

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 10 December 2012
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 December 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Recent Unrest

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 80 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have up to seven minutes. There will be only one round of Members speaking. When that has been completed, I will put the Question.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly unequivocally condemns the rioting and the campaign of intimidation, harassment and violent attacks on elected representatives following the decision of Belfast City Council in relation to the flying of the Union flag; expresses its sympathy to all those who have been attacked, injured or threatened with attack in recent days, including police officers, elected representatives and their staff; reaffirms the absolute and unconditional commitment of all its Members to respecting and upholding the rule of law and the pursuit of their political objectives by purely legal and political means; and insists that any further protests be peaceful, orderly and organised in accordance with the law.

Go raibh maith agat. Mr Speaker, I want to begin by thanking you and the Business Committee for facilitating, at the request of the First Minister and me, this opportunity to enable our Assembly to play its part in bringing a much needed sense of calm, reason and peace in the aftermath of the madness of last week.

Let me open the debate by emphasising the role that we, as political leaders, have to play in ensuring that our words and deeds are not misrepresented or, indeed, left open to misinterpretation. We, as the elected representatives of the people, must recognise

that we have a responsibility to be clear in our message of condemnation of the recent lawlessness and violence on the streets, attacks on and intimidation of elected representatives, and attacks on council staff and police officers. That is utterly unacceptable and must be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

I am, however, optimistic that our message today condemning the violence and supporting those who have been attacked and intimidated will be heard loud and clear beyond the halls of Parliament Buildings. I am encouraged that the joint motion from the First Minister and me is supported by the five main parties, and I urge all others to support it and condemn the recent unrest and disgraceful attacks on elected representatives, police officers and Belfast City Council staff.

The peace process that we have collectively constructed is admired throughout the world. We have had tensions and difficulties in that process, as we have had in the past week, but we must remain resolute and not allow the recent events to undermine the agreements that we have made over the past number of years. We have a collective responsibility to give leadership at all times, and particularly at times such as this. Leadership is being shown by the parties in supporting the motion, and that leadership must continue beyond today and into the communities that look to their elected representatives for direction.

The arson attack on Stewart Dickson's constituency office in Carrickfergus, the cowardly attack on the home of Alliance Party councillors Michael and Christine Bower and their 17-month-old baby in Bangor, the attempted arson attack on Executive Minister Stephen Farry's constituency office and the attack on the house of Alliance Party councillor Linda Cleland in Newtownards, along with other attacks on Alliance Party offices, are reprehensible, and I condemn them in the strongest possible terms. The violence and intimidation directed at the Alliance Party is totally unacceptable, and we must all stand

behind that message. The intimidation and threats against MP Naomi Long, Councillor Laura McNamee, Councillor Jim McVeigh and Gerry Kelly MLA this week are the work of those who refuse to accept democracy, and those elements that issued the threats should lift them immediately.

Let me also say that the attacks on the Church of Ireland in Glenavy and the home of DUP councillor Samuel Brush in Tyrone over the weekend are equally unacceptable and must be forthrightly condemned by all political representatives. In Derry, a lethal explosive device was uncovered by the police, and I want to express my thanks to our police service, because its timely intervention no doubt thwarted an attack on our community that would have caused injury and death. Anti-peace process extremists, using republicanism as a flag of convenience, continue to represent a threat to life, and their actions must also be forthrightly condemned. The violence on the streets over the past week has been orchestrated, and both the UVF and UDA have been involved. That raises many serious questions about the future intentions of those who once professed to support the peace process.

There can be no excuses for the street violence that has left 28 police officers injured, Belfast City Council staff injured, and drivers of cars and buses intimidated and threatened. There can be no ifs or buts: it must be condemned, plain and simple. I hope that all the contributions today will make that clear, so as not to leave any doubt for those who are listening to every word that political leaders say. As we have done before, we must unite, so as not to allow those who wish to drag us back to the past take advantage of less than clear condemnation of the recent unrest.

We must also challenge ourselves to be proactive in the pursuit of the principle of mutual respect and recognise that we live in a culturally diverse society. As United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said during her visit this week, democracy requires dialogue, compromise and constant commitment by everyone to protect the rights of everyone. We must ensure that we protect the rights of political representatives at this time to make decisions without any threat, implied or otherwise, hanging in the air.

The street violence over the past week has been witnessed by a global audience, as it has been reported across the world. In a time of economic recession and pressure on our traders, the violence has resulted only in

making it more difficult to attract investment, jobs and tourists and has badly damaged the prospects of many traders in the crucial Christmas period. As the world was watching, the damage to our reputation and prospects will be difficult to repair, but repair it we must. We must rise to the challenge that this has thrown down and work harder to cement community relations and tackle sectarianism and intolerance among our community.

Political parties must play a central part in healing divisions, not raising tensions. We must recognise that we live a society in which there are different allegiances. We must work for mutual respect for Britishness and Irishness, which should not be an obstacle to harmony in our community. We must also focus on our young people. It really is an indictment on our society that children as young as 12 have been charged in relation to the recent violence. We must give hope to those communities on all sides who feel marginalised and disadvantaged. No one section of our community has a monopoly on marginalisation, disadvantage or economic hardship. We must focus on delivering a better life for all of our people and helping those who are hardest hit by the economic situation, whether they define themselves as British or Irish.

Collectively, we must all strive for new ideas to develop new thinking on how best we build our future together. We need a vision for our society that does not involve a victory over each other. We need to build a better future, a future together in a united community, and let the message that we send out today be one that will offer hope to those communities and not one of political points scoring.

We must dampen the tensions that have been ignited over recent days and not seek, by word or deed, to raise tensions. We must rise above all of that, and we must offer real leadership; leadership that gives our communities confidence in the political process. We must never allow those who want to destroy the political process to succeed.

We are not going back, and that is the message that must be heard loud and clear from the Assembly today. I call on all of the Members to support the motion.

Mr Nesbitt: The Ulster Unionist Party unreservedly supports the motion and joins the deputy First Minister in condemning all attacks, as he detailed. During the week, we actively sought out opportunities to call for an end to the illegality and, further, to argue that what was

needed was a strategy rather than a knee-jerk reaction; for brains rather than brawn.

Anyone who attacks a police officer, an elected politician or an individual, or who engages in illegal activity on our streets, fails to understand the values that encapsulate the Union flag. In doing what they did, the rioters lost the very argument that they were trying to promote. The flag, to me, stands for a society that is progressive and pluralist, a society in which Mo — short for Mohamed — Farah, born in Somalia, wraps himself in that Union flag to celebrate his contribution to a fantastic Olympic Games for the United Kingdom. That is a glimpse of what the flag means to me. It should not be abused, and it was abused this week by those who used it as an excuse for criminality. The people who took part in the riots did so on what they and I would describe as the Queen's highway. That is an appropriate place for peaceful protest but nothing more — nothing more. Anything more is an abuse of the Queen's highway, with all of the implications that flow from that.

As I said, I condemn the attacks on elected representatives of this House, on their constituency offices and on other elected representatives, their staff, their homes and their property, including the attack on the Ards councillor, who is a professional neighbour of mine in South Street in Newtownards. The Ulster Unionist Party has lost many elected representatives to terrorist murder, including Senators in the old Stormont, Members of Parliament, members of earlier iterations that paved the way for this Assembly and councillors and, of course, we lost our old party headquarters in Glengall Street. This party has paid too high a price, especially in human terms, to condone or in any way incite violence.

10.45 am

So let me repeat: we condemn utterly what happened last week. That is the easy part; the challenge for every party in the House is how to acknowledge what last week was all about. On one level, there was a democratic vote at Belfast City Council to stop flying the flag except on a very few days of the year. It was a democratic vote, and we accept that as democrats. On another level, it has been received as part of a process described by some as a party political victory, which, of course, suggests winners and losers. I sense very clearly that some of those who took to the streets last week saw themselves as the losers, not for the first time; indeed, far from the first time. These are uncomfortable truths. People might be a little more comfortable if, for

example, Newry council had not endorsed the controversial naming of a play park.

The peace process promised many things, but chief among them were economic and political benefits. Economically, I remember reporting many times as a journalist the promise of a peace dividend. Do the people feel that they got a peace dividend? No. What they got was a double-dip recession, just like everyone else. They were promised a political settlement that put the constitutional question to bed, but do they feel that that is what has happened? No. Rightly or wrongly, they perceive that their Britishness is under constant and continuous attack. One way that unionist anger was expressed last week was by the burning of the flag of the Republic of Ireland outside Belfast City Hall. I condemn that act. This is not about oppressing others; it is about reassuring those who feel oppressed.

The issue for the Assembly is simple: we must stop this piecemeal attitude to the fundamental problems that add up to the unresolved legacy of the Troubles. The Ulster Unionist Party says that this is the time and, indeed, the opportunity to tackle the poison that remains after 40 years of death and destruction. Let us recognise that sectarianism remains largely unaddressed and lingers as the toxic waste of the conflict. Let us commit to the big legacy issues of dealing with the past and building a truly shared future.

This party was first through the door when the former Secretary of State, Owen Paterson, called for bilateral talks on dealing with the past. We went on to publish our own position paper on the issue. It was not a policy paper or a road map, because we recognise that no one party can or should take sole ownership of that process. The Ulster Unionist Party has also engaged directly with Sinn Féin's initiative on reconciliation and, although we cannot support its current proposals, we have committed to the need for a process of reconciliation. Many years ago, we also brought forward our own ideas on a shared future.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: No, I will not give way.

It is time for the House to be honest with itself and the people of Northern Ireland — honest and bold. We need to acknowledge that some issues will take many years to sort out. So let us begin. Let us say, for example, that we will set a new basic standard of numeracy and literacy for schoolchildren and reach it within five years. Let us commit to a single education system, one that is no threat to Catholics and

Roman Catholicism. We will do it in 10, 15 or 20 years. Leave the detail for later, but let us commit to a principle because it is the right thing to do. In short, let us commit, like a good builder does after handing over the keys to a new house, to return to address the snag list of devolved government, but let us also accept that that snag list includes fundamental flaws that must be addressed urgently.

Dr McDonnell: It is very much in sorrow that I rise to support the motion. We are unanimous in our condemnation of the horrible violence that has been directed primarily against our democratic institutions and our elected representatives. In turn, it flowed from there against police and council staff. For me, polite condemnation is not just enough: we, in the Assembly, are responsible for removing the reasons for such violence. When I stood with Stewart Dickson at the front of the burned-out shell of his office in Carrickfergus, I could not, in all honesty, say that we have been very effective in performing that task. We must do more — a lot more — than just condemn, and we must tell the truth, however difficult that might be.

The founding document of this Assembly states that we are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of our relationships in Northern Ireland. The fact is that the campaign of intimidation started quite a bit of time before the violence erupted, and that campaign must be condemned. Mutual respect requires that there should be no campaigns to coerce or erode anyone's feelings of Britishness or Irishness. Our founding document recognises the birthright of all our people to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British or both. It is not for anyone or any party here to describe anyone else's identity or tell them that this or that is the dominant flag or symbol that they must accept, because that is just not true. There is no flag of the country that is accepted as such by all our people. We are all signed up to an agreement that, in effect, states that we cannot force any section of our people to accept a flag of our choice. That is the basis and the only basis on which we can sort this problem out. There can be no cherry-picking. We cannot pick the bit of the Good Friday Agreement that says that Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom and overlook the bit that stipulates the mutual respect for Britishness and Irishness.

[Interruption.] Mr Speaker, I find it difficult with the amount of nonsense. Would it be possible —

Mr Speaker: Order. The motion is very specific. I am allowing party leaders,

especially, some latitude. I remind all Members that the motion is absolutely clear.

Dr McDonnell: We need to condemn the mindset that says that identities and loyalties can be forced on people. We need to condemn the antidemocratic mindset that says that Belfast City Council somehow or other had no right to take the decision that it did. In the past, systematic erosion of Irish identity was the explicit policy of the old unionist regime. Today, rights to British or Irish identity are equal in all respects. They have nothing to do with our current constitutional arrangement; they are very separate. My right to my Irish identity is guaranteed by the British Government, just as the right to a British identity —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am trying, as far as possible, to give Members some latitude in and around this, but I ask Members to come back, as far as possible, to the motion. The motion is quite specific. I say to Dr McDonnell in all honesty that I think it is important that whatever is said is very much linked to the motion.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am simply trying to set in all honesty the context for the violence as I see it and trying to answer some of the questions. Mr Speaker, what I am trying to say is that it is not enough to condemn, as I said at the beginning; we should challenge the mindset that portrays each and every move towards equality and fairness —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: I have only a limited amount of time.

We must certainly condemn those who manipulate the fears and emotions that lead to this violence, however unreasonable, around the question of identity. That is where we find the roots of last week's violence. For many years, I have worked to draw attention to what I perceived to be government neglect in loyalist areas, and that has been wheeled out to us in the past week as a reason. I can accept that there is a great sense of alienation. There is neglect in areas such as educational achievement and quality of life. I want to put it on record that, in my opinion, this neglect will not be solved by bunging a few million to one paramilitary group or another. In fact, bunging money to paramilitary groups only compounds the problems, because the paramilitary groups are the biggest part of the problem.

Money must be directed to early years education, so that children achieve their full

potential. Where there is substantiated marginalisation and deprivation, let us recognise it, let us confront it and let us remedy it as soon as possible. Let us remedy it in a sustainable way that ensures that it is alleviated permanently, and let us set out to ensure that no child is left behind now or in the future. However, let me be very clear: there is a chasm of difference between proper interventions to address disadvantage educationally and economically and those who exploit concerns and use violence and threats for their own advantage. We will help, where there are grounds for help, but we will not concede ground to any act of violence or any group involved in acts of violence.

We are all agreed here today that what we saw last week is not the future that we envisaged, but my worry is that it will happen again if we do not move to solve the fundamental problems. Our job is to make sure that it does not go on indefinitely by bringing forward clear programmes that generate mutual respect. I suggest that we start that in the Chamber and that we show an example to people outside. — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: The work for real reconciliation and a shared future has to start here without delay. If it does not, our condemnations will be hollow, and we may have to visit this space on future occasions.

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

Dr McDonnell: I want to make a final point. Sorry, Mr Speaker, I will leave it at that.

Mr Ford: The past week has been a dreadful week for Northern Ireland, so let me start by expressing my sympathy and that of my colleagues to those who have suffered. Three children had their home damaged. Grace Bower is well known — far too well known — for a 17-month-old child, and the other two live in the flat above the shop next door to what was Stewart Dickson's office. Their home was smoke damaged last Monday, and they probably will not be back in it before Christmas. People have had homes, cars and businesses destroyed or damaged by street violence or business activity disrupted in these difficult economic times, in what should have been one of the main shopping weeks of the year. Belfast City Council staff have been assaulted. I express my sympathy to Gerry Kelly MLA and to Councillor Jim McVeigh, who have received death threats, and to Councillor Sammy Brush,

whose home was attacked early yesterday. All those incidents are an affront to democracy.

I especially want to recognise the role of the police over the past few days. They have faced a challenging situation on a scale that was not envisaged only a week ago. Many officers have been injured in different places. Despite that, they have played a sterling role in responding to a wide range of incidents and threats, and they deserve our thanks.

The Alliance Party has borne the brunt of the attacks and intimidation over the past few days. Colleagues have had homes and offices attacked, and others have been threatened. So let me put on the record, without repeating the details, the names of Councillor Christine Bower, Councillor Michael Bower, Councillor Linda Cleland, Stewart Dickson MLA, Stephen Farry MLA, Councillor Laura McNamee and, of course, our MP and former colleague in this House, Naomi Long, who continues to live under a threat of death but, unsurprisingly, remains resolute, defiant and absolutely true to the values that she has brought to public life.

We have had people contacting us from literally around the world. They have told us that what they saw reminded them of the worst experiences of fascism, because the attacks and threats were not attacks on Alliance alone: they were direct attacks on democracy and on the rule of law. The people who called expressed support and solidarity for us in the attacks we have endured and for the stance we have taken.

It has been a week of contrasts: contrast between the exercise of democracy inside Belfast City Hall and the exercise of intimidation and violence outside; contrast between the actions of those who claim to be protecting the Union flag and the values of freedom and democracy that that flag stands for; contrast between the cowardice of thugs covering their faces with masks and the dignity and fortitude of elected representatives under attack; and contrast between the response when the same decision on designated days was taken by other unionist-dominated councils at other times and the effect that whipping up tensions had on this occasion.

11.00 am

There are two issues that the Assembly and our community have to face up to: where we stand on the principle of democracy; and what we will do to accommodate differing identities and allegiances in a genuinely shared future.

On the principle of democracy, I find it striking that the motion that we tabled last Thursday differed from today's in one respect only: our description of last week's decision by Belfast City Council as legitimate and democratic. It is beyond me why all parties refused to sign up to those words because any decision taken by a democratically elected body, in accordance with the law and standing orders, is democratic. Any democratic decision is, as a result, legitimate. That is the very essence of democracy.

If we refuse to accept that democratic decisions are legitimate, why bother with democracy? How do we tell the people who rioted and threatened last week that they were wrong to do so? How do we tell dissident republicans that democracy is the only route to influence our future? If democratic decisions are not legitimate, how do we stand over the principle of consent that only the people of Northern Ireland can determine their future? If you want Northern Ireland's present and future to be ruled by democracy, you have to accept that every democratic decision, including those that you perceive to affect your sense of identity, is legitimate.

