

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 18 February 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Beef Contamination

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for the delay in getting the statement into Members' pigeonholes this morning.

With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I wish to make a statement to update Members on the discovery of equine DNA in beef products. First, I would like to take this opportunity to make it clear once again that this has nothing to do with the high-quality, fully traceable beef produced here in the North. My Department delivers meat hygiene official controls on behalf of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in approved slaughterhouses and other establishments. Senior officials from the Department and the FSA maintain regular formal and informal contact to ensure consistent and effective delivery to the agreed standard, and the FSA performs regular checks and independent audits to ensure the quality of work delivered on its behalf. My departmental inspectors enforce regulations that provide customers with assurance about the origin of beef in abattoirs and approved cutting plants. We carry out extensive controls on the traceability of beef and beef products, mainly mince, both fresh and frozen, in abattoirs and approved cutting plants across the North. It is on that basis that I am confident of the high quality, safety and full traceability of beef that is born, raised and slaughtered here in the North, and I have openly and often stated that position since the beginning of this incident.

The FSA was made aware of the results of a Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) authenticity study of a range of meat products on 14 January 2013. This was a small survey conducted as part of the FSAI's routine monitoring programme of the labelling of foods and was specifically to check the type of animal species in meat products. The survey results showed that a number of beefburger products

manufactured in Britain and the South contained horse and pig DNA. The FSA in the North informed my Department of the issue on the evening of 15 January 2013. The FSA launched an urgent investigation into the issues highlighted in the survey and initiated a four-point plan for the investigation. This is being implemented by the FSA in conjunction with the food industry and other Departments, including my Department and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and includes the following: to continue the urgent review of the traceability of the food products identified in the FSAI's survey; to explore further, in conjunction with the FSAI, the methodology used for the survey to understand more clearly the factors that may have led to the low-level cases of cross-contamination; to consider, in conjunction with relevant local authorities and the FSAI, whether any legal action is appropriate following the investigation; and to work with DEFRA, the devolved rural affairs Departments and local authorities across Britain and in the North on a food authenticity survey on processed meat products.

All the FSA's intelligence is being fed into the European Commission through the rapid alert system for food and feed. As you will be aware, this has become a pan-European investigation. An intense investigation into the traceability is still under way, and the FSA is working closely with the respective authorities.

This is a very serious issue, and evidence points to either gross negligence or deliberate contamination of the food chain. For that reason, the FSA is working closely with police forces across Ireland and Europe. Indeed, a number of arrests have already been made in Britain.

The situation is developing at pace. The response between Departments in the North has been co-ordinated through the food and feed incident management group chaired by my Chief Veterinary Officer. To date, that group has met three times: on 17 January, 1 February and 8 February. More meetings are planned in

the coming days. A number of retailers both in the South and here in the North have withdrawn potentially affected products from sale. The FSA has carried out a comprehensive risk assessment of the food safety risks associated with this incident, and its advice is that the risk to human health from burgers in which equine DNA was detected is likely to be very low if the products are cooked thoroughly and if general food hygiene practices are followed. On Sunday 10 February 2013, the FSA issued interim advice to public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, as well as to caterers and consumers purchasing from retailers, in the light of the developing nature of the incident. Food businesses have been tasked with conducting authenticity tests on all beef products for the presence of significant levels of horse meat. Of the just over 2,500 samples of processed beef products tested, 29 were found to contain horse meat. All those products had already been removed from supermarket shelves by the time of the announcement on Friday.

Last week I met the FSA on several occasions to be updated on its investigations, and I met representatives of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland. On Wednesday, I met representatives of the main supermarkets here in the North. I emphasised to them the quality and traceability of beef from the North and encouraged them to source their products locally. On 14 February, eight cases of horse meat contaminated with bute were identified in an abattoir in Britain. Two of the carcasses were retained at the abattoir, and the others were sent to France. Three of those have been traced, and work is ongoing to identify the whereabouts of the others. Since 2011, 21 samples have been tested in the North for the presence of bute, and none of them has tested positive.

Mr Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to bring Members up to date, and I assure you that my officials are working tirelessly to protect the beef industry in the North. I intend to ensure that the FSA continues to require supermarkets to maintain their responsibility to provide their customers with assurance on the authenticity of their beef products by continuing to carry out surveillance for species. I will also want assurances that traceability of the raw materials continues from the fresh meat sector through to the processing sector. It is important that a system is put in place to ensure that horizon scanning for future potential problems is improved. I wish to investigate further the proposal from Safefood to have a neutral environment where information can be placed anonymously. I will ensure that Members are

kept informed of progress by way of regular updates.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development):

Many members of the public believe that the large supermarkets have got off lightly on this issue and that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has not done enough to highlight supermarkets' responsibility in this regard. In the Minister's conversations with the supermarkets, has she stressed to them the part that they have played in this debacle? Can she give us an assurance about the quality of food and the price in supermarkets? We all believe that supermarkets have played a part in pushing down prices and that that has led to some of these issues. Has she defended the County Down processing firm that has unfairly lost a contract with Asda, which some would say is unwarranted? The reputation of the food industry here must be protected. Can the Minister assure us that all cold stores in Northern Ireland have been checked for horse meat? Has any further horse meat been found?

Mrs O'Neill: The Chair of the Agriculture Committee will be aware that this is an ongoing investigation and that the findings of a number of tests are still to come. We had the results of the industry tests on Friday, but we also expect the results of further tests that environmental health officers are carrying out at the request of the Food Standards Agency. I am led to believe that those are due to be reported on by the first week in April. Until we have those results, it is hard to give the assurances that the Member talks about.

This is a massive consumer confidence issue. I put the case very strongly to representatives of independent supermarkets and the larger multi-retail companies. My very strong message to them was that they need to source locally and that this cannot have any impact on the farming community, because our local farmers are not involved in the investigation. Our local farmers are totally distinct from it, which involves processed food. There is a genuine fear in the farming community that, as a result of what is happening, future costs will be put on to it. I will stand strong with them to make sure that no costs are passed on to them, given that they are not involved in the situation. There is an onus on processors and supermarkets. I have made that point very firmly over the past number of weeks, and I will continue to make it. Processors and supermarkets have a responsibility to consumers to make sure that they get what is on the packet and on the label, and they have a responsibility to assure the

public that their products are safe. Farmers have to jump through hoops for farm quality assurance systems. They must ensure that they live up to all the required practices before they can put a logo on a product that they can stand over. Why should processors and supermarkets not have to do exactly the same?

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and for all that she has said for the farming industry. She has stuck up for it robustly. However, the message must go out today that you support the call from the farming industry that no cost should come down the line to the farmer.

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that I absolutely support that call from the farming industry. Our local produce is fully traceable, and it has integrity and safety. Given that they are not involved in the investigation, local farmers should not have to take on any costs that come as a result of further tests. Our farming industry needs to be treated separately in this instance. It already adheres to very high standards, and I fully support it.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement, which, as she said, arrived very late with us. It is abundantly clear that a major exercise is required to restore consumer confidence. Will she commit to spearheading that exercise to ensure that the local industry, especially our farmers, is not irreparably damaged by the revelations, which now come almost daily?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that the reason that I have been so public on the issue, even though the Food Standards Agency is taking the lead in the investigation, is that I am concerned about the damage that the investigation is causing to the local farming community's reputation. That is why I have to be very vocal about it and why I have to keep repeating the message that our local produce is safe, is traceable and has integrity. I will continue to promote that message to protect the local farming industry. The confidence issue will be resolved only as a result of a thorough investigation. The Food Standards Agency has a role to play in the completion of the investigation in as speedy a manner as possible. The investigation needs to be robust. It is now a European issue, and there are ongoing investigations at different levels. Either we are dealing with criminality — we have seen some arrests, which I support — or there is gross negligence that needs to be exposed. Those are the only ways in which we will

restore public confidence. I assure the Member that I will continue to carry out my role in promoting and supporting the local farming industry.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is very important that the statement be made, because the longer that the saga goes on without an official statement in the House, the more the wider public is concerned.

When was the issue first raised? Is it the case that it first arose in a cold store in Newry back in September and that it took a long time before the FSAI formally raised the issue publicly? How secure or otherwise is full traceability from the farm gate to the finished product on the shelf? Does the Minister accept that another system, developed by Dr Ken Baird, might be worth considering to achieve full traceability from the farm gate to the consumer?

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm to the Member that the Food Standards Agency first alerted us to the fact that there was an incident in a local company on 1 February this year. We were first alerted to the original situation in the South by the FSAI on 15 January. We have been regularly involved with the FSA and engaging with it since that time. I am led to believe that there was an investigation by the FSA and that environmental health officers from the local council were involved. It is important to reiterate that none of that foodstuff entered the food chain, and it is important that we get that message out.

12.15 pm

I have been very clear in saying that local traceability is second to none. That also needs to be applied in the processing sector. If there is already a way to do that, it should be exposed and that should be the lesson learned from this investigation. The major retailers and the processors have a duty of care to the consumer to make sure that they can stand over their products. Until such time as processed foods are also fully traceable, it will be very difficult to restore consumer confidence.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement. Does she agree that the longer this goes on, the more difficult it is for confidence to be instilled in the whole industry? I welcome her defence of the Northern Irish agriculture industry. However, does she agree that there has been too much buck passing, which seems to continue every week? The sooner someone takes responsibility for what has happened, the

sooner we will get back to doing what we do best in Northern Ireland, which is producing meat that people want to purchase. I say that not as a meat eater but as a vegetarian, but fully supportive of the Northern Irish agriculture industry.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. From the very start, I have said clearly that the Food Standards Agency is taking the lead in the investigation. If you want to know where the buck stops, that is it. We have been very sure to challenge the FSA on its role in the investigation to make sure that it is robust. I am coming at this purely from the point of view that reputational damage is being caused to the local farming industry. That is why it is important that we continue, as an Assembly and as an Executive, to send out the message that we support local produce, that it is fully traceable, that it has integrity and that it is safe. The Food Standards Agency is the lead body. I have issues with the fact that the Food Standards Agency is not accountable to the Assembly, but that is an argument for another day. At this moment, we need to get to the crux of the investigation and have everything exposed. We can have the conversation about FSA accountability at another stage.

Mr Irwin: Does the Minister agree that it is important that it is made clearer where food comes from and that country-of-origin labelling should be a priority, given that the housewife needs to know exactly where her food comes from?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. The provenance issue is at the core of this. Let us be very clear: this is a traceability issue. The fact is that there is no traceability in the processing sector, and we need to get to the bottom of that. Everybody has to play their role in giving consumer confidence to the households who purchase the products. We will continue to do that.

Mr Clarke: The Minister will be aware that the Agriculture Committee heard from officials from her Department and the FSA last week. They told us that there was never any suggestion — it was never on their radar — that horse meat was in abattoirs or was being used for food products. Can the Minister explain why, as she said in her statement, since 2011, 21 samples in Northern Ireland have been tested for the presence of bute? Given that it is used only in horses, why was there testing for it?

Mrs O'Neill: That is like saying that you should ignore a problem until it exists. You should

always be prudent in looking for potential threats to the food chain. That is why the vets take very seriously their role in abattoirs in carrying out tests. If the Member is suggesting that you sit back and do not do anything until a problem arises, that is not a prudent way to do business.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has spoken about the responsibility of the supermarkets to maintain customer assurance on meat products. Does the Minister agree that, the shorter the supply chain, the greater the control and the smaller the risk? Does she agree that local butchers can play an important role in providing that assurance? Does she also agree that, if supermarkets choose to use a variety of suppliers, they risk their future business and that greater control and genuine knowledge of the source of meat are essential?

Mrs O'Neill: I fully agree with the Member that the whole food supply chain is a complicated process, and the more stages that are involved in that, the harder it is when it comes to investigations. I put the point very clearly to the major supermarkets and to the independent supermarkets that I encourage them to source their products locally. That shortens that supply chain, and that is far more beneficial to the public, so I encourage that to happen.

Lord Morrow: I wonder if the Minister will brief us on what discussions she has had with her counterpart in the South of Ireland. Will she also tell us to what extent Greencore is supplying here in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind that its chief executive is Mr Patrick Coveney, who is a brother of the Agriculture Minister in the South of Ireland? Is it not true that, in fact, ABP supplied food to Greencore, which, in turn, supplied our schools here? Will the Minister tell us if that practice is still going on, and what action does she intend taking to further investigate that situation?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that it is a time for political grandstanding, but I am happy to advise the Member of the discussions that I have had with Minister Coveney, Owen Paterson and the Scottish and Welsh Ministers. Those discussions have been ongoing, and we have had two teleconferences in the past week with Owen Paterson and the Scottish and Welsh Ministers. It is important that we continue to discuss the matter. The week prior to that, I had discussions with Simon Coveney, and I will continue to do so. This is a European issue. It is right across the board, and we will have to continue to talk. Investigations are going on at local level and at European level. I

am going to Brussels next Monday, where there will be an agriculture commission meeting. There will be an opportunity for everybody who is involved to sit around and have a discussion on the lessons that have been learned, what else needs to be done in terms of consumer confidence and what else can be done to support the supply chain.

In respect of Greencore and who it is supplying, you should put that question to the Food Standards Agency. I am happy to pass on to the Member any details that I have in respect of — *[Interruption.]* The Food Standards Agency is in the lead in the investigation. You can choose to nod your head all you want, but that is the reality. They published a list last week of the companies that they have been supplying into, and, regardless of who is involved in any of the companies, if there is any criminality or fraud involved, that should be exposed, and it should be dealt with by the full rigour of the law. I have consistently made that point, and I will consistently continue to make that point, regardless of who is involved in any of these situations. This certainly is a European issue, and it needs European investigation. As I said, I stand over the fact that anybody who is involved in fraudulent activity needs to be brought before the courts.

The Minister of Education made an announcement last week around schools, and I encourage the Member to look at that.

Mr Storey: Following on from the Minister's comments in relation to the Education Minister, in that statement there was no reference to the supply chain in terms of contracts emanating outside Northern Ireland. What discussions has the Minister of Agriculture had with the Education Minister to ensure that there are no contracts that are currently supplying schools in Northern Ireland that emanate out of the Irish Republic or any other jurisdiction in which there has been a clearly identified problem? Can she, without trying to pass the buck or trying to pass the blame on to somebody else, give us a clear answer? Clearly, she did not answer Lord Morrow's question.

Mrs O'Neill: Let me be very clear: the Food Standards Agency is in the lead in this investigation. Throw your head up or choose to ignore it, but that is the reality. I encourage the Member, as Chair of the Education Committee, to have a conversation with the Education Minister.

Mr Storey: I have.

Mrs O'Neill: Well, you asked me the question. On Friday, I had a meeting with the Education Minister. He had a thorough discussion, which he found very useful, with the Food Standards Agency around all these issues. He has a job in respect of the education of children and school meals being provided. He asked a number of questions of the Food Standards Agency, and I know that he sought some assurances. I encourage you again to have that conversation with the Education Minister in your role as Chairperson of the Committee. He sought assurances from the Food Standards Agency because it is in the lead in this investigation.

Mr Allister: Now that, five weeks on, the Minister has belatedly come to the House on these issues and in the hope that she will get to grips with matters that threaten the stability of our vital agrifood sector, can I ask her what specific measures, not platitudes, she intends to take to ring-fence our blameless red meat producers from collateral damage? What steps will she take to deal with her porous horse passport system?

Mrs O'Neill: Maybe the Member has not been following developments. This is an evolving situation. I have consistently made the point that the local farming industry is not involved. I come at this situation from the point of view of wanting to protect the reputation of the food production system in the North of Ireland, which is fully traceable with high standards and total integrity. I will continue to make that point and encourage all Members to make that point.

The horse passport issue is a discussion for another day. It has been highlighted around horse welfare, and people have made public statements on horses in the last number of weeks. Anything that has come to the Department has been fully investigated. There is nothing in the evidence that has come forward to suggest anything untoward at this moment in time, but I am happy to fully investigate any horse welfare issues that come forward. The Member will be aware that the horse passport scheme is an EU scheme that was rolled out across Europe. It came in here in 2010. A review of the scheme in 2011 identified no major deficiencies. That said, I assured the Equine Council for the North of Ireland at a recent meeting that my officials will work with it to bring about any improvements that we can to the horse passport scheme in the North of Ireland, and I am committed to doing that.

Mr McNarry: I recognise that the Minister speaks for the farmers. Is she satisfied with the speed of reaction and subsequent co-operation on this matter by retailers with her and her Department? Can she assure the House that products currently for sale from retailers do not contain horse meat? Can she tell the House that retailers are standing over products on the shelves today and that they will cause no fear for the consumer? That is a different question from her ongoing investigations that she talked about today. This is about consumer confidence today in the shop. Will the Minister give the House an assurance that, when a person goes to the shop today, no matter where it is, to buy a product with beef in it, the consumer can be comfortable that that product has no horse meat in it?

Mrs O'Neill: I will give an assurance on the local produce because that is the assurance that I can give.

Mr McNarry: No, you have to do better than that.

Mrs O'Neill: That is —

Mr Speaker: Order. You must allow the Minister to answer.

Mrs O'Neill: I can give an assurance on local produce because that is what I am responsible for. That is the system that I am responsible for, and I will stand over it. Local produce is safe, traceable, transparent and is there for all to see. If there is a "Farm quality assured" stamp on it, it is safe and can be stood over. I cannot stand over processed food. I am not responsible for processed food. The food processing companies are responsible to DETI. The Food Standards Agency is taking the lead in this investigation and is answerable through the Health Department.

I will continue to separate out those roles because that is important. I will stand over what I can, which is local produce, and I will continue to do that. All we have to go on around processed food and horse meat in processed food is that the Chief Medical Officer in England said that it was safe to eat. That is the only advice that we can go on. She has made that call consistently. Apart from that, I could not give an assurance, but the Chief Medical Officer gave that assurance, and I can only trust that judgement given that she is an expert in her field.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her

statement. Given that the free trade dynamics of the EU food supply chain played a significant role in the recent failure of confidence in the supply chain, what steps will the Minister take to engage with Brussels and our MEPs in the weeks ahead to put this issue to bed?

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

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, this clearly is a European issue now, and it is important that we continue to engage with the MEPs. I am going to Brussels next Monday for the European agriculture commission, and I also intend to try to meet MEPs when we are there. The investigation is going on at local level but also at European level, where a full Europol investigation is under way. We need to be on top of all those things and continue to engage at local level but also at European level. I assure the Member that I am committed to doing that.

