radical than that — in the workings of the NIEA on the heritage side.

I do not wait for all these recommendations to emerge on the far side of conversations with other Ministers. Whether in respect of the bid for Heritage Lottery funding for the Dunluce 17th-century —

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

Mr Attwood: Yes. Whether in respect of funding for the Dunluce 17th-century village, the crannog, increasing historical grants, getting money for decay and dereliction, the Runkerry decision, money to lighting in Derry, all the summits and so on, I believe that there are good ways of showing good authority in real time, here and now, as well as the strategic issues that have been touched on and very much welcomed by me in the debate.

Mr Frew: I appreciate that I am making the winding-up speech to the debate. I certainly recommend to the House the motion moved so ably by my colleague Simon Hamilton.

This issue should be and is very important to the House. It is very important to me and my colleague David McIlveen in North Antrim, where we can see and appreciate the historical environment before our very eyes. He mentioned a couple of places that are very important to us for tourism. Of course, we have the flagship Causeway coastal route and other flagship projects throughout Northern Ireland. However, I would like to concentrate on the small gems.

A lot of Members have raised issues and areas in their constituency, and rightly so. They should be proud of them. I sometimes feel that we, particularly our youth, do not appreciate or are even aware of our surroundings, our history and how steeped we are in history. We are missing a trick by not teaching that to our children. Of course it is important to teach world history about the Roman empire, Greek history and everything else. All of that is important in education, but what about the importance of teaching children the history of their street, of the people who lived in their village, of the buildings that were in their area that have not been preserved and those that have? Also, the environment itself should be considered very important in education. That would go some way to raising awareness of these areas. Earlier in the debate, somebody mentioned raths. How many raths are dotted about this country? Learning who made them and what they were there for could be of great benefit to our young people. It is very important that our young people learn to preserve them and keep them for future generations. Education will be key in doing that.

The whole population needs to be educated. We need to be made aware, and signposting these places will go some way to realising that potential. A lot of people mentioned signposting and signage as an issue. That is important because sometimes our own population, even in their own villages, are not aware of the great potential that could be created around these sites. Even if it is just to walk with visitors from the rest of the UK, down south or America — to walk through these areas and let them see and sample them at first hand is really all that we are asking. We are not asking for large visitor numbers in those areas, because they just do not have the capacity of attractions such as the Giant's Causeway or Titanic Belfast. We should get just a sample of tourists to these areas so that they can be made to meet their potential. I have a couple in my constituency: Slemish mountain is one, and Arthur Cottage another. Slemish mountain is used all year round, but there is a mad rush on St Patrick's Day. We

have a small car park with a small visitors' centre and a small lane the whole way up to Slemish. You get so many complaints on St Patrick's Day that the lane is too small, buses and coaches cannot get up and visitors cannot get turned when they get to the top. That is all true, but how far do we go? Do we build a motorway to Slemish? We have to make sure that we get the right balance for the built heritage, the environment and meeting the potential of those sites. Arthur Cottage is another site that is away down a nice wee lane, right across the fields, acres away from the main road. Again, it is very important that we maintain the integrity of these historical sites.

I will address one issue that has been raised before I sum up on the others, and that is the planning application for the Runkerry golf resort. Would anyone in their right mind suggest that Royal Portrush has gone some way to destroying the great coastal area and beach formation that is the north coast? Would anybody argue that Royal Portrush Golf Club has destroyed anything in that area? It has not; it has led to great potential there. So, too, would the Runkerry golf resort —

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he not agree that access is an issue as well? Once that becomes a wider part of a golf resort, access will be private and we will deny many the opportunity to get to what are some of the most valued areas in Northern Ireland.

Mr Frew: All access will be from the built-up Bushmills side. The golf resort will only edge towards the Giant's Causeway and the massive white building that is the Causeway Hotel, which sits on the side of a cliff. I do not think that anyone can put a serious and substantive argument against that planning application.

My colleague Simon Hamilton proposed the motion and talked about the economic benefit to Northern Ireland. He said that that should not be seen as a polar opposite to the environment. The report records that and measures the benefit of the historic environment. He mentioned the money generated and jobs created in other areas, and he compared and equated us to the Republic of Ireland and to Scotland and asked how we close the gap with our neighbouring countries and sister states in the UK. He brought up the issue of signage, which a lot of people did, with regard to making people aware and taking them off the highways and byways and down into the nitty-gritty of our environment. He also brought up a very important issue, which has raised a significant debate here as to the current role of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and

how it is not really fit for purpose for promoting and enhancing the tourist potential of the historic sites.

Mr Boylan talked about the report and went through all of the recommendations of the study. He also referred to the signage in the Lake District and how we have to make sure that that, in itself, is balanced. He went through each recommendation one by one.

I admire Mr Kinahan, who seems to be the Joe Mahon of the UUP group — 'Lesser Spotted Ulster'. He certainly knows his stuff with regard to the historic environment. He is right that it is not just about buildings. It is about forests, the landscape and the people. I think he was the only one who really touched on that, and it was a valid and important point that he raised. He also mentioned protecting the built environment, making sure that we get the balance right as regards funding and opening it up so that everyone can get it. He talked about a web of tourism, which is a very good line.

Mrs Kelly talked about 'Ulster Unearthed', the new programme on TV, which will raise awareness, I have no doubt. I commend the TV for doing that. She also made a very good point about the Christian heritage of this country and how we should capitalise on that. We in Ballymena have been agreed for many years that they left Slemish out of the St Patrick's Trail for so long. They are starting to come around to our way of thinking and are actually including Slemish on some maps now. It was Mrs Kelly who mentioned the ancient raths — so, credit there — and said that more awareness is needed.

Ms Lo commended the Minister for the project and the work in it. I do not think that any of us would disagree with that. There is still more untapped potential there. She went into the detail on Derry's walls and made the very good point that it is not actually the walls themselves that we always have to take care of but what we build around them. That is a very good case study of how planning can go wrong at times.

Mr Robinson talked about the sites in his own area in Limavady and around that area of East Londonderry, and he went through the recommendations one by one. He is mindful that funding is always going to be an issue and there is always going to be that pressure and that tolerance.

Mr Barry McElduff, from west Tyrone —

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that,

when we talk about the whole thing on tourism, the heritage and all of that, this could be an opportune time to revisit the policy on cultural tourism in councils prior to RPA? We do not seem to be singing off the same hymn sheet in councils when we look at the cultural tourism aspect.

Mr Frew: The Member's colleague made that point with regard to the RPA. I will leave it at that, because I am running out of time. I agree with him that it is something that should be looked at.

It only took Mr McElduff 45 seconds to mention a single-island strategy, so fair play to him. The message got across there in 45 seconds.

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

Mr Frew: I do not understand why I am here and not in west Tyrone, with that list of great things to see and do. I am scratching my head, wondering why I am here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the publication of the report 'A Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment'; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to work with Executive colleagues to examine ways in which the report's recommendations could be implemented.

Adjourned at 5.14 pm.



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 2012