Let me look now at the challenge of accommodating differing identities in a shared future. The achievement of devolution was the symbol that unionists, nationalists and those who reject both labels could live together and work together to address the issues facing our community. Along the way, there have been real moments of important change, although they were often symbolic rather than substantial. Yet, despite that, the Executive have so far failed to make the real and far-reaching progress needed towards a shared society in which sectarianism, fear and threat belong only in the past. Every survey shows strong majority support for shared education, workplaces, leisure and housing.

We have worked successfully to find a political settlement that allows Northern Ireland to be governed from this place, but we have failed to use it to prioritise the building of a genuinely shared society. The longer we fail to do so, the more our talk of building the economy becomes unrealistic and delusional. Last week's events have shown that it can be put off no longer. An immediate priority must be to find a means to accommodate different identities through a shared approach to symbols, even if that is perceived by some to be meddling with identity.

The agreement confirmed Northern Ireland's position in the UK, for as long as the majority wish, and recognised that our diverse society is

a place where people of British, Irish and both identities live together, as Dr McDonnell said.

We must find a better way of regulating the display of flags and symbols as part of cultural celebrations at a community level and find an effective mechanism for enforcing breaches of protocols and the misuse of flags. The challenge has to be to rise above the win-lose politics of them versus us to find a common, shared approach. In my view, the flag decision at Belfast City Council, like similar decisions elsewhere, is respectful of national sovereignty and of the variety of allegiances that make up our community. What was potentially most significant last Monday was seeing nationalist parties pragmatically, but positively, responding to that position. It showed that accommodation is possible if people are prepared to move beyond zero-sum approaches.

Last week was horrific and frightening. The sense that some in the House had more than a little understanding of those targeting my friends was palpable. Today, we have to turn away from that. We have to turn the moment of danger into a moment of opportunity to supply the leadership and commitment that will ensure that we build a genuinely shared future.

Mr Allister: It was a seminal moment when the Union flag was torn down from the prime civic building in our capital city. That was not an isolated assault on our Britishness, but a new high point in insult and republican action in an orchestrated process that began in the Belfast Agreement. It has touched a nerve with many people who are frustrated by a treadmill of concessions, which is just as the Belfast Agreement intended. It, of course, was and is designed to trundle us out of the United Kingdom and to ease us and fuse us into an all Ireland, and every step of the way requires dilution of our Britishness.

Culture is Sinn Féin's new theatre of war.

Mr Speaker: Order. As the Member will know, I give Members quite a bit of latitude in the House. However, once again, I ask him and the entire House to recognise the motion that is before us this morning. I ask the Member to speak to the motion as far as possible.

Mr Allister: I understand, Mr Speaker. I also understand, as I am sure that you do, that the debate is important not only inside the House but outside it. Frustrations and anxieties that are boiling over on our streets need to be addressed and spoken to in the House. I am mindful of the direction, but I am also mindful of

that. In that context, there are some points that I think one needs to make.

I said that culture is Sinn Féin's new theatre of war. Although some people in the republican movement are resting the Armalite, they have moved seamlessly to take up the weapons of cultural warfare. Hence, parades and flags must go. Those who orchestrated and justified terror must rule over us. Perpetrators of terror must be equated with victims. We must have play parks named after their evil heroes. Sinn Féin Ministers must be allowed to discriminate in appointments with impunity. The unionist community is expected to sit back and consent benignly to the trampling underfoot of its culture and identity by forces that are insatiable and still live by the mantra of "Brits out". That is what the taking-down of the flag crystallises in its own particular way.

I want to address directly those loyalists outside the House who have fallen into the trap of spoiling legitimate protest by attendant violence. I understand completely the sentiment that I hear being expressed that, when they look at the Stormont structures, people conclude that violence pays. However, I say to them that their cause — the cause of the British flag — is far more noble and honourable than that, unlike the cause of rebellion that brought terrorism to our streets. Do not sully that cause by treading the violent path for which republicans set the way. The violence of recent days has only added to the glee of those who removed the flag. I say to young men that if they cannot go to a protest without a stone in their pocket, they should stay at home. If they have any pride in their flag, they do not need to cover their face. They should be proud to be seen to support the flag.

Let me make it very clear: I abhor and condemn all the violence of the hangers-on and the threats, arson and intimidation. There is no justification for any of it, and it should stop. It should never have started.

The House has a responsibility. It glibly talks about shared space but gives no thought to those to whom it gives no space and who see their cultural space being relentlessly suppressed.

I hear people talk about an attack on democracy, but look at the perversion of democracy that is practised here. Think of the two fundamental cornerstones of democracy; the right to change your Government; and the right to have an opposition. We continue to fail to address those issues by clinging to the absurdity and anti-democratic structure of

mandatory coalition. Do not be surprised if there is a growing disconnect with those who are being denied those basic tenets of democracy. There is no point in lecturing people about not voting and then constructing a system that denies them the right to vote a party out of Government and the right to even have an opposition. Those issues need to be addressed.

It is not just the people looking for trouble on our streets who need to pull back but those who, day and daily, sustain the very structures —

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

Mr Allister: — that deny the opportunity of real democracy in action. Stormont needs to tackle the beam in its own eye.

Mr Agnew: First, I would like to put on record the Green Party's condemnation of the violence that has occurred over the past week. In particular, the Green Party would like to stand in solidarity with any political representative who had their home or office attacked or who had threats made against them. We would also like to condemn the violence against the PSNI, which has sought only to protect our democracy.

It is always important that we as political representatives are mindful of the language we use in political debate, recognising that our words can have an impact throughout our society. However, on Wednesday evening, when I got the word that the home of Councillors Michael and Christine Bower and their young daughter was attacked, I became acutely aware of the vulnerability of my family. For the first time in my political career, I felt that I had to watch what I said for fear that my family could face a similar attack. For some in the House, I know that that has been a reality of their political career over the past number of decades. However, when I entered politics, I hoped and believed that Northern Ireland politics had moved on, and I see these attacks as a major step backwards. Attacks and threats against any elected representative are unacceptable and undermine our democracy.

The issue of identity has been at the heart of Northern Ireland politics. We have rightly sought to move away from identity as a source of division to a position where we have mutual respect. Diversity can and should be celebrated, not feared. Speaking personally, there are many aspects to my identity. In

Northern Ireland, I have the right to dual nationality, so I can be, and am, both British and Irish. However, I am like many people who probably feel more comfortable with the term "Northern Irish", but I am also European. I am a father, a son, a brother, and an uncle. I am also a vegetarian. So, there are many things that make up who I am and my identity.

I am proud of who I am, and that includes the part of me that is proud to be British. I am proud of the National Health Service, which is free at the point of use. I am proud of our welfare state, which ensures that we all have a safety net should we find ourselves unemployed, as so many have during this economic downturn. I am proud of our democracy and the freedom of speech that underpins it. I am proud of the freedom of the press to hold us, as elected representatives, to account. Whether the Union flag flies at City Hall, Stormont or anywhere else for that matter, I will be no less British, no less Irish and no less European. Indeed, I will be no less than what I am today.

The real attack on my identity has been the attacks by those who undermine that freedom of speech by making me fear that what I say could result in attack on my family.

11.15 am

The attacks on the social welfare system and the institution of the NHS by politicians at Westminster and in the Assembly have led me to take to the streets —

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, there is no doubt about it; the Member has gone totally off the motion. I am trying to be sympathetic to Members in slightly widening the debate, but I ask the Member to come back, as far as possible, to the motion.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Speaker for his guidance, and I will try to do that.

I have taken to the streets and protested with trade unions and other workers who have sought to defend the institutions that they see as integral to their identity and well-being. However, we did so peacefully, and I call on anyone who wishes to protest any decision of our democracy to do so peacefully. We must be mindful that riots tend not to happen when we have high employment, high educational achievement and financial security. So, whether it has been the riots in London or the riots in Belfast, we must remember as

politicians that addressing those issues is our core duty.

If we are to show leadership in the Assembly, those are the issues that we should be tackling. You cannot eat a flag, a flag will not heat your home and a flag cannot give you self-esteem. If we are to improve the lives of those in Protestant, unionist and loyalist estates, such as Ballybeen, where I grew up, we need to get back to addressing those important issues of economic, social and environmental importance.

Within the Green Party there are members who consider themselves British, members who consider themselves Irish and members who consider themselves Northern Irish. Indeed, we have members from England, Scotland, Holland and Germany, and others from across the world. That diversity does not divide our party and should not divide our society.

Mr McNarry: I am with the peaceful and silent protesters sickened by the irresponsible removal of the Union flag from Belfast City Hall. To those who turned their protest into wanton violence, I say to them categorically, "You are wrong. Despite your best efforts, the moral high ground remains with those participating in lawful, peaceful protest." Scenes of uncontrollable anger brought disgrace and turned legitimate revulsion into unacceptable mob violence, doing no service whatsoever to the British culture that unionists under pressure strive to maintain and uphold in this part of the United Kingdom.

Among the many e-mails I received, one began, "I am a loyalist, a Protestant, an Orangeman, and a unionist", and went on to challenge my credentials on the flags issue. I replied, "I am a loyalist, a Protestant, an Orangeman and a unionist", and asserted my credentials. The point being that the e-mailer returned with an acceptable apology, going on to explain his deeply felt hurt and anger at believing that the erosion of his Britishness was visible to him in seeing the removal of the Union flag.

As I and thousands of others do, he feels betrayed and helpless that what happened in Belfast is irreversible. Well, we shall see. However, what happened will leave a deep and lasting scar. The wound is open and festering within the political landscape and, as a consequence, the Alliance Party will pay dearly at the ballot box. That said, I say to the joint proposers of the motion that UKIP will vote for it. It encapsulates our condemnation of violence. The rest of it comprises what any right-thinking person would endorse.

Unfortunately, despite its length, the motion falls short of expressing the full rigour of unionist anger aimed at those who combined to take down the Union flag. What is wrong with the motion —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: — is the glaring omission of condemnation —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: — and the pillorying of the joint action of Irish republicans.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist.

Mr McNarry: In case the Member did not hear that, let me repeat it: what is wrong with the motion is the glaring omission of condemnation and the pillorying of the joint action of Irish republicans and nationalists in cahoots with Alliance. Sinn Féin is the self-proclaimed proponent of a sham reconciliation policy. I accept its duplicity. As for the SDLP, I can do no other but accept its pomposity. However, the Alliance Party, with its bombasity, as so-called middle-of-the-road neutrals, I do not accept your excuses offered today for the travesty that you have — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: — promoted.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have allowed the Member quite a bit of latitude to set the scene. I ask the Member to please get back to the motion that is before the House. The Member will know that I allowed him some latitude in setting the scene and coming back to the motion.

Mr McNarry: Mr Speaker, let me be clear: before I was interrupted, I was moving on to the point that I think that everybody would like to hear.

Let me be clear that attacking homes, making threats and vandalising offices is not acceptable. No one in this place is applauding such vile, nasty, cowardly acts, but the motion refers to the flags issue; it is in there. No one should attempt to treat thousands of unionists as fools or divert attention away from any part they played in what was and is a grubby deal that was premeditated and focused and deliberately designed to apply total disrespect

to those who give allegiance to the flying of the Union flag.

Undoubtedly, this issue will bring home repercussions, affecting future relationships in this place. That is regrettable, because my sense is that the atmosphere here had improved. The attitude to our collective duties was developing; people were being caring and professional. Even in the Committees, Members who previously could not look at each other, never mind talk to each other, were engaging in shared concerns. Sometimes, a mild banter developed in the Committees. These issues impact on our constituents; they are the issues of jobs, investments and spending, and they must remain uppermost in our minds in the House. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: Now, however, we are plunged into crisis management, all because, in Belfast City Hall, the anti-British mask slipped off, the pretence was exposed and a reality check pushed the clock backwards. It is a serious setback for us. Much has been made of the decision taken in that place. If decisions taken elsewhere are deemed democratically binding, the same rules should apply to decisions taken in this place. I hope that decisions will be taken in this place that give confidence to the unionist people here in Northern Ireland.

Innocents suffered last week, as they always do. None more so than the business community. Staff and customers were caught up. I am sure that the House will join together in a sincere expression of regret over what transpired last week and the damage done.

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

Mr McNarry: I am sure that we can conclude the debate by offering our best wishes that the tills that are ringing are ringing in a good Christmas for all.

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): When the deputy First Minister and I tabled the motion, we confined it to language that was structured to gain a united response. It was very clearly worded to ensure that we did not have, at this moment, a debate on the flags issue, but that debate will have to come. It will have to come as a democratic, legitimate debate on the issue, and I believe that that will start tomorrow in the Assembly Commission. I say to the Member who has just resumed his seat that I share the frustration and anger of many people about the

removal of the flag, but that frustration and anger should not flow out into violence; it must be channelled into democratic processes. We regard it as essential that, on this day, considering the backcloth against which we are speaking, the Assembly speaks with one voice.

Politics is not about agreeing on everything, but it is about resolving our differences through exclusively peaceful and democratic means. Although we may disagree on many political issues, we must not disagree on the right of people to express their own views in a democratic manner. The United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said on Friday:

"There will always be disagreements in democratic society but violence is never an acceptable response."

Politics is about the power of persuasion. People are entitled to make their views known. Indeed, doing so is an integral part of the democratic process itself. Democracy is not conducted in secret. People are entitled to have opinions and to express them. I will defend their right to influence decisions and their right to peacefully protest if they do not agree with those decisions. The right to protest is as fundamental to the democratic process as the right to vote. But let us be clear: there is no right to attack police officers or council staff. There is no right to destroy property. There is no right to threaten or to intimidate. There is no right to endanger life, harm, injure or kill. There is no right to attack elected representatives because you do not agree with their views.

I know what it is like to get a knock on the door and to be told by the police that someone is trying to kill me. I have received that visit not once but many times, and many people in the House will have received the same kind of visit. Having received that kind of visit, I know, perhaps more than many, the impact that it has on a family and personal life. Those of us who have been through the fire know, more than any, what it is like, and, without vagueness, equivocation or reserve, we stand side by side with those who are under threat today.

Mr Dickson: Will the First Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I think that it is inappropriate to do so, Mr Speaker —

Some Members: Why?

Mr P Robinson: I think the whole tenor of this debate —

Mr A Maginness: This man has suffered.

Mr P Robinson: Well, I have to say that, having suffered, I recognise and have already indicated my disapproval and condemnation of all of those who have attacked or threatened — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: — or threatened. It is essential that that is recognised, whether it be members of the Alliance Party or my colleague Sammy Brush, who, once again, has been attacked in his home.

Mrs Foster: Yes, do you remember Sammy Brush? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: What about him? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: Raymond McCreesh park.

Mr Speaker: Order.

A Member: Hypocrites.

Mrs Foster: Hypocrites.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: The whole damn lot of you.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: I include in that, Mr Speaker, the Alliance members who have been singled out for threat or attack and my party colleague and all others in the House and elsewhere who have been subjected to attack in their home or office.

Mr Lyttle: Will the First Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I also include the PSNI officers who are on the front line and those others who have been injured — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Lyttle: Will the First Minister give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not persist in expecting interventions. It is up to the Member who has the Floor to decide whether to take an intervention. We really should move

on, and Members should not persist. First Minister — *[Interruption.]* Order.

11.30 am

Mr P Robinson: Attacks on property or the intimidation of elected representatives may not be new, but they must be condemned each and every time they occur. In defending democratically elected politicians, we defend democracy itself. Let us be clear: those who threaten politicians or attack their homes have crossed the line from protest into terrorism. There are some who think that, to stop those who violently disagree with democratic decisions, those who politically disagree with the decisions should not express their opposition. There are even those who claim that anyone who holds and democratically expresses such views is heightening tension or, worse still, they are accused of inciting those who act outside the law.

Let us be sure that, in defending democracy, we do not shut down the means for those who are opposed to democratically taken decisions to express disapproval and seek change peacefully, legitimately and democratically. At the same time, it places a heavy burden on all who wish to protest to ensure that their protests are entirely peaceful.

I hope that all in the Assembly will be able to unite to condemn the threats and violence against elected representatives, the police and others, and the wanton destruction of property. I hope that they will be able to unite to express sympathy to all those who have been targeted. I hope that they will be able to unite to confirm our absolute commitment to the rule of law and to moving forward by exclusively peaceful and democratic means. I hope that they will be able to unite to renew our adherence to having a free and open democracy in which everyone can peacefully and legitimately express their views for or against any issue, even if others do not share that view.

I am happy to give way to the Member who has been impacted by the recent attack on his office, but let us ensure that this does not end up being a controversial debate. It needs to be a debate in which a clear condemnation of violence is expressed by elected representatives, and the Assembly should unite on that.

Mr Dickson: I much appreciate that. My intervention is a simple question to the First Minister: was calling for a suspension rather

than a cessation of the protests and violence a wise or unwise call?