12.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (Designated Organisations) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the draft Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (Designated Organisations) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

I am seeking the Assembly's approval of the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (Designated Organisations) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013. The order designates a number of organisations to sit on all policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) across Northern Ireland and on the four district policing and community safety partnerships (DPCSPs) in Belfast.

I propose the designation of the following organisations: the Police Service of Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; the Probation Board; the Youth Justice Agency; health and social care trusts, excepting the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service; education and library boards; and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. I am pleased to be able to bring the order before the Assembly, since it marks an important milestone in the establishment and operation of policing and community safety partnerships.

When I made provision for the establishment of PCSPs in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, my aim was to make our community safer. The partnerships have brought together and built on the work of the previous district policing partnerships (DPPs) and community safety partnerships. Overseeing their work is a joint committee consisting of representatives from my Department and the Policing Board.

PCSPs are designed to play a key role in building confidence in the justice system and ensuring that members of the community are empowered to help develop solutions to tackle crime, the fear of crime and antisocial behaviour. They will be expected to contribute at a local level to the achievement of Northern Ireland-wide targets set in the Programme for Government, as well as to deliver on the vision outlined in the community safety strategy and the objectives detailed in the policing plan. The partnerships are working to ensure a joined-up approach to policing and community safety issues, developing holistic solutions to issues identified by local people and making a real difference on the ground.

It is, of course, early days. However, I hope that PCSPs will be able to step up to the mark in difficult circumstances and give the leadership needed to address community safety issues in local communities, through identifying problems, developing solutions, taking action and judging and learning from the results. We have already seen some recent examples of PCSPs responding to the needs of local communities. One notable example is from Omagh. Following the tragic death of Jason McGovern, Omagh PCSP is taking forward a range of targeted initiatives to improve town centre safety, co-ordinating with a range of bodies to develop a holistic response to those local issues.

One of the new features of PCSPs that will enhance the effectiveness of such joint working is that of designation. That feature was designed to formally recognise the contribution that statutory and voluntary and community organisations can make to enhancing community safety. In practice, it means that those bodies will be fully immersed in the work of the partnerships, delivering with other partners to improve community safety. They will, as part of the PCSP, work to engage with the community to identify issues of local concern, develop plans and take action as needed. I believe it to be extremely positive that that responsibility will not simply lie with the police, as had tended to be the case previously in DPPs.

The Justice Act includes two types of designation. The first is local designation, where each PCSP can select bodies that might potentially assist them in meeting their local objectives. Those bodies can hold membership of the PCSP and contribute to the partnership's planning and delivery. The second type of designation came about as a result of a Justice Committee amendment during the passage of the Justice Bill. It enabled my Department to list, in an order, a number of organisations that would be obliged to provide representation on all PCSPs across Northern Ireland. In my view, this represented a strengthening of the original provision for local designation, and I was happy to support it.

I thank the Justice Committee for its careful consideration of designation issues and for its ongoing input as we develop the final designation order. It is with the Committee's support that I bring this order before the House today.

The bodies that Members see listed in the draft order represent the culmination of a wide-ranging consultation exercise undertaken by my

Department, with support from the Policing Board. The Justice Act required consultation with all PCSPs prior to the development of the order, and the formal consultation on the seven bodies listed in the order closed in August of last year.

During the consultation process, it was clear that PCSPs recognised the importance of having representatives from a broad range of sectors working together to develop local solutions. The majority of respondents stated that the bodies listed were appropriate for designation because of their potential to play a key role in improving community safety across Northern Ireland. In my view, the order is crucial. It provides PCSPs with a level of consistency and ensures that the key players in the arena of community safety are involved across the board.

Prior to formal consultation with PCSPs, departmental and Policing Board representatives met representatives of a range of bodies identified through consultation as potential designated bodies. The seven bodies listed in the order were keen to get involved from the outset and recognised that the benefits of designation were mutual: they would help PCSPs to deliver on their strategic objectives; and the work of the PCSPs would link in to their own organisational objectives.

Many of the bodies have already become involved in the work of PCSPs on a voluntary basis. They are getting to grips with local issues and are ready for the responsibility that the order will place upon them. Indeed, they welcome the formalisation of their contribution in this way.

I want to emphasise the importance of ensuring that those who can make our communities safer, do so, and do so in partnership. We must bear in mind that strong partnership working is integral to delivering the improvements that we want to the quality of life in local communities in every part of Northern Ireland. The order is only one part of the picture, but it is an important one. It will allow PCSPs to deliver holistic solutions for local people. I urge the House to support the motion.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): The origin of this draft statutory rule, which the Minister of Justice brings to the Assembly for approval today, comes from the work of the first Justice Committee in the previous mandate, when it considered the establishment of the policing and community safety partnerships as part of the provisions contained in the 2010 Justice

Bill. That Committee looked at the establishment of PCSPs in some detail and took oral evidence on those particular clauses from 21 organisations at a stakeholder event. I commend those who were on the Committee at that time. It was ably chaired by my colleague Lord Morrow, and it looked at this in some detail. I know that a number of its members subsequently moved on, but it carried out an important piece of work. I think that it is important that we put that, and our appreciation, on the record.

Part of the Committee's deliberations on the clauses related to the size and composition of PCSP membership. It was the Committee's clear view, strongly supported during the oral evidence event, that there was merit in designating a small number of named organisations, such as the Probation Board, to be represented on all PCSPs to ensure a consistent level of skills and expertise across the partnerships, rather than leaving it entirely to each PCSP to decide for itself which organisations should be represented on it.

The Committee's preferred approach to achieving this was to require the Department of Justice to produce a regulation listing the proposed designated organisations to be approved by the Assembly. It was the Committee's view that such a regulation would place the decision-making in the hands of the Assembly, and the Committee believed that to be the most appropriate place for it. Given that no agreement was reached between the Committee and the Minister on this during Committee Stage of the Justice Bill, the Committee tabled appropriate amendments at Consideration Stage, and these were supported by the Assembly. The regulation provided for by the Committee's amendments is before the House today.

The current Justice Committee was briefed by departmental officials on the proposal for the regulation in October of last year and considered the draft statutory rule in January 2013. The Committee has agreed that it is content that the designated organisations in the regulation, which, as the Minister outlined, include the PSNI, the Probation Board and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, will bring a broad range of experience and expertise to the partnerships and will contribute to enhancing community safety on the ground.

The Committee looks forward to seeing the Department draw up guidance on developing the role of the designated bodies, and it has asked for clarification regarding the protocols that are in place between the Northern Ireland

Housing Executive, which will be represented on the PCSPs, and the housing associations, which will not, on sharing information that is relevant to each partnership's work. The Committee also welcomes the Department's intention to make provision for organisations, such as the Public Prosecution Service and Roads Service, which are not in the list of designated organisations, to engage and contribute to the work of PCSPs as necessary on issues of local concern.

At its meeting on 31 January 2013, the Committee agreed to recommend that the draft statutory rule be approved. I will support the motion today. Echoing the Minister's comments, I believe that this is a welcome development. I think that PCSPs and the way in which they have been formulated have enhanced the role that they can play in our community. Certainly, concern was growing that, sitting in isolation, district policing partnerships and different community safety partnerships did not operate as effectively as they could. The joined-up approach now is the best way to try to deliver on issues that, ultimately, affect all our local communities. We trust that those organisations will be able to play an important role in that.

I will now speak in my capacity as an individual Member. We have a degree of concern. I know that, in the first year of operation, these statutory organisations will not have voting rights. Obviously, that could, ultimately, change. We will be keen to review how that relationship is established between the statutory bodies, people who are appointed as independent members and political representatives to ensure that they work properly together. We will await the outworkings of its first year of operation. We may then have a view about the appropriateness or otherwise of the voting rights being extended and added to those organisations. Certainly, I commend and support the motion.

Mr G Kelly: I am not on the Committee for Justice, but I am a member of the Policing Board and happen to be the chairperson of its community engagement committee. For that reason, I thought that it was appropriate to say a few words on the motion.

For all the reasons that the Minister and the Chair of the Committee covered, I welcome the statutory rule that is being brought forward. I think that it is crucial to having community engagement at the core of policing, and it is excellent that the designated bodies actually have a duty to attend. I agree with the

comments of the Member who spoke previously on — well, I do not know whether we agree. However, the fact that the seven designated bodies agreed not to use their voting power during the first year in testing was a great move forward by all of them and reflects the ability to negotiate the matter with them.

There is a duty to attend. It is, if you like, an extension of a multi-agency approach that has been seen to work on the ground in a number of areas, including north Belfast. For that reason, I am delighted that we are at the point where agencies are coming forward and assisting in that in holding the police to account. As the Minister said, the police have said that, very often, they are the organisation that is held to account, but many other statutory bodies should be involved with community safety and other issues. I think that the partnership bodes well for the future. I support it.

Mr Ford: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you will be delighted to know that I do not intend to make a lengthy speech. I thank the Committee Chair for his positive comments. I confirm to him that guidance is being developed for the way in which the partnerships will operate and for the role of the designated organisations and that we will review voting rights at the end of the first year of operation. I welcome Gerry Kelly's contribution. As he said, he is the co-chair of the joint committee between the Department and the Policing Board. I echo his comments about the necessity for joined-up partnership working. I thank the House not only for its agreement this morning but for the lengthy and detailed work that has been done in the Policing Board and the Committee to get the order right. I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (Designated Organisations) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

12.45 pm

Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a motion to approve a statutory rule.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That the draft Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

I seek to introduce the aforementioned statutory rule, which will, subject to the Assembly's approval, specify the standards for commercial dog-breeding establishments and introduce a new licensing system for such establishments. Before I go into the detail of the regulations, I will briefly explain to Members the background to them.

The current regulations covering dog-breeding establishments are the Dogs (Breeding Establishments and Guard Dog Kennels) Regulations 1983. The regulations were made under the Dogs Order 1983, which focuses on dog control as opposed to dog welfare. The 1983 regulations set out the information that must be supplied to a council for the registration of a dog-breeding establishment and specify the conditions under which such establishments must be constructed and operated. Although the 1983 regulations provide basic welfare standards for accommodation, they do not contain any specific welfare controls for bitches, dogs or pups.

Prior to the Welfare of Animals Bill being introduced in the Assembly in June 2010, there were calls from elected representatives and members of the public to bring forward new legislation to stop so-called puppy farming. In addition, during the Bill's passage through the Assembly, there were also calls from a number of MLAs to stop puppy farming and to specify in the Bill the welfare standards for dog-breeding establishments. However, the level of detail required to do that was considered excessive for primary legislation. My predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, therefore gave an assurance to the Assembly that one of the first pieces of subordinate legislation to be made under the new Welfare of Animals Act 2011 would concern dog-breeding establishments.

Bringing the draft regulations before the House today honours that commitment.

The Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 will regulate the commercial breeding of dogs and provide commercial dog breeders with specified standards that are intended to maintain and, where necessary, improve the welfare of breeding dogs throughout their breeding life. The regulations will not apply to hobby breeders who breed the odd litter of pups to maintain good bloodlines in a show dog or a good working strain in, for example, a gun dog or a sheepdog.

The regulations will introduce a new definition for breeding establishments with an associated licence to operate such an establishment and a related licence fee; provide an exemption for licensed dog-breeding establishments from the existing requirement to have a block licence under the Dogs Order; make it a mandatory requirement to microchip all bitches, dogs and pups in the establishment; introduce conditions that must be complied with under the terms of the licence, including controls on the age and the number of litters that a bitch can breed, the minimum age at which a pup can be sold or transferred, and written socialisation and enrichment plans for pups and bitches in the establishment; and provide an exemption for registered hunt clubs, providing that they do not sell dogs or pups, and one for registered charities, providing that they do not breed dogs.

It is important for Members to know that, before the regulations were drafted, my officials visited a number of registered breeding establishments here and in England to help inform development of the policy. The establishments here range from small establishments with fewer than 10 breeding bitches to a large establishment with 400 to 500 breeding bitches. Standards in those establishments vary considerably, from what could be described as Rolls-Royce models to those barely meeting the minimum standards set in the 1983 regulations. The visits were very informative and helped improve my officials' understanding of the difficulties faced by breeders and the issues that needed to be addressed.

A 12-week public consultation was undertaken on the draft regulations, and it ended on 10 January last year. The consultation issued to over 2,000 stakeholders, including 242 registered breeders and 1,214 block licence holders. My Department received 610 responses, 90 of which were substantive responses and 520 of which were letters

supporting the response from one group of breeders.

The consultation responses came from a diverse range of stakeholders, and a wide spectrum of opinion was expressed in the responses, with many conflicting views. Overall, however, the draft regulations were welcomed by the majority of the 90 stakeholders who submitted substantive responses, and there was significant support for the vast majority of the proposals.

However, the breeders' group that had 520 letters supporting its response expressed concern generally about the legislative proposals and about the draft guidance for council enforcement officers, which was also subject to consultation. It stated its opposition to the new regulations, preferring to keep the current regulations made under the Dogs Order 1983, and to build on and reinforce them rather than introduce new legislation under the 2011 Act. It did not agree with the proposals to license a dog-breeding establishment or the introduction of a licence fee. It suggested that the current block licence, which is issued under the Dogs Order, be retained. It also expressed its opposition to many of the proposed conditions of a licence, such as whelping facilities; socialisation of pups; mating conditions; microchipping, particularly for pups going for export; first registration by the breeder of the pup on the microchip database; records to be kept by breeders; and the suspension of appeals procedures.

As I stated earlier, although the Dogs (Breeding Establishment and Guard Dog Kennels) Regulations under the Dogs Order were fit for purpose when made in 1983, they do not provide the welfare standards that we expect in the 21st century. Therefore, I do not consider it a viable option to keep the 1983 regulations under the Welfare of Animals Act.

I have considered all other points that were raised by stakeholders. Where practical, I have tried to address as many of their concerns as possible. However, in addressing stakeholder concerns, both from welfare organisations and dog breeders, I have had to ensure that the new regulations do not become watered down and meaningless, but clearly set out the welfare standards that commercial breeding establishments must adhere to.

As a result of the consultation responses and subsequent scrutiny by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have made a number of significant changes to the draft regulations, including changes to the

definition of "breeding establishment". In the consultation, one of the key elements in defining a commercial breeding establishment was a person who keeps three or more breeding bitches and breeds two or more litters of puppies in any 12-month period. Most stakeholders did not agree with the proposed definition, and were of the view that hobby breeders should be allowed to breed three litters each year before being required to be licensed as a commercial breeder.

To take account of the majority of stakeholders' comments and to ensure that very small breeders did not face new licensing costs, I have increased from two to three the number of litters that may be bred each year before a breeding establishment licence is required.

In the consultation, it was proposed that a bitch could breed only one litter of pups in any 12-month period and could not be bred after she reached eight years of age. Although a wide range of stakeholders supported those conditions, valid comments were received from dog breeders that they were too restrictive and not financially viable. For example, greyhounds can be raced until they are five or six years of age, and, under the proposals, could therefore breed only two or three litters before they reach eight years of age. In a bid to take on board those comments while still protecting the welfare of the breeding bitch, I have amended the conditions to allow a bitch to give birth to three litters in three years as long as the bitch is not bred in any consecutive heat period. That takes account of bitches that come into heat less than every six months. In addition, a bitch can be bred after six years of age if, on each occasion, a veterinary surgeon certifies that the bitch is in good health to breed.

I have also removed the requirement to have an older bitch or dog spayed or neutered before rehoming. Although I would prefer that those older bitches and dogs are not bred again when they retire from the breeding establishment, it is, on balance, better that the dogs and bitches that are suitable for rehoming as family pets are rehomed as opposed to being put down because of the cost of neutering. I have reduced the mandatory record-keeping requirements that a breeding establishment must retain to the minimum required to allow an inspector to assess compliance with the regulations. I have retained the requirement for all pups to be microchipped before they leave the breeder. It is crucial that pups can be traced back to the breeder, irrespective of whether they go to a new owner in England or remain in the North. Microchipping will allow that to happen.

The draft regulations are fit for purpose. I am pleased to say that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, as part of its scrutiny role, thoroughly examined them. It undertook its own stakeholder engagement and visited a number of breeding establishments. My officials have worked with the Committee to ensure that we now have workable regulations that will improve the standards in commercial breeding establishments across the North. I hope that my officials have assured the Committee that, although council officials have almost 30 years of experience in inspecting dog-breeding establishments, they will work with councils to ensure that their officers understand the requirements and licensing conditions under the new regulations. I endorse that commitment, and I have agreed that the powers in the new regulations will not commence until 1 April to allow time for that to happen.

At the Committee's meeting on 11 December, it indicated that it was content for the regulations to be brought before the Assembly. The Committee provided final clearance of the draft regulations on 5 February. I put on record my thanks to the Committee for its valuable input into all the regulations.

I highlight to Members that, as a result of the new licensing regime, councils will, for the first time, receive a fee that will cover the cost of processing the licence application, including the inspection visit. I assure Members that no unfunded burden will be placed on councils, and hence ratepayers, as result of the regulations.

I appreciate that regulation alone will not stop so-called puppy farming. That is going to take a concerted effort by members of the public, future dog owners, good breeders and enforcement agencies to work together to identify breeders, either licensed or unlicensed, who put financial gain before the welfare needs of their pups and their dogs.

However, these regulations clearly set out the welfare standards with which commercial breeders must comply. More importantly, they provide the powers to allow action to be taken where a breeder does not meet those standards. Council inspectors will also have clear standards for applying strong enforcement powers that will allow them to take action to prosecute anyone who is illegally breeding dogs. In addition, the new enforcement powers and tough penalties will act as a deterrent to those taking part in illegal dog-breeding activities, sending out a clear message that no such activities will be tolerated.

Following Assembly approval of the regulations, my officials will start publicising the existence of the new requirements for commercial breeders and highlighting to future dog owners the importance of buying pups only from reputable breeders and where they can see the conditions in which the pups are born and reared.

So, again, I am grateful to the members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee for their support for the regulations, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I welcome the opportunity to speak to this motion, which seeks to affirm the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013. The statutory rule is being laid under powers conferred by sections 12 and 55(3) of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

As part of the Committee's scrutiny of proposed legislation, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development presented the outcome of the consultation to the Committee at its meeting on 3 July 2012. After that meeting, many of the key stakeholders expressed considerable concerns about the legislative proposals and the draft guidance for enforcement officers. As a result of those concerns, the Committee agreed to host a stakeholder event to help inform its understanding of the apparent apprehensions felt by a large number of individuals and organisations. This included a wide range and type of organisations, among them animal welfare groups, dog breeders, the local authorities that will enforce the legislation and local hunt clubs. That was an extremely useful exercise, and clarified in the minds of members exactly what the issues were.

The Committee followed up the stakeholder event with a visit to two very different dog-breeding establishments. I take this opportunity to thank both dog breeders who allowed us to visit their premises. That, again, was very useful because we could begin to see what the regulations would actually mean on the ground. The Committee also received oral and written evidence on this issue.

Over the next few months, we worked closely with Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials to clarify and agree positions on a number of issues. That was useful for all concerned, and gradually compromise positions were discussed and agreed. My thanks go to the officials who

worked closely with the Committee on this. For example, the Committee expressed reservations on the requirement to spay or neuter dogs at the end of their breeding life before rehoming. Members felt that this would lead to breeders choosing to end the dog's life rather than comply with the requirement, due to the costs involved. It is cheaper to put a dog down than to spay it. On this occasion, after detailed discussions between the Committee and officials, the Minister decided to remove the spaying requirement from the draft regulations.

Members also expressed their concerns regarding the requirement for mandatory record-keeping for each individual dog and their puppies. This was seen to be very bureaucratic and cumbersome by the stakeholders we consulted with. As a result, the Minister agreed to reduce the record-keeping, as she said, to a minimum that a breeding establishment must hold to allow an inspector to assess compliance with the regulations. The Committee sees that as a sensible move in ensuring that the bureaucracy associated with the regulations is not gold-plated but is still effective and proportionate.

A further concern was the proposed requirement to microchip all pups that go out of Northern Ireland to England. Some felt that that would label pups from here as coming from Northern Ireland puppy farms, an image that many breeders would not be happy with — indeed, were horrified by. There were also concerns that microchipping was not a legal requirement in England and might disadvantage locally bred pups. However, in the end, after considerable discussion, the Committee was content that the Minister retain that requirement in the regulations. The Committee is also somewhat reassured to have heard recently that England has since decided to make microchipping compulsory in April 2016. I am sure that that will level the playing field for our dog breeders.

1.00 pm

There are many other examples that I could use of the Committee working well with the departmental officials, but I believe that I have said enough. The statutory rule came before the Committee at SL1 stage on 11 December 2012, and the Committee had no further issues with the merits of the policy. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 5 February 2013 and resolved that it be affirmed. I confirm that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is content that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly. I thank the Minister and her officials, who listened closely

to the concerns of the Committee and were prepared to take the time and effort to address those concerns.

Mrs Dobson: As Ulster Unionist Party agriculture spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the regulations, which have now reached the Floor of the House.

If the vision in the new regulations to increase the welfare standards of dogs and decrease animal cruelty is to be fully realised, it is beholden on the Department to ensure that that vision is properly and efficiently delivered to the benefit of all and not at the expense of legitimate dog breeders and their businesses. Now that the proposals have reached their final stage, the Department, from today, has a duty to educate dog breeders and the wider public. It is vital that everyone knows their roles and responsibilities. There will be many dog breeders, both large and small, including families, who may be unsure how the new regulations will affect them. It is therefore vital that the Department continue to work closely with all stakeholders to increase awareness of the new regulations. I therefore request a clear commitment from the Minister to provide assistance and guidance to dog breeders to make sure that people do not unwittingly get caught on the wrong side of the regulations.

I commend all the stakeholder organisations that engaged fully with the Department and the Committee throughout the process. Through their engagement, they have ensured that the final regulations before the House today are far more realistic than the original unworkable proposals. The regulations allow breeders to focus more on their puppies and less on their paperwork. That is a result of effective lobbying by many groups, and I commend each and every one of them.

I know that, in Committee, members broadly welcomed many of the changes that the Department has made. The issues that dog breeders and their representatives have with the regulations have been discussed at length in Committee, at the Committee stakeholder event, which the Chair mentioned, and when the Chair, the Deputy Chair and I visited dog breeding establishments. The Minister and her officials will be aware that concerns remain among dog breeders regarding the licensing arrangements. I urge them to continue to work with stakeholders to help them and their members.

In passing the regulations, it must be ensured that they will not unwittingly lead to breeders choosing to go underground. I have said at

many stages throughout the process that there is a fine line between introducing legislation that is designed to improve the welfare of animals but, through its exercise, leads to more and not fewer puppy farms operating across Northern Ireland. The Department has a moral obligation to ensure that that does not happen. I therefore urge the Minister to monitor the effectiveness of the regulations on an ongoing basis. We welcome the proposals before the House, and I would further welcome the Minister's assurances on the points that I have raised.

Mr Byrne: Like the Members who previously spoke, I welcome the publication of the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations. I thank the Minister for the work that has gone on over the last six months. I also thank the officials for the work that they did in facilitating the Committee.

The Committee held an inquiry and conducted stakeholder consultation meetings, as has been mentioned, including one main one in the Long Gallery. All the interest groups had their say and had an input. As was mentioned previously, the Committee attended two meetings at dog breeding establishments: one small establishment near Aughnacloy and a larger establishment in Fivemiletown. Those meetings were good for the Committee because we saw at first hand some of the issues and concerns that dog-loving people have had about puppy farms in the past.

Puppy farm breeding has been open to question for a number of years. The new regulations will bring some order and conformity to the situation. I am glad to say that the concerns of the smaller greyhound breeding establishments have been addressed by the Minister and the Department. It is important that the smaller greyhound breeders are not badly handicapped by the new regulations.

As the SDLP's agriculture spokesperson and Deputy Chair of the Committee, I fully commend the regulations and thank the Minister and her officials for all their work.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the members of the Committee for all the work that they did in scrutinising the regulations. I assure them that we have time before the regulations come into effect on 1 April to make sure that we publicise the issue wholly and get all the information out to stakeholders and councils. That is a job of work for the period ahead.

I also assure the Member that I listened carefully to the concerns of the greyhound breeders, whom I met throughout the development of the regulations. I am glad that we are going to approve the regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Committee Business

Planning Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 7 June 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Planning Bill (NIA Bill 17/11-15).

On Tuesday 22 January 2013, the Assembly referred the Planning Bill to the Committee for the Environment for scrutiny. The Bill will accelerate the introduction of a number of reforms to the planning system contained in the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and will make legislative changes to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system.

At its meeting on 24 January, the Committee for the Environment agreed to call for written submissions from interested organisations and individuals. In addition to signposting notices in the local press, stakeholders have been contacted directly, and a number have already indicated their intention to respond to the Committee's request. The Committee for the Environment firmly believes that it is essential that all stakeholders are given the opportunity to comment on the Bill, particularly as it includes two new elements that have not been consulted on by the Department. In effect, there is an expectation that the Committee will do the consultation on behalf of the Department. Therefore, we cannot afford to rush the Bill through without proper and full scrutiny. That will take time, so we have allowed until 15 March 2013 for responses.

The Committee anticipates a high volume of submissions. The Committee will invite all respondents to take part in a stakeholder event at which they will have the opportunity to air their views and question the Department and members of the Committee.

The Committee feels that it is essential that it is afforded the time to exercise its scrutiny powers to the full and asks that the House supports this motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Planning Bill to 7 June 2013.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 7 June 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Planning Bill (NIA Bill 17/11-15).

Health Inequalities: Report of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

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

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety's review of health inequalities; notes the recommendations relating to the restructuring of government Departments; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to discuss the recommendations in the report with the ministerial group on public health and to action those that are within his remit.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to move the motion on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I would like to begin by providing some background to the Committee's review of health inequalities. The Committee has been concerned about the issue for some time. We are aware that, although the general health of the population has been improving over recent years, the rate of improvement is not equal for everyone. Health outcomes are worst in the most deprived areas in overall terms. There continues to be a large gap across various measures of health, including life expectancy, drug- and alcohol-related deaths, suicide, teenage pregnancy, smoking during pregnancy and cancer-related deaths. The main cause of these health inequalities is poverty.

Back in June 2012, the Committee was aware that the Department was in the process of producing a new public health strategy to follow on from Investing for Health. Members will remember that, when 'Investing for Health' was published by the then Minister, Bairbre de Brún, it was seen as one of the most radical documents of its time. We, therefore, believed that a review of health inequalities would be useful work that could feed into the Department's development of the new strategy.

The Department's draft strategy 'Fit and Well: Changing Lives 2012-2022' was published in

August for public consultation. That consultation ran until the end of October 2012, with the strategy expected to be published in spring 2013. Parallel to that process, the Committee carried out its review of health inequalities so that the results of that could feed into the final version of 'Fit and Well'. I want to take the opportunity not only to welcome the Minister to today's debate but to thank him for agreeing to wait until we had finished our report. It is important that the value of the Committee's work is seen by the Department and the Minister because we can add to the process.

The terms of reference of our review were to identify effective interventions to address health inequalities in other regions that could be applied here, with a particular focus on early years intervention. We invited a range of expert witnesses to give evidence to the Committee. We were keen to be outward-looking and see what we could learn from other places. We heard from people working on projects across Ireland — in Ballymun and the Midlands — from Scotland and the European office of the World Health Organization.

As a Committee, we also agreed to carry out a study visit as part of the review. That involved the Deputy Chair and me going to Cuba to attend an international conference on public health and see for ourselves various aspects of the Cuban healthcare system. The Cuban healthcare system spends \$585 on each person a year, whereas we spend almost \$4,000. Despite that huge variance, Cuba achieves health outcomes that compare with and, in some cases, exceed those produced by our system. Therefore, we thought that it was important to go to the conference and see at first hand whether there was anything that we could learn about Cuba's system and use here to tackle health inequalities.

One of the striking aspects of the Cuban approach is the focus on primary care. We got the chance to visit a GP surgery and a polyclinic. We learned that, in 1984, Cuba introduced the system of a family doctor and nurse service because they realised that they relied too much on hospital services. Cuba wanted to put a bigger emphasis on prevention and on treating people in the community first and foremost to prevent them needing hospital treatment, where possible. The family doctor lives in the community that they serve. So, at any point in time, they can provide an overview of all his or her patients' general health. As I mentioned in a previous debate, that is partly because they carry out annual health checks, which means that they can prevent ill health or,

when needed, intervene early. The Committee fully accepts that some parts of the Cuban health system cannot be directly transferred on to ours. However, the focus on prevention, patient education and primary care all fit in with the vision that the Minister has set out in 'Fit and Well'.

1.15 pm

We visited a polyclinic where various clinics and minor operations were carried out, and we learned that the one that we visited had an infant mortality rate of zero in the past 15 years and had had no maternal deaths in the same period. We also heard that a lot of emphasis is put on the care of pregnant women, who have 12 antenatal appointments. The breastfeeding rate is also very impressive, with 95% of women breastfeeding for up to six months. That means that children get the best possible start in life, because the system prioritises the needs of pregnant women and supports them in breastfeeding. Again, that ties in with the Fit and Well strategy, where the focus is on early intervention. My colleagues from the Committee will speak later about some of our recommendations on breastfeeding and parenting.

Another thing that struck us was that there is a strong focus in Cuba on empowering people to deal with their own condition rather than simply writing them a prescription or giving them a pill. We observed classes and spoke to the instructors. The classes were held in a hall that had been pretty damaged by the recent weather in Cuba. However, it was decided that the hall could still be used, and work was still going on. The classes were held in that public hall, which had basic facilities. Throughout the day, different classes were held for people with health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis and depression. Those people had been referred to the classes by their doctor. So, instead of automatically being given a prescription or a pill, they were referred to a class. All the classes were free of charge, and the instructor was employed by the state. There was no modern gym equipment, but there was a can-do attitude from both the instructor and the participants, who made best use of the buildings and facilities that were available to them.

We also talked to men and women who participated in daily grandparent circles, and we attended one such circle. The circles involve people aged from their 50s to their 80s meeting every morning in a public park to do a set of exercises together. We met a woman who was over 80 and still had her own teeth. She had

lost only one tooth, which is impressive for somebody of that age. The members of the group were enthusiastic about the benefits of exercise. Importantly, however, they were also enthusiastic about the social aspect of such groups, which is often forgotten. Sometimes, we talk about our elderly being excluded and isolated, but I thought that the social aspect of that group was hugely important.

The group is peer-led, but an instructor visits twice a week to ensure that people do the correct exercises. A doctor also visits every couple of weeks to monitor blood pressure and so on. Again, they were using a public park. There were no special facilities, and it was free to everyone. If we are serious about tackling health inequalities, we need to make better use of our assets. We have so many leisure centres, parks, schools, school playing fields, halls, church halls and government buildings that could all be opened up a lot more widely so that people could take part in activities that would benefit their health. In fact, in Cuba, there was even a project for children with learning disabilities that was based in the local zoo. The staff were using the animals in the zoo and factoring them in to the weekly work programme for the children, which involved therapy and exercise. We need to think outside the box.

The report says that, if we are to get a handle on health inequalities, there must be a united front across all Departments. It is not an issue for the Department of Health alone; in fact, the Department cannot deal with the issue on its own. As part of the review, I wrote to all Departments on behalf of the Committee asking for details about the programmes that they currently run to tackle health inequalities through early years intervention. Unfortunately, a number of Departments simply stated that they had no such programmes. It is my impression that some Departments have not quite grasped the fact that we all have a role to play in improving the health of our people. It goes across the board: we need to look at education, housing, job creation, access to the arts and sport and so on. It is important that all Departments accept that they have their part to play.

The Minister is keen to secure cross-departmental buy-in and action for the Fit and Well strategy. I assure the Minister today that the Committee is more than willing to be part of the push to tackle health inequalities. I urge members of other Committees to take the time to ask what their Department does to promote public health. If Departments are not doing

anything, they need to do something. If Departments are doing stuff, can they do more?

I thank Committee members for the part that they played in the report and staff from the Committee and the Research and Information Service, who helped us to produce the report. I also thank the witnesses who gave the Committee the benefit of their knowledge of and information about the programmes that they run. I commend the report to the Assembly.

Ms Brown: I speak as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to commend the report to the House.

On taking office in May 2011, the Minister of Health, Edwin Poots, placed health inequality at the heart of the agenda. It is not fair or equal that we have a society in which inequalities not only are evident but continue to widen. It is therefore imperative that the Assembly acts to reduce inequalities and strive to build a fairer society for all.

At the heart of health inequalities, we see more people and communities suffering from smoking- and heart-related diseases, suicide, teenage pregnancies, drug- and alcohol-related mortality and cancer mortality compared with other areas of Northern Ireland. People are not necessarily born with poor health; rather, it is often a condition of their environment, and that condition is poverty.

In my constituency of South Antrim, nearly 18% of the population have a long-term health problem that affects their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Some 38% of the population hold either no qualification whatsoever or a low qualification. Members may ask why I raise the issue of health alongside that of low educational attainment. The answer is simple: as the report demonstrates, they are linked.

There is a need for a joined-up approach to tackle health inequality as well as poverty. The issue needs to be taken up by the Executive Committee as a whole, from the perspective of the economy, regional development, agriculture, rural development and education. Every Department has some role to play.

The Department of Health provides services for those who need them. The practice of modern medicine has come a long way in recent years, but it is poverty that remains at the heart of poor health. That poverty is partly caused by the absence of a nurturing environment to provide a decent education for our young people, which

helps to secure employment in an ever more competitive work environment. A historical absence of decent housing also contributes, as does the need for supportive and better rural life with access to schools, a library and an employment centre, access for infants to local, supportive preschool nurseries and access for parents to programmes such as Sure Start that provide an early intervention mechanism. There is obviously a role for parents and local communities, but many of those involved in such communities have been calling for much of this for some time amid cuts and closures. I urge all Departments to review those strategies, which are clearly not delivering, with a view to overhauling them to ensure that they deliver for all our communities.

The bones of the report focus on the need for a joined-up approach among Departments towards promoting better health and reducing health inequalities; namely, collaborating and prioritising funding and resources for projects in areas of social and economic disadvantage. One of the report's recommendations is that consideration should be given to creating a Department for children and young people to place greater focus on early years intervention, and I ask the Minister to comment on that recommendation and to update us on how that complements the work of the ministerial subgroup on children and young people. While there is much for the Minister of Health to consider in this report, there is much for others to digest to see what could lead to a better, healthier and more equal Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: I, too, am pleased to support the motion highlighting the Committee's review of health inequalities.

When we reviewed the Statistics and Research Agency's figures, it was clear that there were huge variations in life expectancy. The average female life expectancy in Northern Ireland is 80.5 years, but, in the 20% most deprived areas, it moves down to 77.9 years. For a male from one of the 20% most deprived areas, it is 71.5 years. Those are quite dramatic variations in life expectancy, and, with that, there is associated illness. A range of factors are thought to contribute to that, such as an increased risk of mortality because of drugs, alcohol and smoking and an increased risk of suicide. There is also the issue of respiratory mortality and cancer mortality.

The Committee received evidence from a range of experts, many of whom pointed towards the importance of early years programmes to help improve the health of the next generation and to reduce health inequalities. Mention was made

of Professor James Heckman and Sir Harry Burns, who have both recognised the importance of early years investment in education and in health. I declare an interest as a member of Horizon Sure Start, which provides support to parents in Carrickfergus and Larne.

I will concentrate on recommendation 4 in the Committee's report, which states:

"The new public health strategy should recognize parenting as having a significant influence over long-term public health issues and should adopt a 'progressive universalism' approach to supporting parenting projects."

In the evidence from the Triple P Project, we were advised of how Kaiser Permanente, an American insurance company, had reviewed the effects of adverse childhood experiences. It highlighted that such adverse experiences result in a higher risk of developing obesity, ischaemic heart disease, depression and alcoholism. So, by improving parenting skills and reducing adverse experiences, the health of the next generation can be improved. Progressive universalism is about supporting everyone, with more support for those who need it most. The Triple P project from Longford and Westmeath highlighted that 30% of children with social and emotional behavioural problems had parents from lower socio-economic groups. Of course, that means that 70% were from other groups, and there clearly needs to be support across the board for everyone. The group also highlighted the research by Steve Aos from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, which, again, expressed a preference for the universal approach and indicated that, essentially, you get better results and better value from your investment by taking that approach. Some parents may require only limited support and guidance from literature, whereas others will benefit from extra parenting support such as classes and regular meetings with advisers and specialists.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of how a parent can affect the health of their child is demonstrated by the issue of mothers who smoke. According to the NHS website on smoking and the unborn baby, protecting your baby from tobacco smoke is one of the best things that you can do to give your child a healthy start in life. Every cigarette you smoke in pregnancy harms your unborn baby. It contributes to an increased risk of stillbirth, and newborn children are less likely to be able to cope with any complications that arise.