Mr P Robinson: I think that it is very wise. Nobody but a tyrant would suggest that there should be an end to peaceful protest in public. Who on earth would suggest that it is appropriate that people cannot peacefully and publicly protest about decisions that they do not agree with? However, I have said and confirm again today that, in the present atmosphere in which people are trying to use peaceful protest to cause violence, it would be appropriate for the organisers to suspend the protests. However, that should never take away from the right of people to have peaceful, democratic protest. The Member for North Down mentioned his participation in peaceful public protest. Would anybody suggest that he should be denied the right to make such a protest? Of course he should not. That is why I said that the protest should be suspended in light of the violence that is taking place and to make sure that the protests are not used by those who have an ulterior motive. I hope that the Member understands my position on that.

Again, let the Assembly speak as one on those fundamentals to ensure that the wider public debate is conducted in a proper, lawful and peaceful manner and that there is recognition among all in our community that it is completely legitimate for people to oppose the decision of Belfast City Council, providing that they do so in a peaceful and democratic manner.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly unequivocally condemns the rioting and the campaign of intimidation, harassment and violent attacks on elected representatives following the decision of Belfast City Council in relation to the flying of the Union flag; expresses its sympathy to all those who have been attacked, injured or threatened with attack in recent days, including police officers, elected representatives and their staff; reaffirms the absolute and unconditional commitment of all its Members to respecting and upholding the rule of law and the pursuit of their political objectives by purely legal and political means; and insists that any further protests be peaceful, orderly and organised in accordance with the law.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make the following statement on the fifteenth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting held in health and food safety sectoral format, which was held in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Wednesday 21 November 2012. Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive at the meeting. The Irish Government were represented by Dr James Reilly TD, Minister for Health, and Frances Fitzgerald TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. I chaired the meeting. The statement has been agreed with Minister O'Neill, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

Ministers noted that an initial scoping meeting for the North/South alcohol forum took place in October. Key players in alcohol policy from both jurisdictions met to share information and practice in dealing with alcohol misuse. The continuing development of strategies in both jurisdictions on alcohol misuse and collaboration on minimum unit pricing for alcohol was also noted.

We received an update on Northern Ireland's 10-year tobacco control strategy, including the establishment of a multiagency group to take it forward. Minister Reilly and I support the publishing of the legislative proposal for the tobacco directive by the European Commission at the earliest opportunity.

Ministers noted the findings from the public consultation process in Ireland on calorie posting in restaurants, which indicate a high level of support among the general public and in the food industry for calorie-menu labelling. The progress in Northern Ireland of Caloriewise and the front-of-pack consultation, which will empower consumers to make healthier food choices, was also noted.

We noted and welcomed the ongoing co-operation and progress on the range of actions in the all-Ireland action plan on suicide prevention, in particular the sharing of education and training programmes and the publication of the WorkOut online application, which is designed to improve the mental fitness of young men.

Ministers noted that the establishment of a radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital is

further progressing and that officials are working together to ensure the effective delivery of the project.

We welcomed the rapid progression by the All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care in its work on education, research and the provision of care. We also welcomed the continuing success in multinational research through the US-Ireland R&D Partnership, including the development of common documentation and working procedures to deal with funding proposals involving health researchers from both jurisdictions and the US, which were implemented and launched in August 2012, and the publication of major findings, which attracted significant international interest, on the identification of the genes that may cause some patients with diabetes to develop serious kidney disease.

Ministers noted that the child protection work programme that had been agreed at the NSMC health and food safety meeting in July 2012 is being taken forward, and we welcomed news that an all-island child protection conference will be held in the first half of 2013. Conference delegates will share practice knowledge, research and learning among policymakers, practitioners and managers on safeguarding and child protection practices.

Ministers noted the health presidency programme to be progressed during Ireland's presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Officials from the Irish Department of Health are exploring areas of common interest with officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in advance of the eHealth high-level conference, which Ireland will host in May 2013. The Minister for Health indicated that he wishes to ensure continued North/South engagement during the presidency, and it is hoped that, where appropriate, I and my officials will attend key events.

Ministers received a presentation on the work of Safefood from its CEO, Martin Higgins. The report highlighted the range of consumer and scientific activities undertaken by the body and its work on developing an indicator for measuring food poverty. The report covered Safefood's involvement with the Department of the Environment and the Environmental Protection Agency in a joint campaign focusing on improving customers' understanding of "best before" and "use by" dates. We approved the appointment of five new members to Safefood's scientific advisory

committee, as well as the appointments of Dr Mary Upton and Mr Robert Huey as chair and vice-chair respectively. We also welcomed a report by the scientific advisory committee on emerging food safety issues and noted the proposal in the report of a new model of addressing emerging issues on an all-island basis.

Finally, the reappointment of Martin Higgins as Safefood's CEO until May 2015 was approved by Ministers.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and genuinely welcome the fact that an all-island child protection conference will take place in the early part of next year. That issue has been raised in the House on a number of occasions, and I am keen to get more detail about that closer to the time from the Minister.

The Minister mentioned Safefood in his statement. Has its business plan for 2012-13 been signed off yet and is Safefood's remit now complete? In parallel to what is in the statement, did you have the opportunity during or after the meeting to have any discussion with Minister Reilly on the future of children's paediatric cardiac services? If you did, it is important that you give us an update on that.

Mr Poots: I have approved the 2012 business plan, but I understand that we still await clearance from Minister Reilly before it can be submitted for clearance by the Finance Minister here in Northern Ireland. Once the Ministers have approved the plan, it will be formally approved at the next available NSMC meeting.

As regards meetings on the sideline, we had a very useful meeting with Dr Reilly relating to paediatric care. We are very much focused on trying to find a network solution between our service and the service available in Dublin. We are very keen to ensure that some level of service is retained in Northern Ireland. All of this will rely on the medical people giving us very clear advice that this is the safest way possible to ensure that we can provide that care. We will take advice from the clinicians on the issue.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister indicate whether there was any discussion on the importing of illegal cigarettes and tobacco products and whether anything can be done on a joint basis to ensure that that is stopped or at least curtailed?

Mr Poots: Illegal tobacco products are of significant concern to us. We are looking at how we can make a difference on the issue. We have the 10-year tobacco strategy for Northern Ireland, which we launched in February 2012. We are also looking at banning smoking in cars.

We have the Tobacco Retailer Sanctions Bill. We have introduced tobacco controls in respect of the numbers of outlets that are able to sell tobacco, including vending machines. The issue of illicit tobacco is primarily a matter for HMRC. It is a concern for my Department that the availability of contraband tobacco provides an accessible source of tobacco for young people. The proposed Bill requires that all retailers of tobacco products are registered. A fine can be applied for failing to register. It is unlikely that those selling illegal tobacco products will choose to register with their local district council. Therefore, a by-product of the new legislation may be that it will lead to an increase in the number of illicit tobacco retailers receiving fines and/or its acting as a deterrent to illegal trading.

We should recognise that this is a highly prevalent activity in our community. It is an area in which paramilitary organisations very often benefit as regards profiteering. The tobacco sold is also of a lower standard. So, although there are no good cigarettes, illicit cigarettes are potentially even more dangerous than the ones that are sold in shops.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his statement. Following last week's ban on irresponsible drinks promotions, can the Minister detail what measure he expects to be brought forward to reduce the availability of cheap alcohol, therefore addressing the major health demands on both sides of the border?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. That debate has now moved across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, which is to be welcomed. For some time, the Westminster Government resisted the calls for minimum pricing of alcohol. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has indicated on a number of occasions that this is something that they are now looking at proactively.

A minimum price for alcohol across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, throughout the British Isles, would make a significant difference to the availability of drink to younger people. It would make a significant difference to the abuse of alcohol that takes place. It will make a very marginal difference to

people who take a drink regularly but who drink in moderation. It will have little impact on them.

Those arguments all need to be put out there into the public domain so that people can fully understand them. However, this would greatly assist us in our battle for better public health and, indeed, in our battle for a better society.

11.45 am

Mr McDevitt: Can I join the Minister in welcoming the news that the all-island child protection conference will be held in the first half of next year? In the light of the progress that we have made locally with the establishment of the institutional abuse inquiry, does the Minister agree that it is now time to start a conversation through the North/South Ministerial Council on how we might co-ordinate an all-island approach to the investigation of allegations of past clerical abuse?

Mr Poots: I have absolutely no problem dealing with the Republic of Ireland on what is in the best interests of both communities; I am not really interested in developing the political side of it at all.

Where the potential for dealing with abuse is concerned, we must maximise the opportunities to ensure our children's safety in the first instance. If we have information that will assist the Republic of Ireland or if the Republic of Ireland has information that will assist our authorities in bringing people to justice for their abuse, it is incumbent on us to share it. My officials and ROI officials held a meeting on a series of workstreams related to child protection. I am certainly happy to look at this, particularly when we see the crisis that has arisen in the BBC and the crisis that arose previously in the Catholic Church. There are many other organisations and groups where this type of activity took place. So, whilst there has been a big focus on quite large organisations where things should have been done better, let us be honest with ourselves and with everybody else and say that child abuse did not stop there. There is a lot more out there for us to detect, and it is important that we do that. It is also important that our social workers are equipped and have the support to ensure that child abuse is much more difficult for people to get away with now than was the case in the past. It is one of the most reprehensible acts that anyone can become involved in, so, if we can do more to bring people to justice for it, I will be a willing participant in that.

Mr McCarthy: I very much welcome the Minister's statement this morning. Food poverty was raised at the meeting. Like the rest of us, the Minister will be aware of the huge food wastage throughout the island and, indeed, the islands. Has there been any talk or initiative or strategy in the North/South Ministerial Council about tackling that enormous waste? It could contribute to overcoming food poverty.

Mr Poots: I am sure that the Member is aware of a series of organisations that ensure that food that is coming close to its sell-by date is used and used well, as opposed to being destroyed. A lot of our large supermarkets participate in that, along with others in the retail sector. So, those food centres do a good job in getting low-cost or no-cost food out to people who need it. I know that, even in my constituency, many people are considerably more vulnerable now than they were previously. Many people hang about supermarkets waiting for an item to come on at the lowest possible cost that they can afford. Many people are in a very difficult position in that respect. We also want to educate people better about use-by and sell-by dates so that families can be encouraged to make good use of the food that they have.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. What scope is there to realise further efficiency savings from bodies such as Safefood?

Mr Poots: In 2012, James Reilly and I asked officials to review the range of work of Safefood and the other organisations that deal with food safety, diet and nutrition to avoid possible duplication and to see whether there was potential for savings to be made or scope for improved value for money. The DHSSPS has completed that, and I have accepted the recommendations. My Department has started to arrange the implementation of the recommendations. In the South, the Department of Health review is ongoing, but that work is expected to be completed shortly. The joint sponsor Departments will then work together to consider the recommendations that impact on Safefood. This has resulted in the original budget for 2012 decreasing from some €8.5 million to €7.5 million. My Department funds 30% of the Safefood budget, so that will deliver us a saving of some £260,000.

It should also be noted that, working from a 2010 baseline, the Food Safety Promotion Board was required to deliver cumulative efficiencies of 6% in 2012, which is €571,000. However, as the original draft budget for 2012

was €8.5 million, a reduction of €1 million was made from the 2010 baseline. That arose as a cash-releasing efficiency saving, identified over three years. We accelerated that into 2011 and sustained it into 2012.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I specifically welcome the progress on the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin, where work is due to commence next year. That is very positive. Is it intended that the all-island action plan on suicide prevention will review current service provision, with increased targeting of resources to areas of most need in specific constituencies?

Mr Poots: A series of things are being done to improve mental health and, as a consequence, reduce suicide. For example, there is the 'WorkOut' website, which is aimed at young men and has been designed so that they can access it in their own time and engage with it on their own terms. It allows users to undertake and track a series of activities that provide an indication of their mental wellness. We also have the report of the Young Men and Suicide Project in Northern Ireland, which makes an important contribution to tackling suicide among young males. The report recommends the development of suicide prevention programmes and a future direction for suicide prevention policy.

We are also addressing cyberbullying. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety is to address problems of online bullying and promote safer internet use. The council has developed programmes to increase parental awareness of how to stay safe online and to improve the resources available to schools to teach children about safe internet use, as well as to build their resilience to potentially inappropriate content that they may encounter online. We are represented on that council. Work is also being done to counter websites that glamorise and encourage suicide. I know that William McCrea has been working very hard on that over at Westminster. We also have a suicide surveillance system, which was developed for the early notification of suspected deaths by suicide. Quite a lot of other work is being done, but time constrains me.

Ms Brown: I also welcome the Minister's statement. What potential is there for Northern Ireland to benefit from eHealth Week?

Mr Poots: The eHealth Week provides us with significant opportunities because, throughout the European Union, Northern Ireland is ahead of the curve on a range of these issues. That is why we have applied for reference region status

in Europe, which is being made available to five or six regions or countries. The eHealth Week allows us to demonstrate activities where we do things that others are considering. I have had the opportunity to visit Fold Housing Association headquarters, from where we conduct telemonitoring. There are nurses there who check the vital signs of individuals every day. They talk to people regularly, and, as a consequence, many more people stay out of hospital. So, a considerable amount of work is being done on e-health. A memorandum of understanding has been established with the Department of Enterprise to drive the issue forward. An ecosystem has been established between the universities, the business sector and the health sector. That course of work will pay future dividends and allow us to sustain good healthcare against difficult budgets.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, which mentions that:

"Officials from the Department of Health are exploring areas of common interest with officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in advance of the e-health high-level conference ... in May 2013."

Was there any discussion on Transforming Your Care, particularly on cross-border co-operation, with the use of hospitals such as Daisy Hill?

Mr Poots: Those discussions did not take place at the North/South meeting, but we discussed it in the meeting with Minister Reilly. The Republic of Ireland is particularly interested in the availability of a 24-hour cath lab in Altnagelvin Area Hospital, not only for Donegal but for the western counties. There is also the issue of an air ambulance and whether that can be facilitated on a North/South basis to provide value for money that we cannot currently demonstrate for such a service in Northern Ireland alone. Those conversations are continuing on how best we can provide those services.

Mr Byrne: Like other Members, I welcome the Minister's statement. I welcome the clarification about Safefood's current existence and immediate future. Will the Minister consider raising the issue of tackling obesity, particularly in primary and secondary schools? It is a growing problem, and Safefood may be a vehicle that could be used to deal with it.

Mr Poots: A number of vehicles could be used. To be perfectly honest, the Public Health Agency is the lead body on obesity, and that should remain the case. My key focus for investment will be on the Public Health Agency because it does work on alcohol, smoking, encouraging people to be more active and, indeed, on obesity. Considerable work remains to be done. Safefood did some work, for example, on the nutritional value of Chinese takeaway food, which is very popular. Members may be interested to know, in their own interests, that one portion of prawn crackers — just over 600 calories — contains about one quarter of an individual's daily calorie needs. People need to be aware of what they eat and the amounts that they eat. If you continue to take in considerably more calories than your metabolic system needs in conjunction with your activity, you will become obese and consequently have a greater likelihood of worse health. People need to address those issues, and we will ensure, through the Public Health Agency in the first instance, that they are well informed.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will the Minister update us on progress on plain packaging for cigarettes?

Mr Poots: That debate is taking place across the UK. We need a good discussion on the issue. In supermarkets, cigarettes have been removed from their former glamorous stands and are now kept behind screens so that people cannot see the packaging, and that will be the case in local shops. We need a debate, and I have not concluded where exactly I stand on the issue. I have some concerns that plain packaging may provide greater opportunities for those who deal in contraband cigarettes. It is a difficult conundrum. I know that they practise this in other places, and we need to take our references from countries such as Canada and Australia, which have made considerably greater progress than we have. I understand that Australia is going down that route, so we will see whether that makes an impact on its figures. Let us watch just how things are done in other places and learn from best practice.

12.00 noon

Mr Allister: When the Minister reported on the previous sectoral meeting, it emerged that the budget and business plan for the Food Safety Promotion Board for 2012 had not even been approved. Now that we are almost at the end of 2012, will he update us on that? On the previous occasion, the Minister said that he was very concerned to stamp out duplication in the

provision, and one can well understand that, considering that this particular North/South body, which employs no-one from Northern Ireland, has had the benefit of over £20 million from the Northern Ireland block grant since its inception. Can he bring us any comfort that the financial laxity that has afflicted this North/South body is being reigned in?

Mr Poots: I would have hoped that that had been dealt with in previous answers and that the Member might have had something a little more original. Nonetheless, I will answer it again for his benefit, in case he did not pick up what was said previously. Yes, it has been approved by me and is awaiting approval by Dr Reilly. It will then be forwarded to our Finance Ministers. Yes, we have instituted savings, and I indicated that, in Northern Ireland, that would be a saving of some £260,000 in this financial year. I assume that the Member would welcome that.

Salmon Conservation

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): A Cheann Comhairle, Mr Speaker, it is with regret that I am unable to make the statement today. I apologise to you, to the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, members of that Committee and Members of the Assembly. The statement was not with Members in a timely fashion to give them an opportunity to read it thoroughly and, therefore, ask informed questions. I profusely apologise again. I have no understanding of what happened, but I want to make it clear that no one from my Department will treat anyone in the House or on any Committee with any disrespect or contempt. All I can do is apologise profusely. It is totally unacceptable. I will ensure that the statement is forwarded to all Members, and I will make my officials available to the CAL Committee again on Thursday. My apologies again.