Smokers' babies are more likely to be born early and to face the additional breathing, feeding and health problems that go with being premature. A child of someone who smokes is more likely to be underweight and less able to fight off infection.

There is also an increased risk of cot deaths. What is quite surprising is the variation in the numbers of mothers who still smoke in Northern Ireland. When I looked at the official figures, I discovered that, in the Old Warren ward, 55% of mothers still smoked in 2011. In the Greystone ward, 50% smoked, and 48% in the Ballee ward. In my constituency, 41% of mothers in the Clipperstown ward smoked, and 39% of mothers in Sunnylands and Blackcave still smoked.

1.30 pm

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

Mr Beggs: Clearly, further early education support is needed to try to identify this problem and prevent children from suffering.

Mr McCarthy: I offer my support and that of the Alliance Party to the recommendations that are contained in this report. Inequalities in any aspect of modern life are wrong, unacceptable and should not happen, but, when it comes to inequalities in health provision, it is time that someone stood up and called a halt to what is going on. That is exactly what we in the Health Committee have done in this review, and I pay tribute to our Chairperson for putting this very important issue on the agenda and carrying out such a review of the issue. Hopefully, as a result of our investigation, we can, together, put forward those inequalities and what we see as a means to put an end to all health inequalities in Northern Ireland.

I also commend the Committee staff for their work, particularly in bringing to our sessions very important people from various backgrounds who gave us an insight into their experience and made suggestions on a way forward. I also welcome the presence today of the Health Minister, and I hope that, together, we can see an end to health inequalities for all in our society.

So far, colleagues from the Health Committee have spoken on a variety of issues, and I wish to deal with the contribution that was made by Dr Erio Ziglio, the European officer with the World Health Organization, and Joan Devlin from Belfast Healthy Cities. We were extremely

grateful to have the input from such a very high-profile individual. He took time out to contribute to our review, along with our own Joan Devlin from Belfast Healthy Cities, who continues to do extremely valuable work in Belfast.

One of the key points that was made by Dr Ziglio was that a reduction in health inequalities could not be made by working solely within the health service. He argued that, for a public health strategy to be successful, it must provide added value to local and regional development. In his experience, countries with an overall development strategy will have more success, and that is exactly what we want to see as a result.

Dr Ziglio told us how Slovenia had major health inequalities and poor indicators on health and unemployment. However, over a 10-year period, Slovenia made significant improvements by identifying and bringing together three main sectors — health, agriculture and tourism — and produced a strategy that involved all three Departments of government. By working together collectively, there were benefits for each of the sectors, and Dr Ziglio made the point that this combined approach is better than each of the Departments working as silos and seeing each other's Departments as competitors for limited resources. We see some of that quite regularly in Northern Ireland. He also suggested that we in Northern Ireland should look more closely at how to maximise European structural funding opportunities. He believed that the trend has been for most of the funding in health to go to buildings, which might not necessarily be the best way forward. If health could join with other sectors, that would be a better way to access European funding.

With these wise words from this eminent World Health Organization doctor, our Committee has made its first recommendation, which states that the Health Department should actively work to form partnerships with other areas of government, such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), which includes tourism, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and, indeed, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). The Health Department should form partnerships to access much-needed European structural funds.

As I said earlier, health inequalities are unacceptable, and it would be everyone's goal to see them eliminated as soon as possible. If our recommendations are acted upon, we could indeed see —

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

Mr McCarthy: — equity in all our health provisions. I hope that the Minister will act on those recommendations.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also speak as a member of the Health Committee and in support of the motion. I, too, acknowledge the role of the Committee and its staff in undertaking such an important report.

Tackling health inequalities must be central to the delivery of health and social care provision and the Transforming Your Care proposals. Early intervention and prevention is central to that objective. We spend £4.6 billion per year on health and social care and employ 70,000 staff, but the reality is that health has not been shared equally across all the people in our society. The life expectancy of someone in a more affluent area is around 10 years greater than that of someone in a more deprived area. With respect to health inequalities, the top three constituencies are Belfast West, Belfast North and Foyle.

In that context, therefore, I want to focus on recommendation 9 of the Committee's report, which is:

"The Department should consider increasing the percentage of the overall health and social care budget spend on prevention to 6% within the next decade."

That issue was discussed at an evidence session with the World Health Organization, where it was indicated that most European countries' average spend on prevention is 3%, and that that should double within the next decade. The World Health Organization highlighted how there is still reluctance by some Governments to direct resources to prevention.

What, therefore, do we mean by prevention? The Social Care Institute for Excellence defines prevention as providing a range of services that promote independence, prevent or delay the deterioration of well-being resulting from ageing, illness or disability, and delay the need for more costly and intensive services.

The Economic and Social Research Institute of Ireland stated that, for every €1 invested, you get €7 in return. I stress that those figures are for the Twenty-six Counties only, and I urge the Minister to work with his counterparts in Dublin to provide all-Ireland figures that provide us with

a clear economic case for early intervention and prevention.

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland referred to the need for preferential resourcing to disadvantaged communities. The World Health Organization described how the resources could be mobilised, through partnership with other sectors, or through utilising resources that come from the EU through structural or cohesion funds. Early intervention in Scotland resulted in savings of £5.4 million to the Scottish economy.

I want, therefore, to examine a number of key health areas that could be impacted on by prevention. In the Western Trust area, the largest inequality gaps are in alcohol-related mortality, 112%; self-harm admissions, 89%; teenage births, 76%; and smoking during pregnancy, 71%. The constituencies of Belfast West, Belfast North and Foyle have the highest standardised death rates of the main causes of death. The four constituencies of Belfast West, Belfast North, East Derry, and Foyle had over one third of all teenage births in 2010. One hundred and eighty seven alcohol-related deaths occurred in Foyle between 2001 and 2010. All those are stark inequalities that require additional focus and investment in prevention and early intervention.

The principle of Transforming Your Care, in shifting resources from acute to community services, is laudable, but with that comes additional demand for resources. We have an ageing population and, although opting to be cared for at home is an understandable request, it requires additional support for families and carers. Prevention schemes for older people in England that are delivered through the WRVS organisation examined the social return on investment. The hospital-based aspect of the study showed a £1.9 million return on investment.

In conclusion, I highlight two important proposals in advancing early intervention and prevention. The first is the development of the social care campus model, which will allow for a combination of health and community care to be delivered as part of a hub. Secondly, I suggest to the Minister, in his absence, that the facilities exist in the north-west through the Project Kelvin database and its link to North America, the C-TRIC facility and the university, in terms of connected health. I ask the Minister to comment and update us on both those proposals.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It is a very important matter for

everyone across Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, health inequalities continue to exist in today's society, and that remains the challenge that we all must continue to work to improve. I commend the Health Minister for all his work to date on leading on this and trying to improve the health and well-being of our population. I know that he will continue to make preventative care and health promotion a top priority in the Health Department.

The Health Committee has undertaken a lot of work on this subject, and its review of health inequalities has provided some valuable findings that will be useful to the Department as it plans for the future. Life expectancy, alcohol and drug-related deaths, levels of self-harm, teenage births, suicide rates, and respiratory and lung cancer rates were found to be among the most sizeable inequality gaps between deprived areas and the overall figure across the Province. Even in a constituency such as mine — North Down has one of the highest rates of life expectancy — real divisions exist and, therefore, health inequalities unfortunately exist between people who may live only one mile apart. Every constituency experiences significant health inequalities in its population.

As has been said, the Committee has taken evidence from Dr Erio Ziglio, from the World Health Organization. He spoke of how different Government departments in Slovenia, such as health, tourism and agriculture, work together to get positive outcomes for health inequalities. He also spoke about Scotland, where a thematic approach was taken to Departments to tackle inequalities. Some of the recommendations of that review are particularly realistic and constructive. Early intervention was importantly distinguished as one of the best ways to address health inequalities, and that also came through during the many evidence sessions we held with groups and organisations.

The role of parenting was established as one of the keys to improving health inequalities. It is vital that the correct emphasis is put on supporting parents. Some of the evidence gathered from the Republic of Ireland highlighted the fact that a lack of support for parenting can often have negative effects on children as they grow up. Broken homes and marriage breakdown can also add to health inequalities, and I believe that we should do more to support marriage as a basis for stable homes and society.

Another recommendation is that we should identify and fully utilise the significant resources that we have already. There is a vital role for a

cross section of statutory and voluntary agencies to work together and pool resources to help tackle health inequalities. Working together on the ground in our communities is important, as is working together at Executive level. I know that the Minister has been personally involved in several community outreach projects, including those in Kilcooley in Bangor in the North Down constituency, working alongside the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

Departments must work together in a joined up way to tackle these important issues. Education and Health should be working hand in hand on many of the issues around early intervention. However, every Department has a role to play. The promotion of healthier living and well-being should also be continually prioritised by the Department. I know that much good work has already been done on that over the past number of years. Prevention is better than cure, and that must remain our top focus and priority as we plan for the future and ensure that we have a fit-for-purpose health service that will tackle the health inequalities that exist in Northern Ireland today.

1.45 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, speak as a member of the Health Committee in support of the motion.

The Public Health Agency highlights the fact that poverty and economic inequality are bad for health, with poverty an important risk factor in illness and premature death. Poverty affects health directly and indirectly in many ways, including financial strain, poor housing, poor living environments, poor diet and limited access to employment and other resources, services and opportunities. Poor health can also cause poverty. It is well established that the poorest people live the shortest lives in the worst health. Unfortunately, we have persistent poverty here in the North. The figure stands at 21% before housing costs, which is more than double the 9% in Great Britain.

The research on health inequalities makes interesting reading. My constituency, for instance, ranks eighth for multiple deprivation. A number of other health inequality rankings indicate that my constituency of Newry and Armagh is not particularly well off.

I will concentrate on recommendation eight of the report, which is that the new public health strategy should prioritise funding for projects that involve collaboration between partner

organisations to ensure a co-ordinated and more effective approach to particular issues.

Another recommendation is that the Department place the new public health strategy in the context of a wider governmental strategy for the development of the North as a region. The Department should work to form partnerships with other areas of government, including Departments not traditionally associated with health matters, such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, DRD and DARD. The Department should also look at other sectors where partnerships could be formed, leading to the accessing of European structural funds. It has been argued that a reduction in health inequalities cannot be achieved by working solely in the health sector. For a public health strategy to be successful, it must also provide added value to local and regional development.

Slovenia was mentioned by other Members. I also cite it as an example of where there were major problems and poor health and unemployment indicators. Over a 10-year period, Slovenia made significant improvements in reducing health inequalities and unemployment. It did so through partnership with three sectors — health, agriculture and tourism — and produced a strategic plan involving them. The trend here has been for most health funding to go into buildings. If health can partner other sectors, there will be more of an opportunity to access funds.

The importance of collaboration between sectors, communities or organisations delivering services on the ground cannot be overemphasised. There will be a major role for voluntary organisations in the concept of Transforming Your Care, and a collaborative approach will continue to be very important. If it is accepted that a partnership approach is required for a project to be funded, that will avoid duplication and succeed in bringing together a wide range of skills and expertise, which can only enhance and promote any public health strategy. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McDevitt: I, too, speak as a member of the Health Committee. I am very happy to support the motion and speak to the report.

Colleagues have covered several important areas where health inequality manifests itself. I want to focus on one area that I might not be expected to focus on. Nonetheless, I shall, and the issue is breastfeeding.

It is a simple reality that the breastfeeding rates in our region are unbelievably low. They do not stack up well in comparison with other parts of the world. Indeed, they stack up unfavourably compared with other parts of these islands. Yet the benefits of early breastfeeding and sustained breastfeeding during the first six months of a child's life are beyond doubt. Today, a very interesting news report points to the specific benefit of colostrum, which is the very early milk that a mother produces during the first day or two of a child's life, and how essential it is to building up the child's immune capacity and developing essential reflexes, such as the swallow reflex.

I am very happy to speak on this topic because I am the husband of a woman who took the positive decision to breastfeed her three children. One of the reasons why I was late for the debate is that those three children are now enjoying the benefits of the canteen downstairs. The sad reality is that our socio-economic background means that we are probably in the group of people that is able to make that choice. Mrs McKeivitt is here beside me and has, I am afraid to say, been accused of being my wife on a couple of occasions — something that I know she deals with well. She told me that she took the positive decision to breastfeed her five children. Again, I suspect that she was able to make that decision because she was coming from a socio-economic grouping and educational basis that gave her the opportunity to make it.

The report highlights the inequality that exists between women who come from some of the most deprived wards and those who come from the least deprived. The inequality is, of course, that the more less well off you are the less likely you will be able to make a positive choice to breastfeed for your children.

To give you some statistics, it is worth noting that only 15% of children here are breastfed up to the age of six months. I think that the Committee Chair pointed out that, in Cuba, that figure is 95%. Mrs McKeivitt, speaking privately during the debate, reflected to me that it is unlikely that a breast is best campaign was running in Cuba and that that is just the way it is. It is cultural and accepted. Women do not feel awkward or strange if they decide to breastfeed, and doing so is not seen as something that should cause the slightest embarrassment or as anything other than perfectly ordinary.

The Health Committee's report highlights that, in several jurisdictions, not least in Scotland, there is a debate on, and, indeed, a law on the

statute book, protecting the right of women to breastfeed in public places. It seems sad that any jurisdiction should have to think about giving a woman the right to do what, frankly, in many ways seems like the most natural and obvious thing for her. However, if that is necessary, so be it. It is a shame and a sad indictment on a society. I wish that we would not have to think about going down that road. However, we may have to, because the sad reality is that we know of incidents of discrimination against women in Northern Ireland who sought to breastfeed outside the privacy of their homes.

The debate about breastfeeding is a debate about culture, tolerance, understanding and respect. It is a debate about women and about having the integrity, courage and maturity to understand —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: Yes, of course.

Mr Wells: The Member is developing an interesting point, and I want to see it through to a conclusion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to have an extra bit of time.

I think that it is important for us all to understand that some of the ways in which we objectify women and choose to present them in our society make it more difficult for debates such as this to happen. Some of the ways in which we have sought to marginalise breastfeeding and treat it as something that should be done in private rather than just as part of a child's early development have set us back a little.

I hope that this report is yet another opportunity to raise the issue. I look forward to the Minister's response. I hope — indeed, I trust — that he will have a progressive perspective on the issue. I, for one, would love to be able to give every single child in our little region the opportunity to benefit from the great start that my kids and Mrs McKeivitt's kids had.

Mr Easton: Health inequalities are major factors in determining life outcomes for people in our society. Although the overall trend is improving health and better outcomes, there still exists a wide spectrum of health outcomes

across various measurements. I believe that we must look to new and innovative ways to tackle those differences and to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to increase the positive outcomes for their health.

Poverty is one of the major issues that affects a person's health. People often tell us — indeed, they tell me — that basics such as food are priced so that the food that is best for our health is often out of the price range of those who are on the lowest incomes. Recent events have shown the dangers of accessing cheap food. Again, one of the biggest groups affected will be those on a low income. That highlights why the first recommendation in the report is so vital.

Through cross-departmental working, we can address issues such as poverty and deprivation, which will then have a real and positive effect on people's health outcomes. For instance, the Department for Social Development's work on encouraging people to ensure that they are receiving their full welfare benefit entitlement means that people will have more money to spend on food. The warm homes scheme ensures that people's homes are effectively insulated. That benefits the environment and means that heating costs will come down, leaving more income that can be spent on good-quality food. It is important to seek out further ways in which partnerships with other Departments and outside agencies can be established to increase the positive health outcomes that we all want to see.

There is a plethora of evidence to show that, to achieve value for money, the best place in which to invest is early years. Prenatal care, breastfeeding and support for parents are themes that continually arose during the research for the report. Although no one is suggesting that we should write off programmes that aim to help our youth or adults make good choices, if we get early intervention correct, we will see better health outcomes. Breastfeeding, for example, provides protection not just for the baby but for the mother. It is considerably cheaper than formula feeding and has beneficial bonding qualities for the family. However, Northern Ireland has the poorest rate of breastfeeding beyond six months when compared with other countries. The World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding for at least the first year of a baby's life. We must therefore support mothers who wish to breastfeed by introducing legislation to support breastfeeding mothers.

A child who resides in a house in which there are addiction issues, violence or neglect is not

going to reach its full potential in any aspect of life. The introduction in 2012 of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland has provided scope to examine parenting choices and how they impact on children in the family. Children with behavioural problems come not just from the lower socio-economic group but from a wide range of families with a wide range of experiences. Universal access to programmes is therefore fundamental to help address the issues and health outcomes for that child and the family. A child with behavioural problems has a significant impact on the whole family. Therefore, the whole family must be treated as a unit, not just the child.

While promoting universal inclusion, we must ensure that resources home in on those groups that are traditionally hard to reach. We must increase funding to projects that involve collaboration between partner organisations. We must identify best practice models that exist and work to enhance their impact. The role of the third sector in that is vital. The success of, for example, Sure Start is evidence of good practice in partnership-working. The voluntary sector can often access hard-to-reach groups as well as be on the ground. It can tell us what is needed in a particular area and what will work in that area.

Prevention is better than cure, and it often comes at a much lower economic cost. In these economic times, it is all about value for money. Increasing the amount that we spend on prevention rather than cure will achieve better health outcomes for all communities. By educating our young people and families on good health choices, by collaborative working and by supporting families, we can make a difference to the health outcomes of the whole of Northern Ireland in years to come.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the Committee's report on health inequalities, particularly the focus on early years interventions. It signals a recognition that, although our health has been improving in general, the rate of improvement has not been the same for everyone. I have already agreed with the Health Committee to delay the publication of the strategic framework for public health until I have had time to consider the recommendations and to discuss them, as necessary, with colleagues.

When I made a statement to the Assembly in September on the publication for consultation of the draft framework, I drew Members' attention to the fact that health outcomes are generally

worst in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland when compared with the region generally. A number of Members across the House identified that today. Those inequalities are, of course, not unique to Northern Ireland. However, we can learn from experience elsewhere.

The new public health framework is intended to build on the work already undertaken under the 2002 Investing for Health strategy and set the direction for the next 10 years.

2.00 pm

I think that we would all agree that changes in population health are a long-term goal, which can take decades to achieve. A review of Investing for Health, which was carried out in 2010, acknowledged a considerable amount of evidence to support the rationale for tackling the societal influences that impact on health, such as education and literacy; employment and working conditions; housing; and income. Increased emphasis on the societal factors complement the more traditional focus on disease prevention and associated factors, such as diet, alcohol and tobacco use.

The review also drew attention to the evidence that investment in early childhood interventions can reduce the societal inequalities rooted in poverty, by providing young children from disadvantaged backgrounds with a more equitable start in life. Early interventions have the potential to reap long-term benefits, as they can influence health and other outcomes over the whole-of-life course.

The new framework, on which consultation was completed towards the end of last year, addresses many aspects highlighted in the Committee's recommendations and is generally in accord with its findings.

I turn, first, to the Committee's call for a new public health strategy to be placed in the context of wider government strategy and for a thematic approach across the public sector. Those are principles that underpin the new public health framework. The new framework will contribute towards the achievement of a number of objectives in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. It will also seek to create synergy with other key government strategies, such as Delivering Social Change.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I agree that strategic alliances need to be formed in tackling many of the public health issues that we face. You have heard me say before that I want every Minister to be a Minister for health. The public health framework is the result of working across all parts of government. It sets out a cross-cutting programme of action. The ministerial group on public health, which I chair, has led on and will continue to contribute to its development. I have also held bilateral meetings with ministerial colleagues on key public health issues, such as suicide prevention.

There are other initiatives to which I need to draw people's attention. We are working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), for example. Those colleagues are doing significant work. Other Departments, which might not have been traditionally associated with health matters, such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Regional Development, are working with us as well. There are courses of work on public health happening within government, and that is something that I strongly welcome.

The draft public health strategic framework also recognised the potential for greater collaboration across government and proposed six priority areas for consideration. One illustration relates to the use of space and assets. Across the public sector, we have many physical assets that could be put to better use through co-operation. For example, local communities could benefit from school premises and facilities, such as playing fields, outside of hours. Many public spaces could be used more widely to promote physical activity, and we need to take creative approaches.

The process of establishing a thematic approach to Departments, as in Scotland, for example, where Cabinet Ministers have responsibility for broad areas, such as health, finance, employment and sustainable growth, is an interesting one. Although it is not within my sole gift, I would be happy to further consider options with ministerial colleagues for the benefit of population health.

In respect of the recommendation to create a Department for children and young people, I am fully supportive of co-ordinating responsibility for children's issues. However, my view is that the clear direction of travel should be towards fewer, not more, Departments. I am fully committed to ensuring that early years intervention remains a key focus for this

Department, and I will continue to work with other Departments on that and on other areas of common interest.

To illustrate that, my Department is actively engaging with other Departments on a number of early intervention initiatives. For example, discussions are under way with Departments that have a key interest in children and young people about the establishment of an interdepartmental early intervention fund. We also received £5 million through OFMDFM's Delivering Social Change framework to deliver increased direct family support and support for parents' projects, both of which have strong early intervention elements.

My Department's regional family and parenting strategy, Families Matter, and the draft public health framework place emphasis on the importance of early intervention and parenting support. The public health framework proposes early years as one of the two strategic priorities in tackling inequalities. We chose early years because of the now overwhelming evidence internationally that people's life chances are most heavily influenced by their development in the first years of life. That was highlighted by several of those who gave evidence to the Committee.

I agree that if we are to break the cycle of disadvantage across generations, it is vital that our children are given the best possible start in life. That starts from antenatal care, and includes childhood development, support for good parenting and opportunities for learning. What happens to children in their earliest years is key to their outcomes in adult life, not in relation just to health, but to educational attainment and economic status.

A number of Members mentioned breastfeeding. The issue is not just the nutritious value of the mother's milk, but the nurturing and important bonding that takes place, which makes children into better adults who can relate more easily to others in how they deal with other people in later life.

The Committee also made recommendations on early years and the importance of parenting to reinforce that priority in our strategy. Another of the framework's proposed priority areas for collaboration across Departments is support for families and children:

"enhance support through incremental development of targeted and universal programmes."

Again, that is in line with the Committee's recommendations on early years and a progressive universalism approach to support for parenting.

I believe firmly that by adopting early intervention approaches to policy development and service delivery, we can deliver improved outcomes for children, young people and families. I also recognise that intervening early in the lives of children and families has the potential to deliver economic gains, as has been evidenced elsewhere, including in Scotland.

In addition, as sponsor Department for the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI), I agree with the Committee's assessment that whilst the SBNI's main focus is to ensure the effectiveness of agencies involved in child protection, it does have wider powers to promote the safeguarding of children more generally.

I also commend the creation of supportive environments for breastfeeding, as is outlined in the report. It is one of those three proposed strategic outcomes. The introduction of legislation to support breastfeeding mothers is one of the proposed measures to achieve that outcome.

I have already referred to the aspiration in the public health framework for better collaborative working to make best use of all of the resources that we have. I welcome the Committee's recommendation on that.

One of our greatest assets is the people of Northern Ireland. We need to harness the commitment and energy of individuals and local communities in addressing the health issues that matter to them in ways that work for them. Health professionals need to be skilled up to support people to do things for themselves.

With regard to the new public health framework's prioritizing funding projects which involve collaboration between partner organisations, the framework will recognise that partnership working on a broad cross-sectoral basis continues to be vital if we are to make substantive progress in reducing inequalities. The framework should be used to help inform investment in programmes and interventions which are shown to be effective. In light of current financial constraints, it is essential that opportunities are taken to maximise existing resources and effect across all partner organisations.

The Public Health Agency will have a key role in working with others across government and other sectors to co-ordinate delivery and bring about more effective collaboration.

With regard to the recommendation to increase spend on public health, I remain committed to increasing the share of the health budget which is devoted to public health. I have already allocated additional funds to the Public Health Agency in 2012-13, which has enabled new investment in the provision of additional support services to help to address suicide and mental health issues; new initiatives to support vulnerable young children and their families; development of new programmes to help older people to continue to live independently; new breast screening services; and new initiatives to help to tackle obesity. Any commitment in that area, however, must be considered alongside the range of other priorities for the health budget, including meeting the needs of an ageing population and addressing the ever-increasing complexity of healthcare requirements.

I believe that there is much common good between my Department's strategic proposals for public health and the Committee's recommendations. The recommendations are also in keeping with the shift left agenda called for by Transforming Your Care.

Those are some initial comments on the report. I have undertaken to consider the recommendations more fully, together with the outcomes of our consultation, during the process of developing the final public health framework. I should add that we had a substantial number of responses to the consultation. We received over 140 responses, most of which are detailed and well argued, and deserve careful consideration.

The process will include two cross-sectoral workshops, to which representatives of the current ministerial group on public health have been invited, along with other key stakeholders. The first workshop took place a week ago, and the Committee's recommendations were shared with the group that day. A further workshop is planned for next month, and the aim is to finalise the framework this spring.

The process of finalising the public health framework will seek to identify further opportunities for cross-departmental working, which I will be happy to discuss with Executive colleagues as necessary. It is in the interests of all of us collectively as elected representatives to ensure that all people are enabled and supported in achieving their full health potential

and well-being, which is the proposed view of the new public health framework. Collaboration across government and at all levels of society will be vital if we are to change lives, particularly for our young people. Leadership from all Ministers will be of paramount importance. I welcome the Committee's support in this vital area of work. I am happy to work further with the Committee on the issue as we seek to achieve the common goals of improving the health of the Northern Ireland population and reducing health inequalities.

Mr Wells (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): In one sense, this is an unusual debate in that we know what the problem is and we know where we need to get to. Maybe the difficulty is in getting from A to B.

As Maeve McLaughlin quite rightly said, health outcomes in Northern Ireland are largely determined by where you were born. As she indicated, in constituencies such as Foyle, North Belfast and West Belfast, health outcomes, by every measurement, are poor in respect of length of life, health during that life and the health of our children. Unfortunately, it is often the case that where you were born determines how good or bad those outcomes will be.

All the indicators certainly suggest that health risks such as smoking, alcohol abuse, drugs, obesity and lack of breastfeeding are self-evidently a problem in the poorest parts of our society.

Mr Beggs brought to the table some very useful information on the issue.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Smoking in the home increases the risk of a child suffering from asthma. Is the Member aware that a combination of early years health education from Sure Start, home visits from health visitors and the provision of smoking cessation support from local pharmacists, etc, has significantly reduced smoking rates in certain areas such as the Antiville and Love Lane wards in my constituency, where it has gone down from 60% to 22% and 50% to 22% respectively within a two-year period? Is he aware that such dramatic changes can occur?

Mr Wells: I was not, but I certainly think that that is a very useful addition to the debate, showing the form of intervention that can provide a quick hit in helping to reduce health inequalities.

Mr Beggs also revealed some startling statistics from other parts of Northern Ireland. For instance, he said that, in Old Warren, which I believe is in the Minister's constituency, 55% of expectant mothers are smokers. It is extremely worrying that that is going on because of the inevitable outcomes for health inequalities. I am sure that, if you compared it with a similar sized population in somewhere like BT9 or Cherryvalley in Belfast, you would see a very different pattern of smoking. There is a very famous picture —

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. Interestingly enough, we did a course of work, through the Public Health Agency and Barnardo's, in a number of estates in the Lisburn area that have challenging problems, and that was obviously one of the things that was highlighted. However, it also highlighted a range of problems that then led to poor educational outcomes. Poor educational outcomes and poor health outcomes go hand in hand. Therefore, working together to ensure that we drive up both simultaneously is absolutely critical.

2.15 pm

Mr Wells: I agree entirely with the Minister. Indeed, in the most recent Chief Medical Officer's annual report, there was a very graphic indication: if you take a bus from the Markets area, which, I assume, is South Belfast, to the top of the Malone Road, your life expectancy, if you are male, increases by nine years. That is nothing to do with the fact that the air is fresher at the top of the Malone Road; it is all to do with poverty and the outcomes of having very little in the way of the world's resources.

The Committee was very fortunate to hear from expert witnesses with a wide range of experiences. The Ballymun project in Dublin, which I do not think has been mentioned yet, was very interesting. Ballymun is one of those huge 1960s or early 1970s estates that has enormous problems because of unemployment, disabilities and poverty. We heard about what was being done to tackle the health outcomes of the 20,000 people who live in that estate. The Longford/Westmeath Triple P project was also fascinating because you had a mixture of urban and rural. Dr Ziglio gave us evidence from Slovenia. In addition, some of us had the

benefit of attending a seminar on the situation in Glasgow.

All the evidence indicates what needs to be done. First, we need a greater emphasis on public health. The Public Health Agency has recently been established in Northern Ireland. We were very critical of Mr McGimpsey as Minister throughout his time, but one of the things that was positive during his time as Health Minister was the formation of the Public Health Agency. All the evidence indicates that we need to increase our expenditure on the public health element of health to 6% — it is a much higher level in Cuba — so we have to double our expenditure over the foreseeable future.

Secondly, we need collaboration among Departments. You cannot tackle this with the silo mentality that we and many other parts of the United Kingdom have. Of course, perhaps the most interesting and controversial recommendation of the report is that we should move towards the formation of a children and young people's Department. The Minister said in response that he disagreed with the creation of more Departments. The Committee envisages that replacing a current Department rather than bringing about a new one. Scotland does not have silos; it has Ministers based round themes such as older people and children and young people. That works, because a themed ministership brings together all the resources required to tackle a specific issue. You do not have to barter among 12 different Departments to bring elements to the table to create a mixture of policies to bring about better outcomes for young people; you would have a Department with the primary aim of delivering that outcome.

I accept that, under the present structures that we have in Northern Ireland — the need to have everyone round the table in a five-party mandatory coalition — it is difficult to think outside the box and have themed Ministers. However, I would like to think that, as we become a more normal democratic society, we will start to think in that way. I cannot see, because of the very wide encompassing nature of public health in Northern Ireland, how we can deliver what we need, particularly for our young people, simply on the basis of the present structures. I accept that that is an argument for another day. It is certainly not one that the Minister, without waving a magic wand, could deliver in the morning. I hope that, as things move on, we will be able to move to that holy grail.

Mr Beggs mentioned the very interesting material that we received from Harry Burns, the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, who recognised the importance of early years intervention. He focused on the recommendation that we should make this very much a public health issue. He expressed appreciation for the work of the Triple P project in the midlands of the Irish Republic. Dr Ziglio's name featured prominently in many contributions. Mr McCarthy mentioned his evidence from Slovenia, where, again, the suggestion is that, if Departments can get together and form a universal coherent policy, huge increases in health outcomes can be achieved in a very short time. So all the evidence seems to point in the same direction.

We do not normally associate North Down with health inequalities, but Gordon Dunne made a point about people who may live within a mile of each other. While one part of society enjoys extremely healthy outcomes, just down the road, there is another part of society in which problems evident in other parts of Northern Ireland persist. He also brought up the issue of parenting skills. There is absolutely no doubt that even in deprived areas, children reared by loving, devoted and committed parents do much better than those who have a less idyllic upbringing. We must do everything that we can to promote good parenting, so I think that his point was a very useful one that we need to emphasise.

Mickey Brady quoted the very worrying statistic that 21% of the people of Northern Ireland are living in poverty. There is no doubt that that statistic is important when it comes to inequalities in health outcomes. As he knows, that figure will probably become higher and higher under social welfare reform. Therefore, we need to put resources into this before more people have poor health outcomes. He, again, emphasised the need for partnership and suggested that DRD and DETI should be involved. Without doubt, practically every Department has a role in developing better health outcomes.

Maeve McLaughlin also quoted the 10-year discrepancy in life expectancy between people living in different parts of Northern Ireland. She suggested that resources should be pumped into obtaining stronger links and partnerships with other sectors. She cited the great inequalities in alcohol-related deaths in the Western Trust, and, again, the Foyle constituency is in the top three areas for that type of inequality. She suggested a composite approach to social care.

Conall McDevitt raised a crucial issue. I do not decry for one moment the fact that it was a male Member of the Assembly who raised the very important issue of breastfeeding. One of the things that we learned from our visit to Cuba was that the vast majority of people there are significantly poorer than those in Foyle, North Belfast and West Belfast, but they live longer. It was interesting to see how the Cuban approach delivered an average life expectancy of almost 80 for males. That is extraordinary when you consider that just down the road, Haiti, with the same population and a similar geographical position, can achieve nothing like that.

One of the points that emerged during our visit to Cuba was the almost universal level of breastfeeding by young mothers, to the extent that it was practically unheard of for that not to happen without there being a very good medical reason. Before the Chair spoke to the conference, we hurriedly rang Northern Ireland to get the equivalent figure for here, only to find that it was shockingly low. In working-class, vulnerable communities, it was absolutely dreadful. The figures quoted this morning indicate that there is no doubt that breastfeeding is crucial to the first year of a child's life. Yet we do very badly on that. Therefore, it was absolutely right of Conall McDevitt to raise the issue and make a cultural point, which was that we must make it extremely comfortable for mothers to breastfeed, when required. There must be no further stigma. I am a product of breastfeeding — I do not know whether that is good or bad. Certainly, my three children also are, and they are healthier and, I think, happier as a result.

Alex Easton was one of the few Members to raise the issue of the dangers of cheap junk food. Among the many things that I noticed in Cuba was the total absence of fast food. There are no large famous retail chains selling burgers, chicken or whatever. Fast food just does not exist. People do not eat fast food in Cuba, and that must also contribute. The reason for that is really nothing to do with health; it is just that many such companies are American owned and not allowed to operate in Cuba. However, I have no doubt that thousands of healthy young people in Cuba have benefited from the fact that they have no concept of a McDonalds "triple whopper burger" or whatever they are called. I do not eat them because I am a vegetarian, so it does not worry me, but you know what I mean — one of these massive cholesterol cocktails on a plate. The Cubans just do not have them, which makes their society much healthier. Therefore, if we have vulnerable communities who live on fast

and unhealthy food, the outcomes will inevitably be poor. He also raised the role of the safeguarding board in promoting parenting.

I have only a couple of minutes left. One thing slightly annoys me about these debates. We have had yet another debate on a subject that should really concern all 108 MLAs. However, what has happened? We have had the Health Committee talking to itself, and the Minister has been listening in, with his chief of staff beside him. [*Laughter.*] I cannot think of a title, but I am sure that it is something as important as that.

As an Assembly, we will really have to spend a bit more time becoming interested and involved in the debates and in other Committees' issues, because, frankly, there is not much to be achieved by the 11 members of the Health Committee debating this issue in the Committee and reaching total agreement — unusually, with Mr McCarthy there — and then coming to the Floor of the Assembly and reaching total agreement with little or no involvement from anyone else. We have had that again today, but at least we have the Minister here to respond. I think that this is becoming more and more of a burning issue.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. For Members' information, there are only nine recommendations in the report. It is not a big report, and it is on the Committee website, so people should take their time to read it. I think that you are absolutely right: health is everybody's business.

Mr Wells: There is a quick plug for the Committee's work. I will just finish with this point. It is totally wrong that we can have a society where someone is doomed to live nine years fewer simply by accident of birth. If he is born in the Shankill, the Short Strand or the Bogside, that person is more or less doomed to live nine years fewer than somebody he can see across the motorway and who is, perhaps, living on the Upper Malone Road, simply because of that accident. That cannot be tolerated any longer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety's review of health inequalities; notes the recommendations relating to the restructuring of government Departments; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to discuss the recommendations in the

report with the ministerial group on public health and to action those that are within his remit.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time will begin at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: I remind Members not to be seen to be reading out their supplementary question. Members should refer only to their notes.

Budget: Prime Minister

1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what representations they intend to make to the Prime Minister prior to the forthcoming Budget. (AQO 3399/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Representations concerning tax, fiscal and public expenditure issues are made on an ongoing basis. The Minister of Finance and Personnel's quadrilateral meetings, which are usually held at least twice a year, represent the formal process whereby we engage with Treasury Ministers on public expenditure and taxation issues. Separate bilateral meetings are also held on tax and fiscal issues.

Our representations have resulted in the abolition of air passenger duty (APD) on direct long-haul flights and reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing flexibility for the A5 road project. At our meeting with David Cameron during his visit in November 2012, we discussed the general implications of devolving corporation tax and agreed then that we would have a further meeting.

As Members will be aware, the final report of the findings of the joint ministerial working group was sent to David Cameron for consideration in November. The British Government must now decide whether corporation tax powers will be devolved to the Executive. David Cameron wrote to us last month to confirm that he will meet us again to hear our views on corporation tax in detail and that his office will work with ours to identify a suitable date. We continue to press for that meeting to take place as soon as possible. We hope that it will take place before the March 2013 Budget, but a decision is not directly linked to the Budget.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer.