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate the Minister apologising to the House for the statement not being here.

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

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not taking any points of order on the issue. The Minister has come to the House, and she has apologised, which was the right thing to do. Let us move on to the next business.

Executive Committee Business

Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Speaker: The next items are motions to approve statutory rules that deal with matters related to occupational and personal pension schemes. There will be a separate debate on each of the statutory rules. However, the Minister and Members will be allowed some latitude to address the broad policy and issues that are common to both sets of regulations during the first debate. I hope that the House will find that helpful. For the avoidance of doubt, the third motion is about a separate issue, and we will debate it when we come to it.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The regulations, together with the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, which we will consider shortly, amend the principal automatic enrolment regulations, which set out the arrangements for automatic enrolment to give effect to changes made by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012.

As I have said before to the House, I am very conscious that, when dealing with pensions, it is easy to get lost in the maze of technical provisions and pensions jargon. However, the rules that we are considering today are complex and highly technical. Although I will try to keep my comments at a fairly high level, some jargon is unfortunately inevitable. I will do my best to keep it to a minimum.

The Pensions (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, as amended by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, introduced a duty on employers to enrol eligible workers in a qualifying workplace pension and to make minimum contributions into it. Under the legislation, employers are able to choose the qualifying workplace pension scheme they adopt to discharge that duty. A qualifying scheme is a scheme that meets specific criteria;

for example, an occupational pension scheme, including the national employment savings trust (NEST), which operates UK-wide, or a workplace personal pension scheme. Members may recall that, during our debates on the 2012 Act, I highlighted the delicate balancing act between, on the one hand, safeguarding scheme members' rights and, on the other hand, seeking to minimise the burdens on employers, particularly in these challenging economic times. With that in mind, it is important that we do what we can to ensure that employers who already provide their workers with a good pension scheme will be able to meet their duties under automatic enrolment without the need for costly changes to pension schemes and payroll systems. Employers with existing schemes may certify that their schemes are qualifying schemes, if they meet certain criteria. The intention is that, by applying a simple test, employers will be able to check whether their existing scheme is good enough. The regulations set out the detailed rules for certification, with appropriate safeguards for individual members, and include further qualifying conditions for certain average salary schemes. For example, the regulations set out who may issue a certificate, the form that the certificate must take, when it must be renewed and the requirements that the scheme must meet before a certificate can be used.

The regulations make technical provision largely flowing from the Assembly's agreement to changes made by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As the Minister said, these rules can be complex. The Committee had the opportunity to have these complex rules explained by officials. As the Minister said, it is about striking a balance between the rights of employee and employer and ensuring that the scheme benefits both. Certainly, that was explained in considerable detail to the Committee. The Committee had no particular issues, having had the scheme explained. That is all I have to say on the statutory rule.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased that the Social Development Committee has supported the regulations, and I thank the Deputy Chair and the Committee for the positive way in which they have dealt with them.

Automatic enrolment is the biggest change to pension provision in the United Kingdom for many years. I think that we all agree it is right that we do whatever we can to ensure that

automatic enrolment delivers a good income in retirement, whilst minimising administrative burdens on employers, particularly in these challenging economic times. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The regulations further amend the principal automatic enrolment regulations, which set out the arrangements for automatic enrolment, to ensure that the regulations give effect to the original policy intention. The principal regulations exclude certain schemes providing average salary benefits from being qualifying schemes for automatic enrolment, unless they meet minimum revaluation requirements. Revaluation can be achieved by the scheme either providing for guaranteed revaluation or providing for funded revaluation. However, a scheme that had a mix of guaranteed revaluation below the minimum rate and a discretionary power to revalue at a higher rate, technically, would not meet the minimum revaluation requirements. Similarly, a new average salary scheme that revalues in line with the retail price index would technically not qualify. That had the effect of excluding otherwise high-quality schemes on a technicality.

To restore the policy intention, the regulations, first, allow average salary schemes that provide for discretionary increases or a mix of guaranteed and discretionary increases to qualify, provided that the revaluation is funded for and included in the statement of funding principles on the basis that revaluation is at or above the minimum rate. Secondly, they allow any average salary scheme that revalues in line with the retail price index to qualify, not just those with members on 1 July 2012. That fits with the original policy intention of allowing schemes flexibility on how they provide for revaluation while protecting members' benefits, and it ensures that high-quality schemes can be qualifying schemes for automatic enrolment.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Again, the Minister has talked about the policy intention of the regulations. That and the complexities of the regulations were explained to the Committee. Again, the Committee had

no difficulties in agreeing with both the policy intention and the regulations.

Mr McCausland: Again, I am pleased that the Social Development Committee has endorsed and supported the regulations. I thank the deputy Chair and the Committee for the positive way in which they have dealt with them. The regulations form the final piece of the framework for automatic enrolment. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Pension Protection Fund (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Pension Protection Fund (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The regulations amend several sets of regulations relating to the operation of the pension protection fund as a consequence of changes made by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012. They reflect the experience gained from operating the fund since April 2005 and aim to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy. Members may find it helpful if I provide some background to the provisions.

The pension protection fund, which operates across the United Kingdom, was set up in 2005 to protect members of eligible pension schemes. The fund does that by making compensation payments to members of eligible pension schemes where the sponsoring employer has become insolvent and there are insufficient assets for the scheme to cover the pension liabilities. The pension protection fund is financed through the residual assets of pension schemes transferring into the pension protection fund, investment returns and annual levies made up of a pension protection levy and an administration levy charged to all qualifying and defined benefit occupational pension schemes.

Schemes that may be eligible to enter the pension protection fund must undergo regular valuations of their assets and liabilities to determine their level of funding. The information from the evaluation is indicative of the likelihood of a scheme making a claim on the pension protection fund and is used as part of the calculation of how much annual pension protection levy a scheme must pay. In the event that the scheme's sponsoring employer becomes insolvent, the scheme will enter an assessment period for entry to the pension protection fund.

As part of the process, the board of the pension protection fund is required to obtain a fresh valuation, undertaken by an actuary, of the scheme's assets and liabilities at the time of insolvency.

The regulations provide for the board of the pension protection fund to determine the funding position of an eligible pension scheme without the need to obtain a fresh actuarial valuation and to obtain its own valuation of the assets and protected liabilities of the scheme where it has been demonstrated that it is not possible to obtain a protected benefits quotation. A protected benefits quotation is a quotation from an insurance provider of the cost of purchasing annuities, providing each scheme member with benefits equivalent to the compensation that they would receive if their scheme transferred to the pension protection fund or their scheme benefits, whichever is lower. That means that, if a scheme can demonstrate that it has taken reasonable steps to obtain a protected benefits quotation from an annuity provider, it can apply to the pension protection fund to assume responsibility for the scheme.

The regulations also enable the pension protection fund to assess for entry a scheme that has been running as a closed scheme without being required to obtain an actuarial valuation. A closed scheme is one for which there has been an employer insolvency but where it did not transfer to the fund because scheme assets exceeded the assessed value of the fund compensation at that time.

In summary, the regulations permit the board of the pension protection fund to make a funding determination without requiring a new actuarial valuation; require an application that does not include a protected benefits quotation to provide evidence that all reasonable steps have been taken to try to obtain one; require the board to provide a summary of a funding determination made containing the same information that the members and beneficiaries would have received had a fresh valuation been obtained from an actuary; set out how funding determinations are to be carried out; specify the time limits for an application for review or reconsideration of a decision by the board not to obtain a valuation and the issue of a funding determination; specify the interested persons who may apply for such a review; set the time limits for an applicant to refer the issue with one of the new reviewable matters to the pension protection fund ombudsman; and make other minor consequential amendments.

In conclusion, the regulations provide the technical details to underpin the changes made by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012 to streamline the process for occupational pension schemes being assessed for entry to the pension protection fund.

12.15 pm

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is a pity that all social security legislation is not quite as straightforward. I am being so agreeable today that I am surprising myself. The Minister has explained the complexities of the regulation, and the Committee had the benefit of having it explained in detail by officials and had no problems with the regulations.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased that the Social Development Committee has agreed with the regulations, and I thank the Deputy Chair and the Committee for the positive way in which they have dealt with the matter. I was hoping that a new spirit of agreeability on those matters was breaking out, but it is obviously a temporary glitch. Having said that, I am happy, in the circumstances, to commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pension Protection Fund (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Committee Business

Government: AERC Report on Number of Departments

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

Mr Moutray (The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on its review of the number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and of the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments: 'Part 2 - Reduction in the Number of Northern Ireland Departments'.

As Members will be aware, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland intends to introduce a Northern Ireland Bill in the third session of the current Parliament. The Bill will provide an opportunity to make changes to the Northern Ireland institutions where there is broad support among Assembly parties and where Westminster primary legislation would be required, such as future amendments to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC), therefore, asked the political parties and the independent Members of the Assembly for their priorities for the Committee's immediate review of Parts III and IV of the Northern Ireland Act within the available timescale set out by the Secretary of State for the proposed Northern Ireland Bill. Following consideration of the responses, the Committee agreed that its immediate review would cover the size of the Assembly and the number of Northern Ireland Departments. The Committee then agreed in the review's terms of reference that it would, first, report on the size of the Assembly by mid-June 2012 and then report on the number of Northern Ireland Departments in late October 2012.

As part of the overall review, the Committee identified five key issues. The first four of these issues were addressed in our part 1 report on the number of MLAs, which was debated and noted by the Assembly on 26 June of this year. The part 2 report focused on the fifth issue, which is:

"The reduction in the number of NI Government departments and associated re-allocation of functions which will ensure the effectiveness of the Executive functions is maintained."

In this part 2 review on the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments, the Committee adopted a strategic approach. As such, it focused its consideration on three key areas: one, the objectives of the review and, therefore, the underlying objectives of any reorganisation of the Northern Ireland Departments; two, the areas of commonality in terms of future broad structures of reorganisation of Northern Ireland Departments between the different parties represented on the Committee; and, three, the question of what principles should underpin the arrangements for any reorganisation of Departments.

As part of the consideration of these three areas, the Committee also focused its attention on the costs, anticipated savings and effect on employment that would result from any suggested restructuring of Northern Ireland Departments. Members of the House will recall that, in our part 1 report, the Committee concluded that the five key issues that are identified as the focus of our overall review of the number of MLAs in the Assembly and the number of Northern Ireland Departments are very much interlinked and that a holistic approach should be taken. In this part 2 report, the Committee concluded that this holistic approach applies equally to key issue 5 on the reduction of the number of Northern Ireland Departments.

Through its discussions, the Committee has agreed an overall objective for its part 2 review:

"To bring forward recommendations on how a reduction in the number of NI Departments could secure more effective and efficient governance arrangements, including better co-ordination and collaboration within and between Departments and their Agencies, providing a better service and value for money for the public, consistent with the safeguards on inclusivity."

Members, this objective also provides the objectives that should underpin any reorganisation of NI Departments, and, as such, can be used to inform any future reorganisation. Although the Committee did not reach consensus on how many Departments there should be, the report outlines five areas where the Committee agreed that there was some commonality with regard to how Departments could be restructured. As indicated in

Assembly research papers, the task of reorganising government Departments is typically regarded as an Executive function. Therefore, the Committee regarded its role as advisory in this respect, rather than prescriptive. Indeed, the report clearly states that the five areas of commonality:

"do not represent an exhaustive list of broad reorganisations and cannot, therefore, be taken as a set of recommendations."

However, as with the objectives to inform any future reorganisation, the Committee considers that the areas of commonality set out in the report can be used to directly inform any future reorganisation of Northern Ireland Departments.

The Assembly's research service informed the Committee that identifying underpinning principles for government reorganisation in advance has proved to be a very good practice. Therefore, the report also includes a set of principles, six in all, that the Committee agreed should underpin the arrangements for any reorganisation of Departments. In addition to those principles, the Committee agreed conclusions on the issues of costs, savings, impact on employment and equality that should be considered in advance of any decision to reorganise Departments.

I highlight to Members that, in the 'Committee Consideration' section and appendix 4 of this report, the views of all other stakeholders who responded to the Committee, including those of the other political parties in the Assembly, are set out in some detail. As I said in relation to the Committee's part 1 report of this review, the way forward is now for the Assembly's political parties, through the First and the deputy First Minister, to decide.

On behalf of the Committee, I acknowledge and thank the Committee staff for their valuable work and support during the review. I also thank Assembly research staff, legal advisers and Hansard staff for their valuable work. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee requests that the Assembly notes the Committee's report.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin wants any arrangements that we have in place to ensure that we have the best governance and democracy in this part of Ireland. Good governance means equality for all and inclusivity.

During direct rule, there was a complete absence of any democracy with direct rule ministers. That is why Sinn Féin ensured that

any structures that were agreed within our political framework prescribed by the Good Friday Agreement would guarantee inclusivity and power sharing. The number of MLAs — 108, as we know — was chosen to ensure that smaller parties had a voice. The outworking of the Good Friday Agreement is that it ensures that, in constituencies where there is a significant nationalist majority, like my own constituency of South Down or Newry and Armagh or others, unionism has its political representatives elected to the House. It is the same where nationalists are in a minority. That is to be welcomed. Obviously, any reduction would have to be carefully weighed up against whether that balance is affected.

We also have a very inclusive Executive. When there were 10 Departments, four parties held Ministries; five when policing and justice powers were devolved. Any reduction in the number of Departments would have to be weighed against its impact on power sharing, and when I speak of power sharing, I mean genuine power sharing. Obviously, this House is not interested in tokenism.

Níl na costais againn go fóill. Creideann Sinn Féin go gcaithfidh an Coiste an obair sin a dhéanamh.

We still do not have the costs of any suggested new arrangements, and that is one of the key areas where Sinn Féin believes more work can and should be done. It is one of the areas where we suggested that work should be done in the Committee. Some members of the Committee assume that merging Departments will save money. That may be the case but, equally, it may not. Real reform and change costs money and that is why, in other areas of reform, the Executive have had to prioritise money to invest to save. So, obviously, we need detailed costings in relation to that.

It is interesting that the SDLP and UUP do not know what they want. One minute, they want to pull out of the Executive and go into opposition, while others among their members want to stay. The song —

Mr Beggs: With the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will, yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that Sinn Féin was very reluctant to say anything during the entire period when the Committee met numerous times?

Ms Ruane: Sinn Féin has always put its opinions on every aspect. However, the point I was making — the Member interrupted me in the middle of it — was that, one minute, the SDLP and the UUP, his party, want to be in opposition, or certain wings of them do, and the next they do not. They want to stay in the Executive. The song 'Lanigan's Ball' comes to mind. It is time for them to declare their hand, and it is the same with the SDLP. Obviously, their decision will impact on any final configuration. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms Ruane: I will repeat that, because the SDLP Member was laughing so loudly that people did not hear what I said. It is hard to be heard here. The SDLP and UUP do not know what they want to do with regard to opposition. They need to declare their hand. Obviously, any decision that is taken will impact upon any final configuration. So, it will be interesting —

12.30 pm

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is a serious point. This debate is not about the opposition report: we started that work last week, and we will not report on that for another three or four months. This is about the number of Departments, Mr Speaker, just on a point of order.

Mr Speaker: Order. I take the Member's point of order. Let us get back to the motion before the House.

Ms Ruane: I am very aware that we are not discussing opposition arrangements, but the point that I am making, if the Member would listen, is that, obviously, any decision in relation to opposition will have an impact on the number of Departments. Obviously, these are very difficult times. People are struggling from one day to the next with bills, and Sinn Féin is very keen to save the public any money and to have the most efficient arrangements in place. We also want the public to have full confidence in the political system. If we needed any reminders of why we need good governance, equality and strong institutions, we got that over the past week.

We had a situation in the past where people were double- and triple-jobbing. Indeed, when the Executive had to discuss key issues on local government reform, Ministers had to leave the table on grounds of conflict of interest. That is not good governance. Sinn Féin has taken

decisive action. Some parties are still double-jobbing. They know who they are. Indeed, it is the majority of parties in the House, and that needs to be dealt with. In my view, it is bad for the public when there is not good governance. Sinn Féin wants to see the review of public administration (RPA) happen. It is important that we have good, effective and fair local government structures, and that there is real devolution to local authorities.

We are in a far better place than we were pre the Good Friday Agreement. We will not go back to the bad old days of the past.

Tá a lán oibre le déanamh againn, agus tá Sinn Féin réidh le héisteacht le gach moladh. There is a lot of work to be done, and Sinn Féin is open to listening to all proposals. Sinn Féin will keep an open mind. We will be active members of the Committee, as we have been, and we urge others to do so as well.

Mr Beggs: First, I put on record my unequivocal condemnation of the attack on the office of Stewart Dickson, a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and the other attacks and threats that have been made against other public representatives.

I turn now to the AERC's report on the reduction of the number of Northern Ireland Departments. During the discussions, my colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party and I have been focused on delivering better public services and producing improved responsiveness to meet the needs of the public and to make the best use of the limited resources available.