In the light of the £25 million that has been expended on policing the flag protests, would he support a bid by the PSNI to the Treasury security fund for the replacement of that money?

Mr M McGuinness: That is a matter for the Policing Board and the PSNI. The events of the past number of months have obviously been very difficult and a very serious challenge not only to the PSNI but to these institutions. I look forward to more peaceful times in future, and I am conscious that people are flagging up the real challenges that we all might face over the next seven or eight months. I hope that everyone will do all in their power to ensure that everything passes over peacefully. However, if the Policing Board, the PSNI and the Minister of Justice were to make a case to the First Minister and me that we should raise with the British Government directly the issue of replacing the money that has already been spent by the PSNI, I think we would be more than willing to do so.

Mr Dunne: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answers. Given the huge expenses that have been paid to the MPs from his party, will he confirm that he will now instruct them to take their seat and vote against the Budget cuts?

Mr M McGuinness: There is a very short answer to that question and a very long-winded answer: the short answer is no.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the deputy First Minister agree that the absence of complete and accurate figures for the North's revenues and the reliance on Estimates from the British Treasury pose a real problem for the Executive in developing a comprehensive economic strategy?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes, I agree. Current Estimates employed by the British Treasury are based on assumptions and tend to vary widely. The Executive are doing our best to help our people through the economic downturn and financial crisis, but we find that we are limited in what we can do. If we had access to accurate information, it would be of help. It is an issue not just for us but for Scotland and Wales. I believe that all the Administrations should have access to a proper statement of public accounts. We do not have that at present.

The House should be reminded again that the First Minister and I have, at every opportunity, spoken to the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, about the reneging on a financial

commitment that was at the heart of establishing these institutions five years ago. In quite a number of meetings with other British Government Ministers, not least Theresa Villiers, the Secretary of State, we have reiterated the real difficulties that have been presented, particularly for our construction industry, by the resiling of the British Government from the financial commitment, which was described by both Gordon Brown and Tony Blair over five years ago as ring-fenced and guaranteed. It is also important to point out that that financial commitment was made in the course of very important negotiations at St Andrews, which all the parties in this House were at. Of course, the Irish Government were also present. I would like the Irish Government to remind the British Government of the financial commitment that was made at that time and to urge the British Government to fulfil the agreement that was made, which resulted in the establishment of these institutions, which, in my view, have proven to be very successful.

Goods, Facilities and Services Legislation

2. **Mr Weir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when goods, facilities and services legislation will be brought forward. (AQO 3400/11-15)

9. **Mr McElduff** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the legislation in regard to goods, facilities and services. (AQO 3407/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will take questions 2 and 9 together.

The Programme for Government commitment to extend age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services requires that legislation to be taken through the Assembly by 31 March 2015. Currently, anti-discrimination legislation in relation to age is limited to the fields of employment, vocational training and further and higher education. Prior to a new Bill being introduced to the Assembly, a considerable number of steps have to be undertaken to progress through the required legislative stages. We are currently considering the scope of the legislation to ensure that it achieves its intended outcome. We aim to have the legislation in place during the latter part of 2014-15, in line with the Programme for Government commitment.

Mr Weir: I will try not to break the eleventh commandment and not be seen to read out my supplementary question.

The bulk of countries have applied this on the basis of the qualifying age being 18. The exception is Australia, where it has been watered down somewhat. Can the deputy First Minister give an assurance that we will follow best international practice and set 18 as the qualifying age?

Mr M McGuinness: As the Member knows, we are giving active consideration to the scope of the legislation. Research has been commissioned into the discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services experienced by children and young people, people of working age and older people. Officials are scoping out all the issues likely to apply with each Department. Officials are working on a comparative analysis with other jurisdictions such as Australia, which the Member mentioned, to see how they have implemented similar legislation across the age sectors. All that will go towards ensuring that an informed decision is reached on the scope of the legislation.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an LeasChéad Aire fosta as a fhreagra go dtí an pointe seo. Has the Equality Commission given the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister any indication regarding the scope and breadth of the legislation?

Mr M McGuinness: The Equality Commission is strongly opposed to the blanket exclusion of minors from statutory protection. It recommends that the legislation should be non-discriminatory and in line with the guiding principle of non-discrimination in article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. In addition, when examining the scope of the legislation here, we need to be mindful of any potential breach of our section 75 duty that may make such legislation vulnerable to a legal challenge.

Mr Eastwood: Further to the other supplementary questions, can the deputy First Minister reassure the House that the legislation will not leave young people discriminated against and that that will be built into the legislation?

Mr M McGuinness: I am sure that nobody in the House wants to see any young person discriminated against. That is why I indicated in a previous answer that there was a scoping exercise taking place. Officials are very much involved in looking at a number of situations, particularly what is happening in Australia and Canada. As a result of all of that work, we will have to come to final decisions in the House so that we can ensure that the legislation meets the time frame laid out in our Programme for Government.

Mr McCarthy: Will the deputy First Minister give us any indication of the status of the single equality Bill for Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member knows as well as anybody else that, as in all of these matters, there are differing views in the House on it. He will also be aware that, in order to ensure that we bring legislation forward to deal with that issue, we need an agreement in the Executive. Thus far, we have not been in a position where we can bring forward the legislation, but no doubt that will form part of ongoing discussions.

Disability Strategy

3. **Ms Fearon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the disability strategy. (AQO 3401/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Cheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities places an obligation on government to promote, protect and ensure full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by all persons with disabilities. The involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in all facets of public life is an important aspect of the convention. The Executive's formal response to our obligations under the UN convention and the findings of the 2009 promoting social inclusion report on disability will be delivered within the context of a new disability strategy.

Article 33 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires that people with disabilities and their representative organisations are not just consulted by this Administration as part of the development of government policy and strategy but are actively engaged. To fulfil our

obligations, a specialist in disability was engaged and worked with our officials to develop a draft strategy, on which we consulted last year. The sectoral expert also advised us on arrangements for consultation, including the development of fully accessible documentation and consultation events. With that support, we completed a consultation exercise, and we have developed a comprehensive strategy, which has incorporated many of the views expressed during the consultation.

Arrangements are being finalised to launch and publicise the Executive's new disability strategy, and we are engaging with the disability and other sectors. In line with the view of stakeholders on the need for delivery, that will include early signature projects being taken forward within the Delivering Social Change framework.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I know that OFMDFM has an overarching role when it comes to disability issues, but will the Minister outline what specific areas the Department will bring forward in this?

Ms J McCann: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister takes the lead on disability awareness and advocacy and on monitoring, reporting and governance. So OFMDFM will host a major inclusive conference to invite providers of all public services to gather with representatives of the disability sector and other sectors to consider how current arrangements meet the needs of people with disabilities on the basis of equality. In conjunction with people with disabilities, we will also develop a Delivering Social Change signature project to provide greater support and advocacy for people with disabilities and for their families and carers. There are a number of areas that we will look at when it comes to those signature projects. They will include action on disability awareness and advocacy; access, particularly to transport and digital inclusion; housing, employment and standard of living; tackling crime against people with disabilities; and participation in sports and leisure.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her responses. I chair the all-party group on disability, and one of the key worries and stresses for people with disabilities across Northern Ireland is the impending impact of the welfare reforms. Will the Minister outline whether those issues will be addressed and incorporated in any new disability strategy?

Ms J McCann: The Member raises a point that has been raised before on this issue. The Minister for Social Development brought proposals to the Executive for a Welfare Reform Bill to give effect locally to the proposed changes. Consultation respondents on the draft disability strategy expressed a range of views on welfare reform. It was clear that disabled people feel vulnerable about the potential changes that are about to happen, especially in relation to disability living allowance. For many, the potential of suffering a loss in what they see as their primary source of income means that much of the strategy would ring hollow if those changes were introduced. We must, therefore, consider the potential impact of welfare reform in the context of what we aim to achieve through the delivery of that strategy.

2.45 pm

Mrs Dobson: Have officials produced a report on the consultation on the disability strategy, and what is the timescale for the full publication of the strategy following Executive approval?

Ms J McCann: The purpose of 'A Strategy to Improve the Lives of Disabled People 2012-15' is to set out a high-level policy framework to give coherence and guidance to Departments' activities across general and disability-specific areas of policy. The actions that will follow the strategy will provide a framework, particularly for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and take forward that work to improve the lives of children and adults with disabilities. The strategy is about the delivery mechanism that all Departments will buy into that will improve quality of life for people with disabilities.

St Lucia Site, Omagh

4. **Mr Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the St Lucia site in Omagh. (AQO 3402/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Under the Hillsborough agreement, the St Lucia site, apart from the historic barracks buildings, was gifted to the Executive to raise funds from the eventual disposal of the site, which contains houses, light industrial buildings and land. The OFMDFM-owned portion of the site shares an outer boundary with the Department of Education's Lisanelly site, while the historic barracks portion is still in the ownership of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). This part of the site was subject to leasehold covenants dating from the 19th century that limited the use of the site

to military purposes and required its return to the original landowners — the Archdales — should it no longer be required by the MoD. As a consequence, the property at St Lucia, which was transferred to OFMDFM in April 2011, did not include this historic core.

The houses on the site have been assessed by the Department for Social Development as not suitable for conversion to social housing. The Housing Executive has reported that there is not unmet demand for social housing in the area. While the site's potential is being assessed, it is necessary to have realistic expectations of what is feasible in the short to medium term because of the current state of the land and property market locally and regionally. It is important to raise the maximum value from the site, and consideration needs to be given to market conditions. Officials are in discussions with Omagh District Council and the Department for Social Development's regional development office regarding future possibilities for the site.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response. Is he fully aware of the importance of the site to the future development of Omagh, given its strategic location? He touched on discussions with some of the stakeholders, such as Omagh District Council. Will he advise us on the possibility of the site being handed over, given over or gifted to the council or some other stakeholder for the future development of Omagh?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member knows that I am conscious of the strategic importance of the St Lucia and Lisanelly sites to the people of Omagh. We are all conscious of the prospect of an education campus on the Lisanelly site at some stage in the future. I said that the St Lucia site partly bordered the Lisanelly site, and the St Lucia site is full of complications by dint of historic agreements made many years ago. The development of the sites is critical, and I understand that there are ongoing discussions with Omagh District Council and the Department for Social Development about how we can take the issue forward.

In the event of there being an educational campus on the Lisanelly site, lands that are under our control at St Lucia could be made available to the education authorities for playing fields for the pupils who will inhabit that site. The issue of historic buildings is a wee bit more complicated, and I expect that the discussions between ourselves, the Department for Social Development and Omagh District Council will continue. It is important that we get a resolution of the situation with St Lucia, because we all

understand that, strategically, the sites are of critical importance, not least because of their ability, if they were utilised, to free up other land and other buildings in the area that could be used for the benefit of the local community.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that, given the uncertainty that pertains to the sites, the sooner the Executive can come to some decisions, the better it will be for the people of Omagh?

Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Education has pushed forward decisively with what it wishes to do with the Lisanelly site. There will be further discussions between the Department and some of the local schools that are interested — and others that may be less interested — in locating to a campus that, I think, would provide a unique sharing arrangement in education. That opportunity should not be missed, and there is a responsibility on everybody in the Omagh area to recognise the reality that the proper development of the Lisanelly site into an education campus would represent a real beacon of how we need to go forward through sharing in education. St Lucia has important land that can be utilised for playing fields for the young people on the shared education campus, but, yes, it is important that we come to an agreement on the historic nature of the buildings, which are protected buildings, and their significance to the town of Omagh, the local council and the Department for Social Development.

Mr Hussey: I want to deal specifically with the walled barracks of St Lucia Barracks. I understand from the Ministry of Defence and the Secretary of State for Defence that negotiations are under way between the Ministry of Defence and the covenant holder to buy out that covenant, and it is the understanding of the Ministry of Defence that the entire walled barracks will be offered to OFMDFM. I ask the deputy First Minister to confirm that, if that is the case, it will come into the control of OFMDFM and will be offered perhaps to Omagh District Council. Those buildings are so significant, and we do not want to see them lost to a private developer.

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely agree with the Member: the sites are of critical importance to the town of Omagh and are sites that Omagh District Council has a tremendous interest in. I know that there is a commonality of view between the political representatives in the House from the West Tyrone constituency on how the sites will be developed for the benefit

of the local community. I certainly want them to be developed for the benefit of the local community and not for the benefit of developers.

Victims' Groups: Funding

5. **Mrs Hale** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when funding for victims groups will be confirmed. (AQO 3403/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The responsibility for administering victims and survivors funding to groups transferred from the Community Relations Council to the Victims and Survivors Service on 12 November 2012. The Victims and Survivors Service opened the application process for the 2013-15 victims and survivors funding programme for groups on 26 November 2012, and the application process closed on 17 December 2012. The Victims and Survivors Service is in the final stages of completing the assessment of applications from groups for funding from the victim support programme for 2013-15. Once the necessary final pre-contract checks have been completed, the service anticipates that letters of offer will be issued to successful groups from March 2013.

Mrs Hale: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Does he agree with me that it is vital that long-term funding continues to be in place for those who have been most wronged during the past decade?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes, absolutely. A very clear indication of the commitment of the First Minister, me and the entire Executive to this is the reality that, in the four years between 2011 and 2015, we are spending, through the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, the Community Relations Council and the Victims and Survivors Service, close to £50 million. We absolutely accept the importance of ensuring that people who have been victims of the conflict are supported. We are also very determined to ensure that the detailed work that the Victims and Survivors Service is involved in, dealing with the individual issues that affect victims, is carried out in a cohesive and professional manner and in a way that is bespoke to their particular difficulties.

Mr McDevitt: Does the deputy First Minister agree that what many victims desperately want and need is a process of true reconciliation and a truth process getting off the ground in our jurisdiction? What conversations are he and the First Minister having —

Mr Speaker: Order. The question is very specific. It is about funding to victims' groups. Let us not widen the question. I will ask the Member to continue, but let us try to get to a supplementary to the original question.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you for your guidance, Mr Speaker, as always. In that case, what conversations are the deputy First Minister and the First minister having with others about funding mechanisms that would support victims and support the wider objective that I addressed in my earlier question?

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I are very conscious of the need to ensure that we support victims who have been affected by the conflict of the past. Built into the funding arrangements that deal with all the complex challenges that people face is a recognition that we have to deal with that aspect of the past. The Member is obviously tempted to ask what the resolution is to the bigger question of how we deal comprehensively with the past. There is no agreement on that. There appears not to be agreement between the British Government and the Irish Government, and there certainly is not agreement in the House. My party has put forward what, we believe, is the best way forward. I am not saying that that is the solution; others have their ideas and, no doubt, will put them forward. Many times, in the course of many interviews in recent years, I have said that one of the big failings of the agreements that have been made — the Good Friday Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement or even the Hillsborough agreement — was the failure to deal with the past. People can come at the past from their individual perspective.

We could also have a situation in which people choose to speak for victims as though they know exactly how each victim or family wants the past to be dealt with. If you go out and talk to victims' groups and to individual families affected by the past, you will find various views. So coming to an agreement that satisfies the vast majority will be very difficult, but we should not baulk at the challenge. There is a job of work to be done and discussions to be had. I hope that, at the end of those discussions, there will be agreement on how we move forward.

Mr Elliott: Will the deputy First Minister give us some outline of the locations throughout Northern Ireland where there are gaps in funding and service provision in the victims' sector? How does he plan to deal with the issues to do with where those gaps are and

ensure that nobody loses out because of the location that they live in?

Mr M McGuinness: The Victims and Survivors Service needs to deal with that issue. We would be very disappointed if certain parts of the North felt that they were not being adequately serviced. If the Member wants to contact me about a specific demographic or a specific location that is of concern to him, we can have that discussion and see whether we can resolve whatever difficulty is in the mind of the people who have obviously lobbied the Member on the issue.

3.00 pm

Employment and Learning

Further and Higher Education: People with Disabilities

1. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to increase further and higher educational opportunities for disabled people. (AQO 3414/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Last September, I was pleased to launch Access to Success, my Department's regional strategy to widen participation in higher education. The strategy has a strong focus on the creation of a more accessible higher education sector, where people who are most able but least likely to participate are given every encouragement and support to apply to, and benefit from, higher education. The strategy identifies those groups that are still under-represented in higher education (HE), including those with disabilities and learning disabilities, and that may require additional support to take full advantage of the educational opportunity.

My Department provides some £3 million through disabled student allowances to help students with the extra costs that they may incur when studying their higher education course. The allowances can help with the cost of specialist equipment, travel and other course-related materials. They also finance one-to-one personal support to disabled students who are on higher education courses at our colleges or universities. The support providers include note-takers, dyslexia coaches and sign language interpreters. The Department also provides premium funding of around a quarter of a million pounds per annum to the higher education institutions in

recognition of the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

In the further education (FE) sector, my Department provides financial support of £3.5 million per annum to assist regional colleges to discharge their responsibility towards students with learning difficulties and disabilities. That includes £2 million per annum to help to meet the cost of providing tailored, discrete courses for students who are unable to undertake a mainstream course due to the nature or degree of their disability or learning difficulty. The colleges also provide an information and advocacy resource hub, which is accessed through the Colleges Northern Ireland website and the DisabledGo service, that provides potential and existing students with accessibility information about colleges and college campuses.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for a very fulsome answer. Within what time frame is it anticipated that the sums of money that he referred to will be spent? Will that happen within the context of the Programme for Government or the current Budget allocation? Will he outline how he intends to track whether the money that has been allocated is sufficient to meet the needs of this deserving sector?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his interest in this subject, and I assure him that this remains a commitment for me, my Department and the Executive. The Executive have endorsed the widening participation strategy for higher education. The resources come from my Department's existing baselines. The figures that I quoted are spending figures in-year, and I expect that, at the very least, we will seek to maintain them into the future. We will certainly look to increase them where appropriate.

Again, universities are required to have access agreements with the Department that are signed, produced and reviewed every year. That is the means by which we hold the higher education providers to account for their delivery. As to the further education sector, we have ongoing discussions with the colleges, and there is a deep commitment from all the providers to ensure that they are accessible to all sections of the community. That is because, ultimately, we want to ensure that we are developing every talent in society to its maximum potential.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Given that there is a strong post-19 lobby group looking for greater provision of services for those with

learning disabilities, what engagement has the Minister had with Sperrinview Special School, Dungannon and with other such groups in that sector?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for that question. I cannot comment on the very specific engagement that she mentioned, but I am very conscious that post-19 provision is an issue that concerns a wide range of people. I know that there have been discussions in the Health Committee, the Education Committee and the Employment and Learning Committee on that.

We have a range of programmes that address the employability opportunities of young people who perhaps have some learning disabilities or wider disabilities. We are very happy to engage with them. Those types of policy are always under review so that we can make sure that we are getting it right, because I appreciate that it is an area where we need to ensure that we are fully engaging with the young people in question.

Mr P Ramsey: I give the Minister's statement to the House a warm welcome, particularly the £3.5 million to colleges for students with a learning or physical disability. I want to home in on the specific matter of those who are deaf or hard of hearing. What specific programmes or actions are being promoted on widening participation to include those groups?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his ongoing interest in the area. This applies to how we can use the resources available to provide very discreet, one-to-one interventions to assist people with a whole range of different barriers, including those with hearing difficulties. There are services in both the FE and higher education settings where, for example, assistance can be given for taking notes and engaging with lecturers. That one-to-one service is available, and it is hoped that it will address the particular needs of that category of people.

Steps 2 Success

2. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department has received any formal representations from companies which are seeking to compete for the Steps 2 Success programme contract. (AQO 3415/11-15)

13. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the Steps 2 Success programme. (AQO 3426/11-15)

Dr Farry: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will group questions 2 and 13. I also request an additional minute for the answer.

My Department is currently working on the development of the Steps 2 Success programme, which will replace Steps to Work in 2014. The Steps 2 Success public consultation exercise received over 80 responses from a range of organisations. Respondents raised a number of key issues around the proposed programme objectives, eligibility and content. There was also significant interest in proposals on the contract area and duration of the programme, supply chain management and funding.

The responses have been analysed, and the key design features of the new programme are being finalised. The new programme will demonstrate that the Department has listened to the feedback received from the consultation exercise and will blend some of the successful elements of Steps to Work with the best of what is being delivered elsewhere. The Department believes that that will bring forward a programme specifically designed for Northern Ireland that will serve all unemployed clients well.

As the Department has not yet finalised the design of Steps 2 Success, it is not able to receive formal representations from companies seeking to compete for Steps 2 Success contracts. Officials have met, at their request, a number of organisations that are actively considering whether they will bid to deliver Steps 2 Success, either as a lead contractor or as a subcontractor in the supply chain. Their purpose has been to update on progress made in developing the programme. No information has been given to organisations at those meetings that is not already in the public domain. Officials have also ensured that organisations delivering other departmental provision have been kept up to date about Steps 2 Success.

Steps to Work currently delivers a quality service that helps people in Northern Ireland move into work. Steps 2 Success is being developed to build on that service and to ensure that we continue to offer unemployed people a range of supports to help them find and keep a job. Details of the programme will be published shortly, and that will be followed by a two-stage procurement process under the guidance of the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). It is anticipated that that will be completed by November 2013, with the programme starting in 2014. Details of the

procurement process will be formally publicised on the CPD website.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Will he state when the tendering process is likely to happen? Will it be a single contract for all Northern Ireland or will there be regional variations to make sure that we have the right quality-assurance scheme? It is crucial that we have a qualitative training scheme for the unemployed.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Byrne for his question. We are finalising the design of the programme, and we will be seeking to go out to procurement within the next couple of months. On the Member's specific question around contract areas, he will be aware that the original consultation highlighted the potential for Northern Ireland to be one contract area. However, members of the Committee will be aware that the current thinking is around the potential for three contract areas across Northern Ireland. The final decisions have not yet been taken, but it is more than likely that that will be the future design. We will come back to the House to confirm that as soon as we have taken those final decisions.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister confirm that, when it is up and running, the principles behind Steps 2 Success will be adopted in many of the programmes that are currently in constituencies so that young people, particularly those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), are made aware of the training that is available to try to get them into work?

Dr Farry: It is important to understand that Steps 2 Success will be our main return-to-work programme, and it will apply to all age groups. Beyond that, we have a number of specific interventions that address the needs of young people primarily, but Step Ahead 50+ is also there to address slightly older members of the workforce who have not had the opportunities for jobs recently.

The provisions that we have through the youth employment scheme and some of the NEETs projects will offer more intensive work for people who find themselves in those difficult situations than would be available through the more general mainstream provisions. Even with that, we are moving ahead with Steps 2 Success to try to achieve a more individually tailored approach that meets the needs of individual clients a lot better. More flexibility will be given to the contractors and subcontractors in that regard.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In answers to questions in the Committee, we were told that up to £5 million might be top-sliced from the £40 million being allocated to the Steps 2 Success programme just to cover administration by whichever three contractors are successful. What will the Minister do to ensure that the overwhelming majority of any funds allocated for the scheme will go directly into putting schemes in place and will not be there for administrators that come in, maybe from Britain, to administer the scheme, which they will simply top-slice off?

Dr Farry: I understand the concerns that the Member has raised. First, it is important to say that, at this stage, we cannot assume the nature of any successful, or otherwise, bidders for these contracts. I will assure him in this regard: I stress that the scheme is not designed as a cost-saving exercise. That is not in my mind, and it is not in the mind of the officials in the Department. This is about ensuring that we do the best that we can to design a work programme that will assist people who are unemployed, particularly those who are long-term unemployed, into work. The scheme will be judged on how successful we are in respect of those types of outcomes.

We are seeking to learn the best lessons of what happens in other jurisdictions in that regard and to avoid the bad lessons that are already apparent from those types of projects in other areas. Obviously, there will be some overhead costs involved for the companies that will be involved in all this, but, given that we are going out for procurement, there is a clear aim to achieve best value and to ensure that the system for delivering the services is as lean as we possibly can get it and that we are maximising the impact of our scarce resources on the front line.

Mr Speaker: Caitríona Ruane is not in her place for question 3. Chris Lyttle is not in his place for question 4, and Patsy McGlone is not in his place for question 5.

Programme-led Apprenticeships

6. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he plans to address the lack of work placement opportunities available to people enrolled in the programme-led apprenticeship scheme. (AQO 3419/11-15)

Dr Farry: I congratulate Mr Newton on his diligence in being here. Programme-led apprenticeships were introduced in September

2009 as an intervention measure during the current economic downturn. The Department recognised that, in the current economic climate, it was unlikely that young people wishing to be apprentices would secure employment at the outset.

The programme aims to ensure that young people assessed as capable of achieving an apprenticeship qualification at level 2, but who have not yet secured employment, are prepared for future progression to employment as an apprentice. The benefit of the programme is that participants follow the same apprenticeship framework as those following the employer-led ApprenticeshipsNI provision so that they have developed good underpinning skills before they gain employment.

I am aware that some training providers are finding it difficult to source the requisite work placements for participants on the programme-led apprenticeship programme. My Department has urged the providers of training to continue their efforts in search of placements, but that is particularly difficult in the current economic climate. They are encouraged to contact public sector bodies operating in their locality, such as health and social services trusts and district councils, to explore further placement opportunities. In the current offering, I must stress that the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, which is employer led, must always be the preferred option. It requires the continued support of employers, and I encourage them to reconsider the value of apprenticeships and the benefits that they can bring to their businesses.

3.15 pm

On Monday 11 February, I made a statement to the Assembly outlining my intention to undertake a major review of policy on apprenticeships and youth training. The review will explore how we can engage more with employers on the training curriculum and improve young people's employability skills through measures such as work placements.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer so far, but I did ask specifically what he would do to achieve placements. Will the Minister agree that this programme-led apprenticeship scheme was introduced as an interim measure, and that to continue with the same approach does a disservice to young people, employers and the overall economy?

Dr Farry: I fully understand the Member's comments, and I want just to address two or three aspects. First, we are working with the

public sector to try to maximise the number of placements. Secondly, in my main answer I stressed that I regard this as being a temporary intervention that was made by my predecessor in the context of economic downturn and a lack of opportunities for employers. Our current policy is to regard the mainstream ApprenticeshipsNI programme, which deals directly with employers, as being the preferred route because it is much better for a young person to be learning on a job than learning purely in a college or training provider setting with, perhaps, the prospect of a placement.

I appreciate the Member's ongoing interest in the topic of apprenticeships, and he is fully aware that we launched a review last week. It is my intention that that review will be comprehensive and cover the future of programme-led apprenticeships. I want to ensure that we have a model that works best for young people, giving them the maximum opportunities, and also works for employers as well.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, will you tell us, though, exactly how successful or unsuccessful programme-led apprenticeships have actually been? I heard it reported that only 30% on such schemes actually get some employment. What steps are your Department taking to try to improve such schemes?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his question and his interest in this topic. Obviously, programme-led apprenticeships have been a challenge, and in my answer to Mr Newton I indicated that they were far from ideal in terms of the type of intervention that we are making.

Presently about 5,000 people are participating in programme-led apprenticeships, compared with about 11,000 in ApprenticeshipsNI. Almost half as many are in the programme-led apprenticeship scheme. I would prefer that that entire provision could be catered for in terms of the workplace. When someone is training as an apprentice through the mainstream scheme, they are an employee and have a job that they are currently undertaking. Only about 60% of those in programme-led apprenticeships have a placement; about 40% do not. That is clearly a matter of concern, and we need the support of employers to maximise that. In that regard, we are encouraging the public sector to consider what it can do to assist.

Mr Elliott: Following on from those questions about the programme-led apprenticeships scheme being an interim measure, what

exploration has there been with the private sector to establish an industry-led scheme that would replace that scheme?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Elliott for his comments. He will appreciate that we are involved in an advertisement campaign around the ApprenticeshipsNI scheme. Although we are reviewing all our apprenticeship programmes, as of now we are seeking to maximise the uptake of the current offering.

Last year, the 'Belfast Telegraph' ran a successful campaign to highlight the benefit of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, however, we can only work in the context of employers coming forward and offering opportunities, and young people being prepared to take them. So, it is important that we continue to encourage both those groups to come forward for something that is to their mutual benefit and the success of the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. Has the Minister read the Hansard report of the presentation by NIE as part of a CBI delegation to the Committee for Employment and Learning a couple of weeks ago, when serious concerns were raised about the apprenticeships that it applied for?

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

Mr F McCann: That is the question. I am asking what can be done to ensure that that is dealt with.

Dr Farry: I am certainly very much aware of the discussions, and the presentation that was given by the CBI to the Committee. I make it a habit to study the Minutes of Evidence from the Committee. Beyond that, I have had direct discussions with NIE itself, which has recounted to me its experiences with this. Those discussions reinforced the need for us to encourage more and more young people to consider going down the apprenticeship route and the need to work to ensure that our young people at pre-apprenticeship level have the employability skills, essential skills and motivation to take on an apprenticeship. I commend the very positive leadership that NIE continues to present through its engagement in the training of young people.

Youth Unemployment

7. Ms Fearon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the programmes currently in operation to assist people to get into education, employment or training. (AQO 3420/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department provides a range of programmes to help unemployed young people get into education, employment and training. I will outline the main programmes in operation and the new initiatives specifically designed to reduce youth unemployment. Those are in addition to my Department's main Steps to Work programme, which is designed to improve people's employment prospects and help people into work.

The Training for Success programme offers a guarantee of a training place to all unemployed 16- to 17-year-olds to enable them to develop occupational, employability and essential skills. The youth employment scheme offers unemployed 18- to 24-year-olds work experience placements and the chance to develop job-specific skills. An employer subsidy of £5,000 is available in key growth sectors.

Under the Steps to Work programme, the first start initiative offers waged opportunities for 18- to 24-year-olds. In addition, my Department's disability employment service provides programmes to help young people with disabilities progress towards and move into employment; programmes such as Workable (NI), Access to Work, Work Connect and the job introduction scheme.

Building on those programmes, my Department has introduced a number of new initiatives under the Executive's Pathways to Success, the NEETs strategy, specifically for unemployed young people. Those new initiatives include the collaboration and innovation fund, which provides support to help disadvantaged 16- to 24-year-olds improve their employability through the acquisition of economically relevant skills; the community family support pilot programme, which helps the most disadvantaged families in targeted areas by supporting parents and helping all family members to re-engage with education, employment or training; and the community-based access programme, which will enable 16- to 18-year-olds to increase their essential skills qualifications and progress into further education or government-funded training.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that, due to the wide range of schemes available, it is a complicated area to get advice on? Would he consider setting up a one-stop shop for advice to enable easier access for NEETs?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. I entirely understand the point that she is making. One key aspect in the NEETs strategy is the focus on the one-to-one mentoring of the young people in question. The Careers Service is very keen to take that forward. We fully appreciate that, to really make a difference to young people, particularly those who are facing real barriers, one-to-one interaction will be required; as, indeed, will signposting, which can be provided, to make sure that they are aware of and can access the most appropriate schemes available.

Mr Storey: Does the Minister not believe that the initiatives he listed in response to the original question are working in a policy vacuum, given the fact that the Education Minister has refused to ensure that there is a policy for 14- to 19-year-olds? Will he tell the House what interaction or joined-up approach there is between his Department and the Department of Education to ensure that there is an overall provision to the benefit of young people and not the benefit of silo Departments, as clearly seems to be the way of doing business at the moment?

Dr Farry: There is no policy vacuum. The overall NEETs strategy has been endorsed by the Executive and is an interdepartmental strategy. That includes the Department of Education. In particular, one of the things that we are keen to develop in partnership with that Department is a tracking system for young people throughout the system. At present, it tends to break off when transfers are being made between different stages.

I fully appreciate the importance of a 14-19 strategy and that we need clear funding of an entitlement framework as a subsection of that. I further appreciate that the Salisbury review has made a number of recommendations in that regard. I am also aware that the Member has a motion down for debate in the very near future. My officials and I continue to engage with the Department of Education around those issues, and I know that the Minister of Education is keen to ensure that, collectively, we deliver the best for the young people of Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. What mechanisms does the Minister have to assess the success of the wide variety of schemes that he has outlined here today, to show that they are working in getting young people into long-term employment?

Dr Farry: The Member is correct to say that we need to ensure that we are delivering in all of the schemes that we have out there. The main means by which we will do that is by having a clear understanding of the baselines that we start with and tracking the progress in that regard.

We want to see a decrease in the number of people who are falling into the NEET category and in the number who fall into youth unemployment. You will also be aware that the Executive have tasked my Department, alongside the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), with producing a strategy on economic inactivity. Again, we will want to see changes happening with regard to the number of people who fall into those categories. Indeed, we will be bringing a paper to our various Committees and to the Floor of the Assembly in that regard in the very near future.

Engineering: Skills Shortages

8. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what his Department is doing to ensure a joined-up approach to addressing skills shortages in the engineering sector. (AQO 3421/11-15)

Dr Farry: To address skills shortages in the engineering sector, I chair the advanced manufacturing and engineering services working group. That working group consists of employers from the sector and representatives from the further education colleges, universities, employer bodies and other Departments. It aims to agree a co-ordinated approach to the skills needs of the sector and to put in place relevant interventions in the three areas of skills provision, sector attractiveness, and co-ordination and communication.

To gain a better understanding of the skills demand in the sector, my Department has commissioned research to ascertain the likely skills shortages there will be over the next three years. The research will assess the skills profile of the sector, carry out a salary survey and highlight any skills imbalances that currently exist or are forecast to exist. It will

include statistical modelling work, which will examine the demand for skills under a range of scenarios over the short, medium and longer term. That key piece of work is expected to be finalised in summer 2013 and will inform the further population of the action plan for agreement by the group.

In the meantime, a number of actions are already being taken forward. Work with employers and colleges is under way to explore the introduction of relevant short-term specialist engineering conversion courses and an aerospace academy. Discussions are also well advanced about the establishment of a higher level apprenticeship in engineering, and I expect that those will be concluded shortly. Recently, I made a statement to the Assembly outlining my intention to undertake a major review of apprenticeships and youth training. That review will conclude in autumn 2013. All of that work supports the wider aims of the Executive's science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) strategy, which identifies actions to encourage more people to study those subjects, including engineering.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Can the Minister give a little bit more detail on what discussions he has had with engineering companies over the past six months on how we can ensure a more joined-up approach going forward?

Dr Farry: Again, I thank the Member for his interest in this topic. The establishment of the working group was very much informed by concerns that were being brought to me directly by engineering companies and, indirectly, via a number of Members. The skills adviser for Northern Ireland, Bill McGinnis, did a scoping exercise in discussion with a number of companies from the sector. We also had a stakeholder forum event in the Stormont Hotel, last June, at which a number of issues were aired. Finally, a number of employers sit on the working group and are involved directly in the discussions that we have. We also have representative bodies from business, which reflect the views of their individual members.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes Question Time. Before we move on to the next item of business, I want to point out that quite a number of Members were not in their places for Question Time. I know of no other elected institution where that would be tolerated. I expect Members who were not in their places this afternoon to, at their first opportunity, come

to the House, give a reason and apologise to this House. I assure Members who, for whatever reason, feel that they cannot do so that I will deal with the matter properly and procedurally. It cannot go on that Members just do not turn up and do not give a reason. Certainly, if it continues, I will deal with it. From here on, I expect Members to come to the House, give a reason and apologise to this House. Let us move on.

Committee Business

Sustainable Energy

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is a motion from the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I apologise that I was not in my place earlier. I had been in the Chamber, but I left to attend a social function with the intention of being back on time. Unfortunately, however, two other Members were not in their places during that time. My profuse apologies to you for that.

Mr Speaker: You were in the Chamber, out of the Chamber, and then I noticed you in the Public Gallery, so I know that it was not deliberate. I think that I need to say that. We will keep a watching brief on Members who do not come to the House to apologise or give a reason, and we will deal with them. The Member may continue.

Mr McGlone: I thank you for your understanding, Mr Speaker, and, obviously, your observation.

I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to encourage and support further growth in the sustainable energy sector to help maximise government's contribution to creating sustainable, high-value jobs in the renewable energy sector, developing the green economy, enhancing security of supply and encouraging consumers to use renewable energy.

In February 2011, the previous Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment reported on its inquiry into the barriers to developing renewable energy. The Department has provided regular and timely updates to the current Committee on progress with the implementation of recommendations from that inquiry. Indeed, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and other Departments are to be commended on their efforts to implement many of the

recommendations for which they have lead responsibility, such as the inclusion of interim targets for renewable electricity and renewable heat in the strategic energy framework; representatives from business, academia and the renewable energy sector now being included on key subgroups for renewable heat, grid development and planning; DETI's working with the financial sector to educate and provide awareness of the long-term security of renewable energy incentivisation; the development and implementation of a renewable heat incentive; new building regulations being introduced by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to improve the thermal performance of buildings; efforts by the Utility Regulator to improve the transparency of costs for renewable energy grid connections; and steps by the Department of the Environment (DOE) to improve consistency in planning consents and increase permitted development rights for renewable energy installations in the domestic, business and agricultural sectors.