When looking at the departmental structures, we highlighted the fact that it was not just about the Departments; it was also about the agencies and arm's-length bodies that exist alongside and below the Departments. There is the cost of running any Department. There is the ministerial cost, the cost of the permanent secretary and the central headquarters' staff, and, if that can be reduced, a small saving can be released to go towards additional front line services for nurses, doctors, teachers or whatever. However, the way of bringing about potential major improvement in cost is in removing inefficiencies that may exist in our system.

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

All parties recognise that Health, Education and Justice are major Departments that deal with fairly specific areas and that there is limited

room for improvement. Yes, there is interaction, and there are undoubtedly areas for improvement at the edges, but, principally, those are large Departments with core functions, and that would need to continue.

However, let us look at the range of other things that have impacted on the public. Let us look at flooding. Most flooding is the result of our streams, rivers and culverts being overburdened or blockages occurring, which results in flooding downstream. The responsibility for that lies with the Rivers Agency in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Department for Regional Development's (DRD) Roads Service has an input to ensure that the gratings on our roads are kept free so that flooding does not occur. Northern Ireland Water, which is linked to DRD, has a responsibility for sewers. In our older systems, there are combined sewerage systems in which some surface water is linked with sewage. If flooding occurs, we have the dreadful situation of sewage flowing along our streets and possibly even into our houses. There is obviously a role for that Department.

The way in which we are fragmented does not help with planning issues because, frequently, new developments upstream cause problems downstream. If there were an increased focus and responsibility, we might have better planning.

There is also flood line, which takes phone calls and directs people to Roads Service, NI Water and, perhaps, the councils for help. The Department of Finance and Personnel provides that service. We need to make things work better together to produce better outcomes and clear lines of accountability and responsibility. That is one of our suggestions. It is not only about Departments but about the range of bodies that exist below them.

We advocate that improvements could be made through a single Department of the economy. That was proposed some time ago by the independent review of economic policy. The idea is for an even greater focus on the economy to ensure that we are all pushing in the right direction and working for the optimum benefit to create greater job opportunities for everyone. The recommendation has been there for some time, but we seem to be slow in bringing about change. Improvement is definitely needed.

I will now move to fishing. The Department of Agriculture is responsible for fish farming, but angling is the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). They are

all fish, and one clear line in a Department should be looking after fishing.

The Committee's recommendations refer to non-overlaps, grouping functions together, administrative efficiencies —

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

Mr Beggs: — the need for cost-benefit analysis, planned and timely decisions and, most importantly, services being customer facing. We must look at the needs of the public and ensure that we provide better services.

Mr McDevitt: I join the Chair and colleagues in thanking the Research and Information Service, Legal Services and our Committee staff for their work in preparing the reports for the House. As the Chair pointed out, this is the second of three reports that we are due to present to the House on different aspects of potential structural reform inside our institutions.

It was most frustrating to be party to the preparation of the report, largely because there was very little willingness on behalf of a significant party to engage in any serious way in any aspect of debate around the issue.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. Rather than the Member referring to "a significant party", I encourage him to be very precise — perhaps he was about to be precise. If he is not precise, I will be.

Mr McDevitt: I will leave Mr Campbell to his own precision. Sinn Féin was the party that failed to make a substantial response to the consultation process that kicks off each of these periods of internal debate. I respect Sinn Féin's right not to make a response, but it devalues the robustness of the report and, in my opinion, undermines the credibility of the AERC process, which ultimately undermines the credibility of the House.

What were we being asked to think about? We were being asked to think about the structure of government from the Departments' point of view. The SDLP does not see this as a numbers debate, but I respect the fact that others do. I respect the fact that others have a fixed number of Departments in mind, and, for them, the best government would have, let us say, six or seven Departments. That is not the way that we come at the issue, and the report reflects our opinions. For us, it is about government meeting the needs of the people of this part of Ireland and having a form that

follows its function, and respecting the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, which make the maximum number of Departments quite clear and give a clear indication about the actual number of Departments.

We came to this process agreeing with the Ulster Unionist Party on the need for a single Department for the economy. It is a recommendation from the independent review of economic policy that we supported from the day that it was published and are happy to continue to support. We came with our own unique proposition, which was that we should think about establishing a Department for energy and sustainability to corral important cost factors in our economy: the production of energy; the development of future energy sources; and the use and harnessing of energy in a more sustainable way. That would have included transport policy, aspects of rural development, etc. We said that we could do that without having to radically reduce the number of Departments because, for us, it is not about a number; it is about a series of Departments that better meets the needs of the people of Northern Ireland than our current Departments do.

We can make that contribution without in any way diluting our commitment to power sharing, without in any way undermining our position as equals in the House and without in any way giving even the slightest impression that we are departing one millimetre from the spirit and provisions of the Good Friday Agreement. In fact, we can do all this within the protections of the Good Friday Agreement. In the next few months, we have work to do on a series of potentially controversial questions, but we should be capable of conducting that debate in an open and honest way. That does not mean that we have to find agreement, but we should not run away from having an opinion. What has been regrettable, and has undermined this process, is that people have exercised a right to silence. You might want to do that in the criminal justice system, but, in a parliamentary democracy, it just does not stand up to any credible scrutiny.

So my appeal to colleagues from all sides of the House, as we move to the next phase, is that we have the courage to put opinions on the table and not treat those opinions as political footballs or use them to pick holes in one another. I appeal to colleagues to have the courage to say to the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party or, for that matter, the Alliance Party that we disagree with them about the number of

Departments, but we will not run away from having a public debate on the issue.

Mr Dickson: I will make my contribution to the debate brief. First, I place on record my thanks to Roy Beggs for his kind remarks.

There has been some public comment about my attendance at AERC meetings, but, as Members will note, it meets on Tuesdays when plenary sittings in this place also take place. Therefore, it is quite difficult for a party that has stretched membership resources to be in two places at once. Notwithstanding that, I believe that the report from the Assembly and Executive Review Committee is broadly in line with the position taken by the Alliance Party and with our submissions to that review.

At this point, I note my disappointment that some parties did not take the opportunity to put forward, or fully put forward, their views on matters that were available to us for discussion or clearly on the table. Some full and detailed submissions were made to the Committee, but there were some notable blank spaces.

It is clear that the Assembly has an unsustainable and unnecessarily large number of Departments. What is clearer still is the need to deal with that in a wholesale and carefully considered manner on the basis of what will be the best outcomes for the future governance of Northern Ireland and value for money for its citizens.

The Alliance Party has made clear its preference for a move towards eight Departments. That should go hand in hand with a reduction in the number of MLAs. There are issues about whether we remain coupled to or decouple from the Westminster parliamentary constituencies. That will be an ongoing debate.

I welcome the report and commend those who participated in the review in a meaningful way. However, I note that decisions on the matter will, ultimately, be taken at Executive and, dare I suggest, party leader level. I look forward to our next round of work and urge parties to fully engage in the work of AERC.

12.45 pm

Mr Campbell: I, as a member of the AERC, also commend my colleague Mr Stewart Dickson, given the exceptionally unfortunate, regrettable and unacceptable circumstances in which he found himself in the past week.

I will not waste too much time, because the issues are fairly clear. This was a very important Committee review. Given the climate in Northern Ireland at present — I am talking about the economic climate — there are not too many employers or employees who have the luxury of being able to carry out their working life and activities with more people or departments than they require. Very, very few are in that position. We are.

The Committee was set a number of tasks, one of which we are discussing, which is the interim report. Towards the back of the report, people can see the number of meetings that took place. There were well over 20 meetings. People were asked to put forward their proposals. Time after time after time after time after endless time, we put forward our proposals. One party did not: Sinn Féin.

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. To point a finger across the Chamber is very unparliamentary.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that all Members realise that that subject has been raised previously. It is not acceptable to point a finger. I ask the Member to continue with his speech.

Mr Campbell: One party did not: Sinn Féin. It did not elaborate or expand on any of its views. In fact — after about the twenty-third meeting — page 19 of the report states:

"At the meeting of 23 October, Party Representatives were asked to indicate whether they agreed with these suggested principles."

That was after all those meetings had taken place and inordinate time and effort had gone into trying to get agreement. Eventually, we got commonality. After the Alliance Party's representative had elaborated on what his party wanted, he said that he had "no difficulty" with the principles. The DUP spokesman said that he had "no issue" with the principles. The SDLP representative said that he was "content" with the principles. The Sinn Féin spokesperson said:

"Most of them appear to be worthy principles, although I would not like to see them set in stone just at the minute."

That was after around 23 meetings had taken place. Let us not go too quickly, now. Let us not go too fast here. Let us not express our opinions. Let us not put our views forward, because we might actually be asked to defend

and explain them. However, that is what Sinn Féin did.

Let us look at the areas of commonality. There are some sensible suggestions here on which the Committee needs to build. Just because we make progress at a snail's pace does not mean that we throw the baby out with the bath water. But, neither does it mean that we have to consign ourselves to the continuation of the snail's pace, because, at this rate, it will be 2050 by the time that we get to the point at which most people out there want us to be, which is to ask, "Have we too many Departments?" Of course, we have too many Departments. Nobody can defend the number of Departments that we have, whatever partial justification Sinn Féin tries to throw up about equality. There will be equality whether there are seven Departments or 12. No one denies that. No one seriously suggests that we are going to live with 12 Departments. Let us get on with it.

If we are saying that we are not entitled to an expansive 108-Member Assembly, spell out how many Members you think you do want. Again, that party seems to be incapable of spelling out how many it wants. I do not know why it keeps running away from reality. Last Monday night, it got a reality call at Belfast City Hall. The sooner that it gets that reality call every night and every day —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Campbell: — from now on, the better.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to resume his seat. I remind him to stick to the subject of the debate that is under discussion. I also ask him to address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Campbell's partial condemnation of the attack on Mr Dickson's office earlier in the week rings a bit hollow after his utterances.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is also veering off the subject. I ask Mr Campbell to continue the debate.

Mr Campbell: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I will continue. I thought that I was addressing through the Chair, and I will continue to do so. Hopefully, people will smell the coffee after last week's decision at Belfast City Council.

I think that we need to make progress and we need to make it rapidly, so that we have more

than just areas of commonality. When people look at this report and at the 23 or whatever number of meetings there were, they will say, "Can we not have a bit more than just commonality? Let us get some sort of agreement on a cost-effective, efficient system of government here, which is what everyone outside has to have."

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling the next Member, I advise the House that there will be no latitude in the discussion. We discuss the report that is before us. End of story.

Mr Givan: True to form, the plenary debate about the AERC report is more exciting than the Committee meetings. When we go through all this, we see that it certainly was a frustrating process. I am not going to repeat what my colleagues said. I think that Sinn Féin did no credit to those on the Committee who are capable of putting forward positions and who, I have no doubt, are able to defend them but, for whatever reason, did not.

It worries me that that side of the House seems to have some kind of paranoia about a hidden hand somewhere and about all this work somehow diluting equality and inclusivity, and attempting to undermine power sharing. That is not and never was what this is about. It is about how you can get the most effective and efficient government for the people of Northern Ireland. The Member for South Belfast Mr McDevitt made that very point. This is about delivering services to the people, and that is how we should approach it. That is what government, first and foremost, is there to do — deliver services to the people. How best can you do that within the structures of government? How best can you co-ordinate and collaborate it? How do you drive that, while, of course, providing value for money?

So, efficiency is important, but so is the effectiveness of government. This piece of work was about creating an effective government. We as a party made it clear that, we feel, there could be greater effectiveness in driving forward decisions on big issues. How can you do that within a government of 12 Departments? Would it be better achieved with eight or, indeed, six Departments? We pitched the suggestion that we would be content with somewhere in that range.

I suppose that there is one element of this that we can be pleased with, and that is the fact that, despite Sinn Féin's lack of input, we got to the point where parties broadly came to the conclusion that a reduction in Departments is necessary. Mr Campbell made the point that

people expect that to happen because, in the real world, people have to cut the cloth to suit the current environment.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I certainly will give way to Mr McDevitt.

Mr McDevitt: For the benefit of the House: Mr Givan knows well that there is consensus that we need to organise government better and that many Departments certainly do not meet the need of the people. However, I think it is fair to say that there was not a consensus at the Committee that that can be achieved only through a smaller number. I think we have made it quite clear that we do not necessarily see the need to reduce the number in any significant way, but we do see the need to reorganise stuff.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Givan: Thank you. We are now teasing out the nuanced positions that people hold. The report is pretty clear: there is commonality around the number of Departments. I think that parties clearly need to take a firm position, so that there is not some sort of pretence put out to the public that we are doing something. We need to get on with this and do it. I would be worried if the SDLP was now trying to manoeuvre itself a little bit on that.

Members rightly pointed out that this is interlinked with other issues, such as the reduction in the number of MLAs, and how that would impact on how the Assembly does its business and on Committee roles. I think it is important that we take forward the report. The initial scoping work has been carried out at length, so we can now get on with ultimately making decisions and showing that this place can bring forward an outworking of the arrangements discussed at length in Committee and make that a reality.

Mr McCallister: I was relieved to hear the Member who spoke previously say that the plenary was more exciting than the Committee. Being a relatively recent member of the Committee, I have enjoyed the past months, meeting every few weeks to hear members of Sinn Féin tell us absolutely nothing. It was always a breath of fresh air going into the meetings.

I want to address several things that came up during the debate. It was probably a little

strange to hear Ms Ruane talk about double-jobbing and bringing an end to it when, in 2010, she wanted to double-job. Thankfully, the good people of South Down knew to send Margaret Ritchie to Westminster and not Ms Ruane.

It is, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Ms Ruane: As the Member knows, we have an abstentionist policy in relation to Westminster.

Mr McCallister: Oh, sorry, an abstentionist policy. Yes, and that has served the people well when they continue to talk about welfare reform but will not turn up to vote on it. So, it is a little rich to mention that policy, and the people in South Down quite rightly rejected that very idea.

This debate is very much about how you deliver better government, services and outcomes for people. We have all sat here through many debates when we all heard the call for better government, better joined-up government and more collaboration and co-operation between Departments. Health, social services and education need to work together to get a common policy objective and some sense around the Executive table of a collective responsibility that is so lacking at this time. You need that, which is why we have called for a proper Programme for Government to be developed as soon as possible after an election, even before d'Hondt is run. That way you could get a collective responsibility and have an Executive running and driving policy in broadly the same direction. That is what this report is and should be about: how you deliver better services for the people who send us here.

We talked about eight Departments. My colleague Mr Beggs mentioned a single Department of the economy. We think that is hugely important because our unemployment levels are rising and our youth unemployment rates are appalling. Those are areas that we must tackle to get our economy back up and moving. In Great Britain, they managed to create many more jobs in the private sector over the past couple of years than we were able to create here. We must look at that and at where we are failing. Broadly, there has been agreement around a single Department of the economy.

As for the Department of the Environment, with planning, in particular, moving into local government with the RPA reform, we see it moving into the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. A total of 80% of the budget for the Department of Culture, Arts and

Leisure goes through arm's-length bodies anyway, so you have to question the purpose of and need for that Department.

In response to David McNarry, the Health Department is just too important to leave off the list. We will certainly not be supporting leaving it off the list. We would have it firmly up there as one of the most important Departments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: On a point of order.

Mr McNarry: Just to make a correction, I remind the Member that I have not made any speech about health in recent times. Maybe he will clarify.

Mr McCallister: Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, he could have done that simply by asking for an intervention. I know that he has not spoken, and that is maybe why he left it off his list of Departments. It was in the report and his response to that; health was not mentioned in his list of Departments. It is just too important to leave off that list.

1.00 pm

The Committee continues to do its work by looking at opposition. With the Deputy Speaker's guidance, I will not attempt to respond to Ms Ruane's remarks about opposition. We have a very clear direction: we would like to see it created. This is about government delivering better services for the people who send us here. We should never lose sight of that. We should engage in a much more positive way; I think that the vast majority of parties have done that in this process. We should get on with the work that we have been tasked with.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the publication of the report. I thank the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson for steering us through our meetings; I think that somebody said that there were 23. I am not sure how many meetings there were, but, whatever the number, I thank the staff for servicing us in the way that they did throughout the debate. I add my best wishes to Stewart Dickson. He was absent last week from the Justice Committee. All those on the Justice Committee wish him well.

I have perhaps the unique distinction of having been a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee since its inception, throughout the previous mandate. On a

number of occasions, we had to bring reports to the Assembly, most notably on the transfer of policing and justice. The same type of suggestions and depressing views were put across the Chamber. It was said that it was not a good report and that perhaps it could have been better. Depressing language was used. We said then, and we say again, that the report will inform the debate as we take it forward. We will be guided and steered by the principles of inclusiveness and representativeness. Other people have made a commitment in their party manifestos to deliver this. Perhaps that is the haste, urge and need. We will not be guided by other party manifestos. We will take decisions that are best. The decisions will be made at the appropriate time. We will not be bounced by anybody.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Surely.

Mr Campbell: If the Member thinks that 23 meetings is acting in haste, how many meetings would he say is taking your time?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCartney: I am not sure how many meetings the Assembly and Executive Review Committee had about policing and justice. We were patient then, and we will be patient again. The Member was one of the people who, at the time, did not talk about 23 meetings, which, I assume, were in less than six months. Remember that we were told then that it would not happen in a political lifetime, 20 political lifetimes, 50 political lifetimes —

Mr Campbell: Yes; a Sinn Féin Justice Minister.

Mr McCartney: — or 100 political lifetimes.

Mr Campbell: That is right: a Sinn Féin Justice Minister.

Mr McCartney: However, it happened. It happened because we brought reasoned debate to the Committee and the Assembly. The right decision was made at the right time. That is how it will happen here. I am not sure what was meant by this, but it is worth reminding people that it was said that we got some sort of reality call last Monday night in Belfast City Hall —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I have reminded Members twice that we are not going off the report that we are discussing. I also ask other Members not to shout across the Floor. The Member will resume.

Mr McCartney: I accept what the Chair said, but, sometimes, when something is said, there needs to be the right to reply. I am not sure —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind the Member not to challenge the Chair. I have made my ruling.

Mr McCartney: I am not challenging, nor do I intend to challenge, the Chair. I just wanted to point out that, sometimes, the right to reply should be allowed in these circumstances.

This always happens in these types of situations: when someone puts a proposition on the table, they sometimes back it up with a theory. However, theories work only if there are facts. I could say, "Time after time after time", and maybe I could raise my voice and point across the Chamber and use invective, but the reality is that not once throughout the 23 meetings were we told that fewer Departments meant less money being spent and better value for money. Not once were we told that. The contention that reducing the number of Departments would save money was not backed up.

Indeed, neither the researchers, the Assembly staff, the witnesses or any of the parties that now lecture us about not saying enough were able to prove that fewer Departments would save money. It is not there to be proven. As a matter of fact, most people said that, if anything, it was cost-neutral. That sort of spurious idea —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, on occasion, some things almost go unsaid? There is a cost to having a Minister. There is a cost to a ministerial car. There is a cost to a permanent secretary and to Ministers having their own staff. When there is an obvious cost, there has to be a benefit.

Mr McCartney: The Member makes my point: it is so obvious that it could not be made. The Committee asked the researchers to prove the case that fewer Departments meant less money, and they told us that there was no case

to be made and that it was not true. It cannot be made to be true.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr McCartney for giving up his time. I sympathise with his argument because it is consistent with mine. So I put this question to him: why not join the debate about improving the structure in government without changing the number of Departments? That is why I was disappointed with Sinn Féin. It could have supported the argument that I presented in Committee, but instead I am the only voice recorded as having presented that argument.

Mr McCartney: Despite being accused of saying nothing in Committee — as someone once put it, we reserved our right to silence — we said that, in principle, we were not opposed to a reduction in the number of Departments but we remained to be convinced. We remain to be convinced because too many people rushed in, first, to deliver on their party manifesto and, secondly, to make claims that were not true. I will say it again: the claim that fewer Departments means less money and better value for money was not proven. All the parties that made that claim had the ability and the chance to challenge the analysis that was brought to the Committee —

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

Mr McCartney: — and they did not do it.

Mr Hamilton: To listen to the tone of the debate, you would think that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee did not actually agree on something. I am also a bit of a veteran of the Committee; I have been a member for some five years. I do not know what I have done to deserve that punishment and exile to the Committee, but I recall several reports coming through from that Committee — Mr McCartney will remember them as well, as will other Members — including those on policing and justice and, more recently, the number of Assembly Members. On each occasion, we were rightly criticised in the Chamber for not having any degree of commonality or agreement across the parties. We have had agreement on some of them but not agreement that encompassed all parties and all members on the Committee. Here is an exception: this report has been agreed by all 11 Committee members and, therefore, by all five parties represented on the Committee and in the Executive. So progress has been made on this issue in a way that it has not been made on others, in that there is agreement on areas of commonality, right from the initial objective of

the inquiry, which was to see how a reduction in the number of Departments could increase effectiveness and efficiency — not keeping the status quo or increasing the number of Departments. We also have agreement on areas of commonality, such as everyone agreeing that seven Departments should be consistent in any Executive moving forward in the Assembly. It is not total agreement or precise agreement on the final number of Departments, but, in those areas of commonality, there are not a lot of powers remaining that need to be allocated to other Departments.

Even if it is not explicitly said, it is pretty clear that there is agreement that a smaller number of Departments is right for Northern Ireland. There is certainly no definitive agreement on where certain powers should go, which, as Mr Campbell keeps reminding the Committee, is a decision that is above our pay grade. The leaders of our respective parties and the Executive must agree the final number and where powers should be allocated. However, there is significant commonality across the five parties and the 11 members on the Committee, which stands for something. You might ask why, after years of disagreement on the issue, significant commonality has been found at this time, but it has been argued for over a decade since 1999, when political expediency won out over economic sense and efficiency, that Northern Ireland has had government that is too big and too bloated. That is unjustifiable at any time but is particularly so when we live in austere times.

Mr McCartney mentioned that there was no proof that a reduction would lead to savings. It is self-evident that a reduction in the number of Departments would realise savings. I appreciate — I am not silly — that there would be initial costs in reorganising government, but there would be savings in the long term. The Member's colleague — she is not in her place now — sits on the Committee. She spoke in October 2010, when she was still Education Minister and pushing for the creation of the Education and Skills Authority. Her argument was:

"What I want to do is use the money I fight for in the best possible way, and I don't want it squandered".

She was talking about money being squandered on five education and library boards as opposed to having the Education and Skills Authority. If it works in education and education administration, it will work across the

whole of the Executive and the Departments here at Stormont.

I have always made the point that it is not just about savings, although I believe that savings would be realised in the longer term. It is also about having effective government here in Northern Ireland. It stands to reason that, if you bring powers together, you become more effective. Mr Beggs talked about flooding, which is a prime example. Three agencies spread across two Departments deal with similar but different aspects of flooding response. Town centre regeneration spans at least three Departments, sometimes more, as well as local authorities. The Environment Minister recently established in his Department a marine directorate that does not control everything to do with the marine environment. There are any number of areas in which there is a disconnect and disjointedness in how policy set by the Assembly is implemented by the Departments responsible. People in Northern Ireland are poorer as a result because they do not get as effective a government as they deserve.

It is about making savings, and I think that those would be realised, but it is not just about that. That is not even the paramount issue. Yes, it is about having smaller government, but it is also about getting smarter government. For too long, people in this part of the world have had the luxury of government that is too big and too bloated and has not delivered for them in the way that they deserve.

Mr Allister: This is a farcical report. In fact, it is a non-report, because, despite everything that the Member who just spoke sought to say, it does not advance us with an agreement on a reduction in the number of Departments. At its height, the very best that it can do is to talk about something that broadly reflects a view on how Departments could be reorganised — not how they should be or will be reorganised but how they could be reorganised. That hardly moves us at all from the base of the issue.

The report goes out of its way to make it plain that it contains no recommendations. That, of course, as we have heard, is because, yet again, of the feet-dragging veto of Sinn Féin. It seems from what we hear from the Committee that, many, many times, they simply have nothing to say. It is quite clear that old habits die hard. They have nothing to say, and, of course, in saying nothing, they exercise the veto that lies at the very heart of these Belfast Agreement arrangements and torpedoes the very promises falsely and deceptively made by some. Just give it a little time, and we will work

all sorts of changes. We will have a marvellous efficiency review committee or some such grand title — an efficiency review panel. It has not even been appointed, the report tells us. We will see the structures of government changed and democratised so that you do not have to live with a mandatory coalition and not having an opposition because we, some told us, will change all that. Now it emerges that they cannot even change something as neutral as the number of Departments. They cannot change it because of the belligerent veto of Sinn Féin. That same belligerent veto guarantees that they will not change the things they really made promises about, such as creating an opposition and getting a voluntary coalition. They have surrendered the same veto to the same belligerents, who will make sure that it does not happen. Therefore, we go through a farce — this is another part of it — in which Members, particularly those in the DUP, preen themselves and pretend that change is on the way. They say that they control Stormont, but we see today who controls Stormont: those who can feet-drag even on the neutral issue of the number of Departments.

1.15 pm

The report is also farcical because, in the context of allegedly giving advice to the Secretary of State about a Bill that she is going to bring forward, it deals with an issue that is not even a Westminster issue. The reduction in the number of Departments is not within the gift of Westminster; it is within the gift of OFMDFM. The report, as part of that process, is farcical also. I also note that when, as part of that feet-dragging, the Committee went looking for help from OFMDFM — the primary Department of government — according to paragraph 62 of the report, it refused evidence from its officials. The Committee then wrote to OFMDFM about costings and got no reply. That, of course, is the Department that, at the beginning of 2012, beat its chest and told us that it would deal with DEL and would:

"Ask officials to make arrangements to prepare the necessary Assembly legislation to abolish the Department of Employment and Learning and transfer its functions."

A few months later, it was eating its words and backing away. That was another promise of change and of a reduction in bureaucracy and the number of Departments that went by the wayside.

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

Mr Allister: The report is in the same vogue. It is a waste of time.

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

Mr Agnew: In its manifesto and in a submission to the Committee, the Green Party outlined that we would like to see a reduction in the number of Departments. Some talk about smaller government, but we are more interested in efficient government and better outcomes. We certainly believe that, as some Members pointed out, the number of Departments, with responsibilities for single issues shared across Departments, is not in keeping with good governance. Good governance has to be at the heart of any position on the issue, just like it has to be for the number of MLAs. It should be based not on party self-interest but on how best we deliver government to the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed, I have been working on a private Member's Bill to seek to improve how we co-operate across government in the current system to deliver services to children and young people. I hope that those who have talked about good governance today will work with me in that endeavour.

The Chair of the Committee said that now was the time for political parties to make decisions. Other Members said that parties should take away the report and party leaders should make decisions. The AERC is a public and transparent Committee and was designed specifically for parties to have these discussions. We should not move a public discussion behind closed doors, where there will always be the public perception that deals have been done. Any such decisions will lack confidence.

Furthermore, although we need to find common ground around these issues and, where we have common ground, build on it, ultimately these institutions were created by the Good Friday Agreement or, as it was dubbed at the time, the "people's agreement". If we propose to make major changes to it — some would suggest that we have already done so — it is my view and that of my party that we should do so with the consent of the people whose agreement we are discussing. My first ever vote was in the referendum vote on that agreement, and I know that it was taken incredibly seriously in my household, as it was in many others. We should be mindful of that in these discussions. We see in the current —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Sure.

Mr Beggs: In the referendum that you referred to, the Belfast Agreement etc, the legislation indicated that there was a maximum number of Departments. It did not state that you could not go for a smaller number, so, in reducing the number of Departments, we are not breaching anything that was agreed at that time.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I appreciate that, but we are talking about completely changing the structures and numbers of the Assembly. When I talk about putting it back to the people, I do so in the context of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's whole review. While I appreciate that this one aspect of it may not contravene the agreement, other aspects of it may do, if firm proposals are made. Ultimately, where politicians fail to get agreement, we can put a multi-optional position to the electorate. Where we fail to agree, we should ask the electorate what they believe the institutions should look like. Ultimately, it is their lives we seek to govern.

We have seen that happening with the Irish constitutional convention, where there are proposals to change the constitution in the Irish Republic. There has been a serious attempt to engage with members of the public. I am honoured to represent the Green Party in that convention. Just as I spoke earlier today about being proud to be British because of many of the institutions of Britishness, I am, in that regard, equally proud to be Irish and to take part in a democratic and effective way of engaging with the public. I said in part of the submission to that convention that the Northern Ireland Assembly can learn from how the Government of the Republic of Ireland have sought to engage with the people. Essentially, the Good Friday Agreement is the nearest thing that we have to a constitution, and we must go back to the people. There must be a time when politicians are clear on what the questions are but go to the people of Northern Ireland for the answers.

Mr Sheehan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have been on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee for about two years. This is the greatest excitement I have encountered in that time. *[Laughter.]* I will rise above all the catcalling that has gone on today and stick to my role as Deputy Chair.

As I said of the Committee's part 1 report on this review, this report represents part fulfilment of the matters referred to the Assembly and

Executive Review Committee by Standing Order 59, which provides for the Committee to make a report to the British Secretary of State, the Assembly and the Executive Committee by no later than 1 May 2015 on the operation of Parts III and IV of the NI Act 1998.

As the Chairperson said, no consensus could be reached by the Committee on the reduced number of Departments. However, the report usefully sets out in some detail the position of the political parties represented on the Committee and includes objectives that should underpin any reorganisation of Departments; five areas of commonality that can be used to inform any future reorganisation of Departments; six principles that should underpin the arrangements for any reorganisations of Departments; and further principles on costs, savings, impact on employment and equality for consideration in advance of any decision to reorganise Departments. The Committee considers that those conclusions should aid the final decisions on the restructuring of Departments.

I do not propose to go through Members' contributions today, except to say that we have had a mature and constructive debate in Committee. We have agreed important principles, and there is a need to take the debate forward. I thank Members for their contributions. I also thank the Committee staff, the Research and Information Service staff and other Assembly staff who assisted the Committee in its review and in the production of this report. As the Chairperson of the Committee said, the way forward is now for the Assembly's political parties, through the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to decide. Finally, I ask the Assembly to note the Committee's report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on its review of the number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and of the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments: 'Part 2 - Reduction in the Number of Northern Ireland Departments'.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.25 pm.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Lisanelly Shared Education Campus, Omagh

1. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Education to what extent the Lisanelly shared educational campus will be shared. (AQO 3049/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15 is committed to the creation of a shared education campus on the Lisanelly site for some 3,700 post-primary pupils, together with provision for pupils with special educational needs through the relocation of Arvalee School & Resource Centre. It is envisaged that the campus will involve a range of schools from different sectors, with different ranges of ability, coming together on the same site in Omagh. Plans currently under development propose a number of core schools relocating to the campus, where each core school will retain its own identity. Pupils at Key Stage 4 and beyond will have the opportunity to be taught together in shared, innovative centres.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that Drumragh Integrated College was refused an extension, is there any rationale for not having the local integrated post-primary school there as a catalyst?

Mr O'Dowd: The post-primary integrated school in Omagh is a relatively new building. That is the most pertinent reason not to relocate it to the Lisanelly site. It is an excellent building; indeed, Drumragh is an excellent school. That is one reason why we would not want to move it at this time. It has all the resources required to run a modern post-primary education centre. So, I have no intention of moving it to the Lisanelly site at this time.

Mr Storey: Given the recent court judgement on the challenge Loreto Grammar School made on its newbuild, will the Minister tell the House what discussions his Department has had since the appeal on how the issue will be moved

forward? Does he believe that schools under the authority of orders, or the maintained sector, are now committed to the project in Omagh?

Mr O'Dowd: It is now several months since the court judgement on the appeal took place. Since then, area planning has been in place. All schools, and indeed the community, should have been involving themselves in area planning discussions as to how we move forward.

The Lisanelly site is a Programme for Government commitment. I think that it is a good Programme for Government commitment. Although the area planning consultation responses have to be evaluated in relation to Omagh, I remain committed to the Lisanelly site. There would have to be a very, very good reason as to why a school or group of schools would not want to move to the Lisanelly site. I think that it is an innovative way forward. It allows schools from different sectors to come together. It allows them to retain their identity. It allows them to bring forward the shared educational needs of our community, which are reinforced by the Programme for Government. As I said, there would have to be a very, very good reason why a school would not want to move to the Lisanelly site for that to obtain my agreement.

Mr McAleer: Will the Minister update us on the relocation of the Arvalee school to the Lisanelly site following the fire at Arvalee school?

Mr O'Dowd: Members will be aware that, on Friday 31 August, a fire at Arvalee school caused extensive damage, resulting in its closure and the temporary relocation of pupils to neighbouring provision. The Arvalee site has since been cleared, and work is under way to reinstate the school on its original site, with pupils returning, hopefully, in or around March 2013.

Plans for the newbuild accommodation for Arvalee have been advanced to design stage C on the Lisanelly shared education campus, and an outline business case was recently received by the Department. Given recent events, officials from my Department have been working closely with the board to explore options to advance the Arvalee project as a stand-alone project on the Lisanelly site. Indeed, Arvalee could be one of the first schools to move to the Lisanelly site. I think that that in itself will give impetus to the project.

When the community around Omagh sees actual building work starting on the Lisanelly site, I think that that will encourage other schools that are still deciding where to go. It will encourage them to see that the Lisanelly site is a real project and is happening. I would like to see Arvalee move as soon as possible.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What other campuses are planning shared locations?

Mr O'Dowd: The boards are studying the responses to the area plans. I suspect that, through the area-planning consultation process, the boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), we will see other examples of shared educational campuses across the North. From the point of view of resources and community cohesion and building, it makes sense that our educational campuses come together on one site so that communities are, for the first time, sharing educational resources. That would be a good example for our education system. The consultation responses are being examined, from which I hope that we will see more examples of sites that have the same potential as Lisanelly.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Will he state how advanced the formal and informal negotiations on the project are with the three grammar schools and the other post-primary schools? There is a feeling that a greater emphasis is needed on the educational needs and requirements associated with the project.

Mr O'Dowd: The educational needs of young people in the Omagh area are at the very core of the project. That is advanced in the sense that there is also a community development proposal in the project: for the first time, we will bring the schools of Omagh together on one site. I thought that everyone would have welcomed that, that the project was a no-brainer and that we would be much further advanced in the negotiations.

The area-planning consultation process has been completed. That was the formal negotiation in the Omagh area. Those plans are being studied, but, as I said to the Chair of the Education Committee, there would need to be a very good reason for me, as Education Minister, to agree to the building of a new school anywhere other than on the Lisanelly site. It is a former British military site that is in the hands of the Executive. There is an onus on the Executive to develop it. It is a

Programme for Government commitment to develop the site, and there are a lot of national and international interests in it. So if we can get things right on the site, it will open up opportunities for education and investment in the future, nationally and internationally.

Primary Schools: Irish Language

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education how he intends to work with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to promote further the Irish language in primary schools. (AQO 3050/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am committed to enhancing the use of the Irish language in schools and communities that wish to be involved. I very much welcome the progress that has been made by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in publishing its strategy for protecting and enhancing the development of the Irish language. I recognise and support the importance and the contribution of education to that, and I am keen that my Department play its full part in contributing to that work.

During a recent joint visit to St John the Baptist Primary School in Portadown with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I announced an additional funding scheme to be delivered as part of the extended schools programme, which will help to promote learning and awareness of the Irish language. The scheme will complement the Culture Minister's Líofoa initiative, which aims to encourage 5,000 people from all walks of life to become fluent in Irish by 2015. I have made £230,000 available in the 2012-13 financial year to support the scheme, with the intention of continuing that funding over the next two years. The additional resources will enable extended schools cluster groups across all school sectors to apply for funding to provide programmes that support pupils, parents and the wider community in developing their skills in the use of Irish.

My Department also funds a number of educational initiatives to support primary schools and pupils in learning the Irish language, such as the primary languages programme, which gives pupils at foundation stage and Key Stage 1 the opportunity to learn an additional language at school. It also funds the Gaeláras Léargas pilot programme, which provides Key Stage 2 pupils in the Derry area with an opportunity to develop their knowledge of Irish language and culture.

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

his answer. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Will he give some additional detail about the success or otherwise in the take-up of the Léargas programme that has been initiated in Derry?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist, a Chomhalta. There has been an increased demand for Irish-language programmes, with more and more young people becoming interested in learning the indigenous language of the island. The Léargas pilot programme was announced by Minister Ruane in 2011, and it aims to provide Key Stage 2 pupils in the Derry area with an opportunity to develop their knowledge of Irish language and culture. The programme, which is scheduled to run for four years, commenced in 10 primary schools in the north-west in October 2011. It is being delivered by An Gaeláras in Derry and will build on the success of the primary languages programme. I am delighted to say that early indications are that the programme has been very well received by the schools and parents involved.

Mr Campbell: The Minister referred to schools that "wish to be involved" in his initial answer. Will he elaborate on that given that so many schools would not wish to be involved other than in teaching Irish as one of a multiplicity of other foreign languages?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has answered his own question. If you wish to be involved, you are involved. If you do not wish to be involved, you are not involved. It is quite simple, in English or any other language. I am sure that he can understand that.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister detail his Department's assessment of the return on capital employed given the increased level of expenditure on the promotion of the Irish language in the Irish-medium sector, which appears to have increased from £11.3 million in 2007-08 to £14.9 million in 2011-12?

Mr O'Dowd: I missed the start of the question. Does the Member want me to report on the return of the capital involved? With the Speaker's permission, perhaps he would clarify that?

Mr Copeland: Given the priorities facing his Department, is that level of capital expenditure justified?

Mr O'Dowd: The resource involvement in Irish-medium education is justified by the parental demand for it and by the fact that, under the

Good Friday Agreement, we have a legislative duty to promote and facilitate Irish-medium education. The return is that thousands of young people now speak Irish, their native language, and are involved in the cultural expression and use of that language.

More and more people from across our communities, regardless of their constitutional or any other view of this state, are prepared to accept the use of the Irish language as a non-threatening language with which everyone can and should be involved. There are many different political views, but most are prepared to accept and learn the Irish language. I am proud to say that my Department of Education has been involved in the promotion of the language. We have been investing in it and will continue to do so.

Primary Schools: Computer-based Assessments

3. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the operation of the new computer-based assessment arrangements for primary schools. (AQO 3051/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Ninety per cent of assessments have now been completed, and the remaining schools are expected to complete their assessments shortly. I understand that, following scheduled overnight updates to the network, a small number of schools encountered problems in accessing the computer-based literacy assessment on 28 and 29 November. That was due to planned upgrades to the education network and was not an issue specific to the computer-based assessments. Once reported, the technical problems were rectified within a couple of hours. I have been assured that schools can now continue with the assessments and that checks have been put in place to reduce the risk of those incidents happening again.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his response. I am sure that he will agree that, when computer problems arise during assessment, they can be very stressful for pupils and their teachers. Does he agree that it is vital to ensure that the problems are resolved quickly and effectively and that the IT systems in place are up to the task? When will he agree to a standardised approach to assessment?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with the Member that there should be no disruption to any assessment in schools, whether computer based or otherwise,

and the incidents in the recent autumn term were not acceptable.

Earlier in the autumn, when that issue first arose, I brought all those involved together and emphasised the need for them to set out a programme of work to rectify the problems that schools were facing and to ensure that they never happened again. We have rectified the problem, but I cannot stand in front of the House and definitively say that it will never happen again. Measures are now in place to ensure that a speedy resolution on the computer-based assessment is available to schools. The assessments are there to assist teachers in reporting back to parents on performance. They are not there to replace any of the other assessments that teachers or schools may wish to use to do so.

2.45 pm

I am not sure what the Member means by a single assessment. Schools can use a number of assessments, and, under legislation, computer-based assessment is one of those. I have asked the ETI to carry out a review of the current assessments, and part of that review will include a review of the legislation that stipulates that computer-based assessment has to be part of the tools that teachers use. I believe that computers should, in some format or another, be used in the assessment programme in schools, although I am flexible about what format that takes.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Given the level of investment in the system, can the Minister confirm whether there is potential for any clawback from the service providers in the light of the problems encountered?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist, a Chomhalta. Both contracts contain a clawback clause in the event that any part of the service provided by either NILA or NINA does not meet the requirements of the contract. However, we are not at that point. We should await the review of the trialling and implementation process and take into consideration all relevant factors before deciding what, if any, subsequent actions are necessary. The key issues for the moment are to provide support for schools where needed and to ensure that schools can complete the assessments to allow for updating to parents where possible. I am confident that both tools will provide effective support to teachers to

inform parents and pupils on progress achieved and areas for development.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What plans does the Minister have to make the outcomes of computer-based assessment more relevant to parents and inform teaching in our primary schools? That will probably involve expanding on the answer that he has just given.

Mr O'Dowd: As I said, I have asked the ETI to conduct a review of the current assessment process. As part of that, I also want to see how relevant and up to date the computer-based assessments are. I await the outcome of that report. I am flexible on how computers are used in schools and how they are used as part of the assessment framework. We currently have legislation that quite tightly stipulates the time frame and how assessments should be used. That legislation should be reviewed. We await the outcome of that review, and I will bring a report on that to the Assembly and the Education Committee.

DE: HM Treasury

4. Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education what information his Department provides to HM Treasury annually. (AQO 3052/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is responsible for the flow of departmental information from Departments to Treasury. My Department does not therefore provide information directly to Treasury. I can confirm, however, that my Department provides the necessary information to DFP to allow it to respond to Treasury requests.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his response so far. He will be aware that his Department assists in providing Her Majesty's Treasury with significant and detailed data through the public expenditure statistical analyses. Given that there is a clamour across the House to have greater detail in and greater scrutiny of budget lines, including from some Members from his party who sit on the Finance and Personnel Committee, does it not strike the Minister as odd that he is prepared to assist DFP and provide Her Majesty's Treasury with more detailed information than he is prepared to agree to the House seeing?

Mr O'Dowd: I provide the same amount of detail to the Treasury, through DFP, as all other Executive Departments do. DFP provides a very detailed response to the Treasury. I have

no difficulty with transparency in finances, and I have no difficulty with having greater transparency in finances in the Assembly. I do, however, have a difficulty with the Department of Finance and Personnel having the ability to tell me as Minister how, when and where I should spend Department of Education finances. That is not transparency; that is interference.

We are all clearly governed by the relevant legislation as Ministers, and we are all clearly governed by the code of conduct for Ministers. I am not aware that I am in breach of any legislation or the code of conduct, so I am living up to all my responsibilities on this. If the Treasury were to say that it now had my information and that it was going to tell my Department how to spend its money, I would tell it that it would not be getting any more information.

There is a need for —

Mr Storey: It is its money. It gave the money to you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: The Treasury gets its money from taxpayers. It does not grow the money on trees.

There is a need for us to resolve the situation. I am on the record, and I will go on it again: I am completely in favour of financial transparency. I am involved in financial transparency, but I will not allow DFP or any other Department to tell me how the Department of Education will run its affairs.

Mr McKay: The Minister answered the question that I was going to ask. Can he detail some examples of the data that he forwards to the Department of Finance and Personnel? Perhaps he can inform us whether he remains on the Finance Minister's Christmas card list.

Mr O'Dowd: I provide to the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Assembly the following information: in-year monitoring rounds — updates submitted in June, September, December and January — reflecting changes in spending plans; the provisional out-turn in May; the final out-turn in August; reporting administrations; the programme of capital spending against budget allocations; monthly out-turn and forecast out-turn information, providing details of all spend to date and projected spend for the rest of the financial year; and annually managed expenditure

details. I could go on and on, but I suspect that it will not reach the news headlines. I provide quite a lengthy list of returns to the Department of Finance and Personnel because that allows for financial transparency and does not interfere in my role as Minister running the Department of Education.

I do not know whether I am on the Finance Minister's Christmas card list, and the least said about that, the better.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister outline the benefits of that process to education itself?

Mr O'Dowd: That is exactly the point. My officials could spend a lot of time shifting papers from one desk to another but, quite rightly, they want to be involved in delivering services to schools, boards and communities, rather than being paper-shufflers. It is beyond me what benefit it could bring to education for further paperwork on financial issues to be pushed back and forward. If there is a need for further financial transparency, I will support it, but I will not support any measure that interferes in my role as Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Phil Flanagan is not in his place for question 5.

Education and Skills Authority

6. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education, given that there is no representation for Irish-medium and integrated education on the Education and Skills Authority board, whether he will seek to amend the Education Bill to remedy this situation. (AQO 3054/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans to amend the provisions on membership of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) in the Education Bill. Those provisions preserve the established role of the transferors and trustees in membership of the administration arrangements for education. There will also be four members appointed from the community, and representatives of other sectors may apply for those positions if they wish. ESA will have a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education. To give effect to that, ESA will need to ensure that it has staff with knowledge and expertise in Irish-medium education and that it engages with the sector and gives due regard to its views.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Seo í mo cheist ar an Aire. Does the Minister agree that, if Irish-

medium education and, indeed, integrated education are to be at the heart of the system here — that was not always the case in the past — it is essential that they have proper representation at board level on ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist, a Chomhalta. Irish-medium education and integrated education are at the heart of our education system. They are integral parts of education. They are no longer standing outside education being referred to on a needs basis. They are now part of the education system, and the reason for that is that we have a statutory duty, under the law, to ensure that we promote and facilitate Irish-medium education and, indeed, integrated education. That is not going to change with the ESA Bill. That statutory duty will also be placed upon ESA, regardless of its membership. Apart from those set out under the heads of agreement, membership has yet to be finalised in the sense that there are to be four community appointments to the board. So, there is a statutory duty on my Department and there will be a statutory duty on ESA which, I have no doubt, will continue to copper-fasten Irish-medium education and integrated education as a part of our education system.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, I am very concerned that he is not looking at amending the membership of ESA, which does not directly include the teaching fraternity. Will he support the Bill being amended, so that we get head teachers or principals into the body of ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: We could end up with an ESA board consisting of several dozen people representing every sector of education, everyone who works in education, everyone who wants to be involved in education and everyone who thinks that they know something about education. Teachers are very important, and teachers' voices will continue to be heard in education.

The role of the ESA board is to be a strategic delivery body for education. It will have a duty to consult all its stakeholders, and teachers are a crucial stakeholder in education. It will have to consult all the unions and everyone out there on its programmes of work and how it delivers education. So, no one's voice is not going to be heard, but it is impractical to have a strategic body with a board that consists of everyone. That just does not work.

One of the reasons why the boards have become outdated is that a 35-person board running a body does not work. It did work for a

time and, in fairness to the boards, they brought us through some very difficult times in our collective history, and they continued to deliver education through those times, but we have to bring forward a modern mechanism to deliver our education system. I believe that the board, as currently constituted under the draft legislation, is the way forward. The board will have a duty to consult everyone.

Mr Agnew: Given that the Minister has just made it clear that the integrated sector and the Irish-medium sector are now part of our education system, why have they not been given a place on the board of ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: I am sure that I would hear the same argument from the voluntary grammar sector and others around why they have not been given a place on the ESA board. I repeat what I said to Mr Bradley. They are an integral part of education. The ESA board is not there as a representative body of everybody in education. The ESA board's responsibility will be to deliver the key services to our education sectors. It will have statutory duties placed on it around Irish-medium and integrated education, it will have other duties placed on it to ensure that it delivers a fair and equitable service to everyone, and it will have a duty to consult the people it serves. Everyone's voice will be involved in ESA. However, it is impractical and would, I think, be a mistake to have every representative body around the ESA table. It is not a negotiating mechanism: it is a delivery body for education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: David McIlveen is not in his place.

Area-based Planning: Consultation

8. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education when the results of the area-based planning consultation will be published. (AQO 3056/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Each of the education and library boards has submitted a report to my Department on the key issues raised in the consultation. They have also outlined how they will address those issues. I will consider those reports, and I intend to make them public in due course.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he use his influence to move things on so that people in my constituency who, like me, support the Dickson plan can have any doubts about its future dispelled?

Mr O'Dowd: I assure the Member that I am using my influence every day in the Department of Education, as is my role. We had 47,000 responses to area planning, which is fantastic. It shows that there has been great community involvement in the response to area planning, and we have to have regard to those responses.

I have given the boards a bit of time to go through the consultation responses and ensure that the voices of those who have spoken are listened to and reported back to me. I had hoped to be in a position to report back to the Assembly in January. However, given the volume of responses, I suspect that it will be February before I report back to the Assembly. At that stage, I will be in a position to report back on the different aspects of our education system.

3.00 pm

Employment and Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Jim Wells is not in his place. I call Jim Allister.

Stranmillis University College: Governing Body

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why there has been delay in activating the process to appoint a new chairperson to the governing body of Stranmillis University College, Belfast. (AQO 3063/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The process of appointing a new chairperson to the governing body of Stranmillis University College has been activated and is under way. I understand that the post will be advertised in the press from 13 December.

Mr Allister: The Minister has known for a very long time that the present chairman would be retiring in December and that, therefore, a new chairman would be required. Indeed, three other members of the board have retired. Why, therefore, has there been this delay in activating the process? Can we be assured that, this time, a chairman who believes in Stranmillis, who supports the continuance of Stranmillis and who will work admirably with the staff there will be appointed?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his two supplementary questions. I am not sure which one he wants me to answer, but perhaps I will humour him and answer both. To address the

second issue first, the current chair of Stranmillis college has my full confidence; I believe that he has done an excellent job in that role. However, his term of office is coming to an end.

In response to the Member's first point, it is worth stressing that detailed consideration has been given, and is being given, to the merger of Stranmillis college and Queen's University. It has the support of the boards of governors of Stranmillis college and Queen's University; it also has my support and the support of my Department. At present, there is not sufficient support in the House to take forward the necessary legislation to make that a reality. We also have the ongoing review of the teacher education infrastructure, the first phase of which I hope to bring to an end within the next number of weeks.

In light of all those factors, I wanted to give careful consideration to whether it was appropriate to appoint a new chair, given that the long-term role of Stranmillis is under discussion and review. However, I concluded that it was appropriate at this time to run the competition not only for the new chairperson but for three additional governors to the board.

Mrs Overend: Can the Minister confirm that Stranmillis College is converting to non-departmental public body status and whether that also applies to St Mary's? If not, why not?

Dr Farry: I can confirm that Stranmillis and St Mary's have been classified as non-departmental public bodies by the Office for National Statistics. That body is independent not only of our Executive and Assembly but of the UK Government. At present, my officials are working through the implications of that reclassification. It is likely that St Mary's will be reconsidered in that context, because a number of representations have been made in that regard. It is important that everyone remembers that St Mary's and Stranmillis are not mirror images of each other; they were founded on a different basis, and they have different aspects of governance. It is important that we find a way forward that reflects what is appropriate.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister assure the House that he will do all in his power to address the situation regarding the representation of the transferors at Stranmillis, given that it was a former Member of the House — a former Minister — who removed the transferors from their rightful position on the board of governors, and that Stranmillis educates teachers for the

controlled sector? It is vital that that sector be protected?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question, but there are a number of fallacies behind the points that he makes: Stranmillis is a non-denominational institution that seeks to train teachers for the entire education sector in Northern Ireland. Although, historically, it may have been viewed as supplying teachers to one particular sector, that is neither the position in practice nor, indeed, in law. The same applies to St Mary's and to all the teacher providers in Northern Ireland. I certainly subscribe to the view that any professionally trained teacher, irrespective of their personal background, should be capable of teaching in any school in Northern Ireland, even schools that have a particular ethos. It is important that we bear that in mind as we move forward.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's points in relation to the current chairperson of the board of governors. They fought valiantly for Stranmillis over a number of years. Does the Minister share my concern that the viability of Stranmillis should be a stand-alone question and not something that is brought into a sectarian dispute?

Dr Farry: I concur with the first point that the Member made in respect of my confidence in the outgoing chair of the board of governors. However, I reject some of the other points that she made. We should not be having a sectarian dispute in any sense about teacher training, but it is my view that we cannot just look at the future of Stranmillis separately from the wider teacher training system in Northern Ireland. I have been on record and made a statement to the House saying that I do not believe that the current system is sustainable and viable in the medium term. So, we have to ask ourselves some hard and searching questions as to what is the best way forward.

In the light of that, I have set out a two-stage review of the process. The first deals with the financial viability of the colleges, and that is due to report very shortly. After that, I intend to move to the second phase, which is to discuss with all the providers how we can look to various formats for the sharing of teacher training in Northern Ireland. In doing so, while I may have my personal views as to the ideal way forward, I am prepared to listen to the views of the sector and to see where we can find consensus among providers on the best way forward. This should not be seen as a process that is threatening to anybody, but it is something that I hope everyone will embrace as

a means of ensuring that we provide a professional means of training teachers in Northern Ireland that is financially sustainable.

University of Ulster: Belfast Campus

3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the benefits of the planned University of Ulster Belfast campus development plan. (AQO 3064/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster's planned move to a new landmark building on its York Street campus will provide it with accommodation that is fit for a modern university. It will improve its utilisation of space and provide it with high-quality teaching and research facilities. The university demonstrated in an economic appraisal that the newbuild in Belfast was better value for money than redeveloping its existing facilities at Jordanstown. The total investment will amount to £250 million and represents one of the largest infrastructure investments in Belfast in recent years. It will provide a welcome boost to Northern Ireland's construction industry and will make a major contribution to the economic and social regeneration of that part of the city.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he outline whether he has had any discussions with his counterparts regarding possible difficulties with student accommodation in the area?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and for his supplementary question. There are probably two spillover issues that need to be considered as we move forward, and they are issues not only for my Department but for others. Those two issues are, first of all, as the Member has outlined, accommodation, and, secondly, sufficient transport infrastructure in respect of private car use with respect to car parking, roads infrastructure and public transport. Belfast City Council is also involved in discussions, given that it has a critical role in the future of Belfast city. I believe that this is an exciting project, but, given the scale of it, we want to make sure that we get it right. As we move into the planning phase of the development, those issues will come more to the forefront.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh mile maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We got a presentation on that issue. It is very exciting and will hugely impact on that part of the city.

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

Mr F McCann: I was just coming to it. Given the amount of businesses that are lying derelict in the area, is there any possibility that the Minister could bring the universities and the businesspeople together to see what impact they can have in providing accommodation for students, as we will see an influx of thousands of additional students into the area?

Dr Farry: Accommodation is not my direct responsibility as Minister for Employment and Learning, but I recognise my responsibility in relation to universities and higher education. I am happy to play whatever role I can in facilitating any dialogue that is required to take place. Any way you look at it, an investment on this scale will have a major regeneration boost for that part of the city and further afield. There will be benefits for existing businesses, both those that are derelict and want to be sparked back into life and those that wish to grow.

It is also crucial to remember the importance of developing Belfast as a university city. Around the world, universities play a critical role as key drivers in boosting economic activity. They provide the skills base for an economy through investment in research and development, but the sheer spending power of students, academics and other university employees can also make a real impact on a city's economic life, whether that be through social aspects or taxis, shops and other businesses.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht na bhfreagraí go nuige. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Speaking as chair of the all-party working group on construction, I believe that it would be a welcome shot in the arm and a boost for that sector. Will the Minister outline the time frame and investment that are associated with the project?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He is certainly right to highlight the importance of a project of that scale for the construction sector. I hope that we will have some additional capital plans for the further education sector that will also boost the construction sector. That plan will, hopefully, be completed by 2018, so it will be a medium-term investment. We hope to take the next steps in the near future. A project planning application was submitted to the Planning Service in March 2012, and it is hoped that it will make a decision in early 2013. As part of that, there will be issues that the

Member's colleague the Minister of the Environment will wish to consider.

Further and Higher Education: Language Courses

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to increase the uptake of languages at further education colleges and higher education institutes. (AQO 3065/11-15)

Dr Farry: I am aware of the importance to businesses in Northern Ireland of individuals with language skills at graduate and other levels. Language skills will play an important role in assisting businesses to promote their products and develop trade links in foreign markets.

My Department sets the strategic direction for the further and higher education sectors. However, each institution is responsible for its own curriculum offering, which includes the teaching of languages. Provision is dictated largely by demand for those courses.

Further education colleges currently offer an extensive range of language courses, from non-accredited beginner courses up to and including level 3 certificates. Language provision can be embedded in a number of specific curriculum areas, such as business, marketing, hospitality and tourism, although that will be of particular assistance to those who have previously studied languages at school. Those courses are marketed proactively to learners and employers through websites and prospectuses, and by a variety of social mediums.

In 2011-12, which is the most recent year for which validated data is available, there were 2,556 enrolments on language courses in the further education sector. They included European and Middle Eastern languages, such as Irish, French, German, Italian, modern Greek, Arabic, Chinese and Japanese. In the same year, there were 485 enrolments onto language courses at Northern Ireland's higher education institutions.

The two universities offer an extensive range of degree and extra-curricular courses in a wide range of languages. The University of Ulster offers degree courses in French, German, Spanish and Chinese. Queen's University Belfast offers degree courses in French, Irish, Spanish and Portuguese. In addition, Queen's University's language centre offers extra-curricular courses in 22 different languages.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am sure that he is aware of the British Council's criticism of Northern Ireland's underperformance with regard to foreign languages. Given the objectives that the Minister and I share on growing the economy, does he agree that the sector has a greater role to play in encouraging people not only to continue languages but to increase their understanding of a broader range of foreign languages?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his main and supplementary questions. I certainly concur with the sentiments that he expressed. Perhaps I will put it in the following terms, of which the Member will be well aware.

3.15 pm

We have our economic strategy, which underpins all that the Executive and individual Departments seek to do on the economy. Its central theme is the need to increase exports from Northern Ireland businesses. We need export-led growth if we are to have a real step change in our economy because our local market is not big enough to sustain the level of growth that we want. Obviously, given that we want to expand our exports and trade, we need an uplift in people's knowledge of and skills in languages.

Mr B McCrea: With the emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, many teachers in different institutions feel that languages are being left behind. Has the Minister given any consideration to producing a language strategy that would unify the approach taken by various institutions and convince parents and pupils alike that languages are, indeed, an important part of our economy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Committee Chair for his question. Our promotion of STEM subjects is not to the exclusion of other types of study. For sure, we need to significantly increase knowledge of STEM subjects because people will require those very specific skills if we are to grow our economy, and we have plenty of research to back that up. However, we need people who are adept and flexible. Indeed, those who study STEM subjects will benefit from having some knowledge of a language so that they are able to operate in a range of sectors.

The Member also mentioned the potential for a language strategy, which I would endorse. He may be interested to know that the Minister of

Education has lead responsibility for the development of languages for study. I have no doubt that he can ask the Minister directly for an update, or the Committee may wish to pursue that and get a progress report on where the strategy stands.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why his Department has effectively withdrawn funding for the provision of Irish-medium further education, despite there being a real demand for that and a legislative requirement on the Department to provide same?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I am not entirely sure whether I agree with him about the nature of a particular legislative requirement. I stress that I am more than happy for our further education sector to offer Irish.

The Member may be referring to issues with particular courses, and I am happy to have a conversation with him about that. I know that I had correspondence from some of his colleagues about particular issues.

The central point is that I am delighted that the Líofoa project has been taken up by the further education (FE) sector. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure asked whether we could publicise that through the FE sector, and I was happy to oblige. Ultimately, the provision of courses in the FE sector is largely driven by demand, and where demand exists, provision will be made. I am happy for that to continue to be the case.

NEET Strategy

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he intends to ensure that the not in education, employment or training strategy reaches those persons most in need. (AQO 3066/11-15)

Dr Farry: Pathways to Success, the Executive's strategy for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) was developed to ensure a cross-departmental, cross-agency approach to help young people who face barriers to participation, and it is complemented by initiatives to tackle the wider problem of youth unemployment.

The strategy seeks to join up effectively actions being taken across the Executive to prevent young people from falling into the NEET category in the first place, with measures to re-engage those who have left school but are not

in any other form of education, training or employment. It also sets out a number of key supporting measures to ensure that we can identify our young people's needs and match young people with opportunities to meet those needs. The strategy introduces a number of new initiatives in the context of wider existing and developing programmes of intervention. In combination, these represent a comprehensive programme of action, for which the Executive as a whole will provide leadership.

The initiatives on which my Department is leading are specifically targeted at young people most in need and their families. These initiatives include a community family support programme; a community-based access programme; a collaboration and innovation fund; and a training allowance for young people taking part in programmes supported by the European social fund.

My Department helped to establish a forum of community and voluntary organisations that are active in that field, which proved extremely beneficial in informing the development of the strategy. To ensure that the voluntary and community sector voice continues to be heard, the NEET strategy forum has been formally recognised as part of the organisational arrangements for taking forward the strategy.

My Department will lead a NEET advisory group and facilitate a partnership approach and joint working with Departments, the voluntary and community sector, the education sector, the health and social care sector, local government and the business sector.

Mr Boylan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. How does the strategy help those with disability to return to employment or education?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. A key theme threaded through the NEET strategy is a much more individually tailored approach to the circumstances facing young people who are disengaged. Disability issues, whether physical or mental health issues, are real barriers for people, so we are putting a lot of emphasis on individual mentoring.

We are also stressing that, beyond the precise limits of the NEET strategy, within employment services we have the disability employment service (DES), which is dedicated to working with people with specific disability needs to support them to look for employment and when they are in employment. Moreover, Training for Success, which is the main statutory programme provided for young people post-16,

is extended in eligibility for those people with a disability.

Mr Copeland: I, too, thank the Minister for his responses. Will he outline how, if at all, the £3.8 million collaboration and innovation fund could or will be used to help those not in employment, education or training, or, at the very least, what proposals he has received?

Dr Farry: I certainly can, but, with respect, I cannot announce those just yet to the Member and the House. The closing date for applications to the fund was the middle of November. My officials have reviewed and judged those programmes. The response to the initiative was very strong, and I am extremely encouraged by the level and quality of responses that we received.

I am hoping to finalise decisions on awards of funding over the coming days and to consider whether we can add additional resources to the pot to ensure that we can fund more of the good projects that came forward than were originally planned. I would like to be in a position within the next couple of weeks to make a formal announcement about the projects that will be supported.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his reply. Indeed, I commend him for his endeavours to reach out to one of the most socially disadvantaged groups of young people in present circumstances. Does he agree that more needs to be done, and how much has been spent on the strategy to date?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and agree with its thrust. I am pleased at what we managed to achieve over the past 12 months. When I assumed office, there was no budget available and set aside for NEETs. We were committed to producing a strategy, but it was envisaged at that stage to be no more than a means to draw together existing programmes and spending from Departments.

I am pleased that the strategy that we produced includes new interventions. As part of the wider youth employment business case and funding that we secured from the Executive this year, we have approximately £10 million set aside specifically for NEETs over the remaining three financial years of the current Budget period. That represents a significant intervention and shows the Executive's commitment to address that issue. I am sure that the Member will concur that this is a major problem and will require a

sustained intervention in not just this Assembly mandate but into the future.

There is a lot of work that we have to do to properly engage young people. Indeed, the images that we have seen over the past number of days and weeks, and our recent past in Northern Ireland, show that we really have an agenda of ensuring that our young people understand that they have a real stake in this society. We need to provide the means to ensure that they have the opportunities to realise that stake.

Steps 2 Success

6. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the Steps 2 Success programme, given the serious concerns raised in other jurisdictions regarding employment schemes and their failure to deliver permanent jobs. (AQO 3067/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is working on the development of Steps 2 Success, which will replace Steps to Work in 2014. Steps to Work is delivering a quality intervention that helps people in Northern Ireland to move into work. However, given that the programme has now been running for over four years, I would have been asking for a thorough review in any event. That would have been carried out regardless of the forthcoming introduction of universal credit or the ending of Steps to Works contracts.

Steps 2 Success is being developed to ensure that we continue to offer unemployed people the best opportunity to find a job. The Steps 2 Success public consultation exercise delivered over 80 responses from a range of organisations. Those responses are being evaluated, and they will help to inform the final shape of the new programme. I assure the Member that every attempt will be made to ensure that we develop and deliver the best programme for Northern Ireland.

It would be unwise not to consider what is happening with other employment schemes in Great Britain and further afield. The lessons that we can learn will prove invaluable in helping to avoid the pitfalls that have occurred elsewhere. The new programme presents a real opportunity to meet the employment needs of those who require it most.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. I ask him to detail the financial incentives that are given to people to encourage them to take part

in the Steps 2 Success programme. I am specifically referring to travel and other expenses that the individual might incur.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I am happy to write to him to set out specifically the assistance that is on offer today through Steps to Work for individuals who are in those circumstances. It is worth stressing that, as we move to a new programme and the contracting for it, one of the things that we will be looking to do is provide more flexibility around how the system works; we will provide flexibility to the contractors and subcontractors around how they can assist people to get into work.

There is a concept called the black box, which has been applied in the programme in Great Britain. It is, basically, a laissez-faire approach. Clients are handed over to the contractors, who are then asked to use their best endeavours to find them work without much accountability or understanding of what happens or who they prioritise to get work. That is not appropriate for Northern Ireland. I am not committed to the approach that has been applied in Great Britain. I intend to use a much more service-level-agreement-driven process, which could perhaps be called a grey-box approach. We have to find an appropriate balance of giving flexibility to contractors while ensuring that we preserve accountability by ensuring that all clients are treated equally and that assistance is given to everybody to find work.

Mr Kinahan: Have many people raised concerns about moving the timing of payment in Steps 2 Success? Does he feel that many people may not apply because of that?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. The Steps 2 Success consultation was an extremely worthwhile exercise. Although, at times, there can be a lot of cynicism about consultations, such as the view that they are, essentially, a tick-box exercise for Departments and a hoop that we have to jump through, that was certainly not the case with Steps 2 Success. Indeed, it is not ever the case with anything that we do. We have had a lot of very useful feedback from the 80-plus responses that we have received.

The issue of the funding model is very much in my mind at present. We are giving consideration to having a different funding model than was originally set out in the consultation document. In doing that we are very mindful of the experience seen in Great Britain to date, both in the sustainability of the

contractors who take on the contracts and their current success rate for placements.

3.30 pm

Mr Wells: On a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry; that ends questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning. There is a point of order.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to you and Minister Farry for my failure to appear for question No 1. I have only three defences. First, it is a first offence. Secondly, I was 30 seconds late. Thirdly, I was across the Atlantic with the Health Committee last week, so, although my body is at Stormont, my head is somewhere across that ocean. However, I realise the inconvenience that my absence caused you and the Minister, and I give you an assurance that it will not happen again.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for making his apology. I remind all Members that, although we know the precise time that the first Question Time will start, no one knows when precisely Question Time for the second Minister will start. Perhaps we will all learn from that.

Adjourned at 3.31 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

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

It is essential that the concerns are explicitly and fully addressed. I believe the external team will provide the comprehensive overview on the capacity and capability needed for that to happen. Sue Page, Chief Executive of NHS Cumbria, has agreed to lead the team. Details of other members and the terms of reference for the team will be announced shortly.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Published on Monday 10 December 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a Statement to the Assembly regarding the appointment of a Turnaround and Support Team to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

The Trust has faced significant challenges since its establishment in April 2007. In spite of support measures which have been put in place previously to assist the Trust, and the actions which have been taken, there needs to be further progress in the improvement of patient experience and care in the Northern area. There are no signs of sufficient improvement in waiting times at Emergency Departments (EDs) in spite of the earlier Hinds and Rutter Reviews of the Trust. The numbers of patients waiting over 12 hours at Emergency Departments have been unacceptably high throughout the year, and rising lately, and significant numbers of patients are waiting longer than 4 hours at the EDs.

The Trust Chief Executive has written to my Department to ask for further support in addressing these issues. Consequently, a small Turnaround and Support Team is being asked to complete a strategic overview to establish what changes and support might be required to accelerate progress. There will be a focus in particular on the challenges in relation to the Trust's ability to deliver on the services commissioned, including reducing waiting times in relation to unscheduled care. The Team will work alongside the support already being provided by the Health and Social Care Board and Public Health Agency. The Team will provide an assessment of the changes required to improve performance and to support the management of the Trust in the delivery of services.

I acknowledge fully the professionalism and commitment of the Trust management and the staff in addressing the challenges. Delivery of safe and effective quality services to all of our patients and clients, across all service areas, must be the over-riding priority, and it is for that reason that I have taken the decision to appoint an external expert team to support the Trust to help turn around performance in critical areas. It is clear that clinicians must be at the heart of the improvement process.



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