However, a number of the inquiry's recommendations that were either accepted or partially accepted have not yet been implemented. The disparate nature of energy vires may have contributed to that to some extent.

The fact that there are so many Departments with responsibility for energy matters was identified in the inquiry as a contributory factor to preventing the efficient and effective roll-out of renewable energy opportunities by the Executive. The Committee supported the call in the Barnett review of economic policy for the Executive to provide clear focus and leadership to the range of energy policy issues as a separate and distinct government priority. Although the Department informed the Committee over a year ago that the consolidation of energy functions should be revisited at some time in the future, the Committee still awaits the outcomes of a cost-benefit analysis that the sustainable energy interdepartmental working group (SEIDWG) considered in November.

At the core of any long-term strategy there must be a long-term vision. The inquiry recommended the development of a long-term vision for renewable energy to 2050 and beyond. The Department accepted that, and, as agreed with the Committee, the Department established a sustainable energy action plan, which the Executive approved in April last year. However, today, more than two years after the renewable energy inquiry report, that long-term vision has yet to be developed. Indeed, the

Department only recently appointed external consultants to carry out a study with a view to establishing that long-term vision.

To inform the establishment of a vision, a series of stakeholder events will be held next week that will contribute to a report later in the spring. The Minister may be in a position now to provide more detail to the House on how and when a long-term vision for renewable energy will be established.

The need to make certain renewable technologies mandatory was an inquiry recommendation that DFP accepted. In June 2011, DFP informed the Committee that, from 2013 onwards, it was likely that some form of renewable energy would be necessary to meet the proposed building regulation requirements. However, having considered its latest update in November, it seems that DFP has done nothing beyond putting in place new building regulations to improve the thermal performance of buildings.

The Committee recommended that the Executive take forward the green new deal. However, in May 2012, DFP decided instead to opt for a boiler replacement scheme. Although such a scheme is to be welcomed, it will benefit consumers by having their boilers replaced by existing engineers using boilers that are manufactured outside Northern Ireland. If we are to grow our green economy, we need to provide further incentives for domestic energy-saving technologies and renewable technologies that provide opportunities to generate new jobs and new business opportunities in green manufacturing, construction, installation, servicing and maintenance.

Of course, the renewable heat incentive will contribute to that when phase two is launched later this year. However, that needs to be coupled with incentives for energy efficiency to ensure that we increase the use of renewable sources of energy in an environment where overall energy usage is falling because of efficiency measures. It is only in that way that renewable energy can really start to contribute significantly to security of supply.

The inquiry called on the Executive to bring forward a programme to develop the renewable energy potential of public buildings. The Committee was informed by DETI and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in June 2011 that regulations exist that put a duty on responsible authorities to take appropriate steps to ensure that a public building that was constructed after

31 December 2011 or that has undergone major renovation after that date fulfils an exemplary role in the context of the renewable energy directive. Although it is unclear what exactly that means, I am personally aware of a number of new or recently renovated public buildings where renewable energy technologies simply have not been availed of. That also came up recently at a meeting that I attended with key sectors in the industry. If the public sector is not encouraging the use of renewable energy, how can the Executive encourage others to do so? That is a key point.

Since the previous Committee's inquiry, the Department has done a lot of good work to implement many of the recommendations. I thank and commend the Minister for that. However, a number of the key recommendations that were accepted have not yet been implemented. It should be said, however, that DETI does not have lead responsibility for most of them. They can be summarised as follows: consolidating responsibility for energy vires; developing a long-term vision for renewable energy; making certain renewable technologies mandatory for new buildings; incentivising domestic renewable energy and energy efficiencies to create high-value jobs and business opportunities; and leading by example by ensuring that, for public buildings, every opportunity is taken to avail of renewable technologies.

Those are the very recommendations that can contribute most to creating sustainable, high-value jobs in the renewable sector, developing the green economy and encouraging consumers to use renewable energies with the environment at its core.

The Executive must lead by example. We have an excellent opportunity to exploit the many opportunities presented by the development of renewable energy technologies. The Committee wants to encourage continued growth in the sector. The Carbon Trust's estimates are very encouraging. It estimates that, by 2020, between 8,000 and 33,000 more jobs could be created from renewable energy. The future actions taken by the Executive will have a significant influence on whether the actual figure is closer to 8,000 or 33,000. The future of many of our people depends on that.

If the upper estimate for jobs is to be realised, the Executive must fully consider the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) report on skills requirements in the renewables sector. The report estimates that up to 5,880 more skilled people will be needed by 2015 to integrate renewable technologies and energy efficiency measures into existing

buildings; for offshore wind and tidal installations; for bioenergy technologies; and for energy storage. That report was published in 2011. To what extent have the Executive taken on the report's findings? Has enough been done to date to ensure that the skills are in place as they are needed? The last thing that we need is for businesses to consider locating elsewhere because we did not act to address a skills gap that has clearly been identified.

At its meeting last week, the Committee considered the statement from the Minister for Employment and Learning on his review of apprenticeships and youth training. The Minister highlighted the need to match skills to the needs of employers. The great potential for employment in the renewable energy and energy efficiency sectors will be realised only if we have in place the appropriate skills at the appropriate time, and matched to the needs of employers and potential employers in the renewable sector.

It is essential that there be a much more integrated approach in the Executive to renewable energy to create the right conditions in which to develop the renewable energy business and the employment opportunities that undoubtedly exist. There is also potential to develop our green economy —

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

Mr McGlone: — through the opportunities that exist for supporting innovation, research and development, and the export of renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies for the benefit of the economy.

Mr Newton: I welcome the motion. When it was first drafted, the word "further" did not appear in the first line. That is a small but important point, because we need to recognise the work and growth that has been happening in the area. The inclusion of "further" was critical. I say that because we need to recognise that the Minister has already done some good work. I note that the Committee Chairman paid tribute to her for that. That work has taken place in a holistic way that has seen a range of renewable technology initiatives taking place. The strategic energy framework (SEF) has been put in place. Invest Northern Ireland identified wind, marine, bioenergy and resource efficiency as areas in which there could be major growth.

I will mention three specific areas: the first is the skills base that is necessary in the area, which

the Chairman mentioned; the second is communications; and the third is the potential incentives, if I get that far.

In August 2011, the Department for Employment and Learning published a study that sought to determine the skills required to support the potential economic growth in the Northern Ireland sustainable sector. It should be noted that, despite the fact that the study concentrated on only a small number of sub-sectors, the report identified a number of major concerns. Those included a decline in the number of people pursuing high-level mechanical and electrical courses. That is an area on which the House has concentrated its energies before. There is a need for multidisciplinary, skilled workers to meet the crossover of disciplines at all levels. For example, there is a need for ICT and engineering skills crossover in the development of the smart grid. There is the possibility that current public sector funding constraints will make additional public intervention and funding courses difficult, hence the need for the Employment and Learning Minister to perhaps concentrate his energies on making bids, where he can, for additional money.

3.45 pm

An issue that gives me and I am sure many others cause for concern is that any large incoming company will likely have to source many of its initial requirements from outside Northern Ireland. That says that the skills base in this area is not here and, if we secure inward investment, those jobs are likely to go to people from outside Northern Ireland. The most promising route to address that appears to be to provide a healthy supply of labour market entrants with STEM subject qualifications in science, technology, engineering and maths. That is an important piece of work that must be done to underpin and take forward a renewables strategy. It cannot be down to only one Minister to deliver on this; it is a cross-sectoral issue, and is of particular importance for DEL.

Many organisations provide information, advice and support about renewable energy, and communication by government is obviously critical: communication between government and the public, between government and the business sector, and within government. We must have that cross-sectoral approach, which the Chairman spoke about. I know that the Minister will want to ensure that communications are effective and that that area will be addressed. However, communication is two-way. The public need to seek the

information as much as government must provide it, and the business sector also has to communicate with government. If it is not a two-way thing, and there is a breakdown, we just are not going to get there.

It is imperative to communicate with and educate the public. An enhanced programme for how we do that must be considered. However it is achieved, there is a need to continue to communicate consistently and effectively —

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

Mr Newton: — across all Departments and with the public and the business sector.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I speak as a member of the ETI Committee in support of the motion. We have to start from the premise that people at home and in businesses are struggling daily with the cost of energy. In 2008, electricity customers in the North of Ireland endured a 53% increase in the price of electricity. In a recent evidence session, the Consumer Council highlighted how home heating oil has increased in price by 63% over the past three years. Therefore, as has been accepted, the energy strategy must move away from its dependence on fossil fuels towards much more of our energy coming from renewable sources.

The strategic energy framework confirmed new renewable energy targets, which have been referred to, of achieving 40% renewable electricity and 10% renewable heat by 2020. Are we doing enough to meet those targets and to promote further growth? The low-carbon and environmental sectors saw a 2.8% increase in employment between 2009-2010 and 2010-11. The Carbon Trust estimates that renewable energy could create between 8,470 and 33,124 jobs by 2020. Those targets will, of course, depend on the aggressiveness of companies in exploiting the supply chain opportunities that are likely to emerge from the growth in renewables.

I join others in highlighting the skills required by that sector. The 2010 DEL report suggested that an additional 3,327 skilled persons would be required between 2011 and 2015; that the six regional colleges are considered a key element in meeting that vocational need; and that the main training need would be a reskilling away from traditional trades, for which some colleges have already developed a range of courses. But do all of our regional colleges

have a clear vision and a strategy for the development of the renewable energy sector?

Energy storage — and, more specifically, the development of a smart grid — is seen as one area where graduate-level skills are needed. NIE points out that it finds it difficult to recruit power engineers and will face greater recruitment problems over the next few years due to an ageing workforce. The main response here, in my view, will come through a STEM initiative. Although much work has been done on renewable energy, it has been done in the absence of an overall vision for renewable energy. The main document outlining Government policy is the strategic energy framework. That extends to 2020, but does not contain interim targets or milestones, apart from for the level of electricity consumed to be from renewable sources by 2020.

Although there is a move — and I welcome it — from DETI to increase incentives for renewable energy, in some cases there is a sense from potential developers that those incentives may improve in the future. Therefore, some developers are not convinced that now is the time to invest. Opportunities were clearly missed to take advantage of funding for research and development under European framework programme 7.

There are major disparities North and South. The North, across that programme, drew down in the region of €30 million, and in the Twenty-six Counties the figure was just under €500 million. It is therefore vital that more is done to support the sector, under both the new Horizon 2020 framework and any other funding opportunities that are available. The Green New Deal Group estimated that additional investment for a green recovery package could be in the region of £900 million, and also pointed out the housing fund, which is designed to enable the energy retrofit of 500,000 homes over a 10-year period.

In conclusion, it remains the case that very few public buildings are using renewable sources and that 42% of our households are in fuel poverty. It is therefore vital that more is done to support a clear vision and an action plan to support further growth in the sustainable energy sector. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Overend: I rise to speak in favour of the motion. Supporting growth in the sustainable energy sector is important for a number of reasons already mentioned today, including jobs, the environment and security of supply. The motion refers to that. It is a motion that the Committee felt was relevant to bring for debate

in the House, given the work undertaken over previous years in a number of areas.

I will begin by highlighting some of the recent good news stories in the renewable energy sector. I think specifically of the SeaGen tidal turbine installed in Strangford lough, which is a world leader in that field. As well as that, we have seen a £50 million investment by Belfast harbour to develop a new terminal for the assembly of offshore wind turbines, which will be utilised by DONG Energy for its future Irish Sea operations. Another example is the ongoing work off the north Antrim coast, where licences were granted in October last year for three renewable energy projects. Those are all positive examples of what can be achieved in Northern Ireland with the right focus and investment.

A renewable energy inquiry was taken forward in 2010 by the previous ETI Committee. A number of recommendations were brought forward at the conclusion of that inquiry and published on 27 January 2011. The recommendations covered a vast range of areas, including government vision, strategy and policy, communications, development of technology for renewable energy, support for business, grid infrastructure and connection, and planning and consents. The Committee has received regular updates on the implementation of those recommendations, most recently on 17 December 2012, when the Chair received a letter from the head of DETI's energy division.

We are now aware that, while work has been ongoing in relation to a number of the recommendations, such as the electricity market reform (EMR) seminar held in June 2012 and the decision to launch the boiler replacement scheme in December, there is still work to do. For example, analysis to evaluate the structure of small-scale feed-in tariff (FIT) levels and associated small-scale ROC branding levels for the period prior to the FIT being introduced is due to be completed by March. Perhaps the Minister could update the House on the progress of that work.

As well as that, the long-term vision for energy in Northern Ireland to 2050 is still being worked on. The Committee was informed that consultants are being used to aid this project. Again, I ask the Minister to clarify where that process is at and when we should expect to finalise the long-term vision that is so vital to this sector.

Given the high levels of unemployment in Northern Ireland, which have been consistently

around 8% as well as being the UK average for some time, it is more important than ever that jobs are maximised in every sector of our economy. The green economy is no different in that respect.

A briefing provided by the Assembly's Research and Information Service has considered this issue in detail and has found that a number of gaps in provision exist in the green sector. According to this information, we need to look specifically at jobs in process, plant and machine operations as well as skilled trades occupations. I ask the Minister to outline how she is currently monitoring these clear gaps in provision.

Education needs to be considered as well. The Minister should also be looking at what training and qualifications are necessary to fill the evident gaps. A joined-up approach is clearly needed, and that is why the Ulster Unionist Party wanted to establish a Department of the economy as soon as possible in line with the recommendations of the independent review of economic policy to tie in the functions of DETI and DEL.

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

The motion specifically mentions the security of supply of renewable energy. That leads on to considering the likelihood of meeting our renewable energy targets. The current target is to provide 40% of electricity demand from renewable sources by 2020, but we all know that that is very unlikely to happen.

The 2011-15 Programme for Government also includes encouraging the achievement of 20% of electricity from renewable sources and 4% of renewable heat by 2015. It is essential that we continue to strive to meet these targets as far as possible. I am sure that the Minister will update us on that today.

Mr Lunn: Not for the first time, I find myself speaking on a Committee motion even though I am not on the relevant Committee.

Mr A Maginness: You are very versatile.

Mr Lunn: Aye, I know. Be that as it may, the motion speaks for itself, and I have no doubt that it will have overwhelming support. I will speak briefly on the economic potential, after which I will put on record some Alliance Party proposals on the wider context.

The motion refers to government's contribution to creating sustainable jobs, but government

should recognise the potential for others to create jobs. Governments do not create sustainable jobs but they can create the conditions for others to do so.

We have been moderately successful in this sector in Northern Ireland. There are over 30,000 jobs in the low carbon and environmental sector, which represents a marginally larger total proportionately than in the rest of the UK. That total is growing, despite the prevailing financial conditions. I appreciate that estimates are only that, but even at the lower end of the spectrum, it is possible to see that number doubling over the next decade.

I agree with much of the findings of what I believe was the previous Committee's inquiry into barriers to the development of renewable energy production when it comes to the current lack of targets, which Mrs Overend mentioned. I do not want to set everything up as a tick-box exercise, but we need some means of measuring success or otherwise as we go forward.

I am also amazed at the wide range of agencies that are involved. You have to wonder whether these could be brought together in some way, but whatever the outcome of all that, the key is to have targets for jobs; that is the number one priority. There is, of course, a wider context, particularly with regard to the benefit to consumers. I note that almost £7 million overall is now available each year for home insulation, which is a good start.

The Alliance Party has proposed a renewable energy support Bill. We would include in that the introduction of renewable heat incentives, provision for permitted development for domestic and non-domestic renewable installations and the creation of a framework for the installation of smart meters in every home for microgeneration, which, I understand, would cost roughly £30 million over five years with a potential return of more than that annually. We also support the introduction of a framework for the development of geothermal energy.

We would also like to look at a programme of low-interest loans to the agrifood industry to produce and market environmentally friendly food products. That seems popular at the present time.

4.00 pm

We should not underestimate our green image as a useful marketing tool when it comes to

promoting Northern Ireland as a green economy hub. However, we have to back that up with a range of environmental initiatives, not just the direct work on renewable energy. We need to be more environmentally friendly in both our economic and health interests. Initiatives such as the rapid transit scheme, which looks as if it will finally go ahead, will be a welcome development. The creation of additional woodland would also be welcome, as we are sadly lacking in that. That would go along way towards assisting moves towards more renewable energy provision.

This is not a criticism of the Minister — in fact, Mr McGlone complimented her when proposing the motion — but this is the sixth time in three years that we have discussed something along these lines in the House. We have had debates on the warm homes scheme in January 2010, the strategic energy framework in November 2010, the green new deal in October 2010, the green economy in September 2012 and the energy strategy in November 2012. Perhaps, in her reply, the Minister could point to some positive outcomes from all those debates. Mr Wells made the same point in the health debate earlier; namely that we talk about and around these things, but it is sometimes hard. Everybody agrees, but there does not seem to be a positive way forward. I look forward to hearing from the Minister in due course.

Mr Moutray: I rise as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to speak in support of the Committee's motion. The motion, which I hope will gain widespread support across the House, considers several potential benefits that would flow from the further growth of the sustainable energy sector. Sustainable energy has been defined as energy that has minimal negative impacts on human health and healthy functioning of ecological systems and that can be supplied continuously to future generations. That is a technical definition, but it emphasises the importance of sustainable energy.

The public debate on energy has taken centre stage in recent years. Our dependence on oil and gas is simply not sustainable. We owe it to generations yet to come to make sure that we grasp the nettle, develop alternative energy resources and set clear strategies, objectives and targets. Therefore, today's debate is important as it encourages us to go the second mile.

The Committee's interest in these matters reflects the Executive's interest and approach. The Executive have the strategic aim of a more sustainable energy system in which energy is

used as efficiently as possible, much more of our energy comes from renewable resources and energy efficiency is maximised. The Executive's strategic energy framework looks ahead to 2020 and includes the key goals of building competitive markets, ensuring security of supply, enhancing sustainability and developing our energy infrastructure.

In the limited time that I have, I want to address one of the key areas outlined in the motion: the creation of high-value jobs. As our traditional manufacturing base continues to decline and unemployment, especially among our young people, continues to blight our society, it is vital that we do all that we can to exploit all alternative means of job creation. To do that, we must focus on potential growth areas, of which the renewable energy sector is a prime example. Various investigations into the job creation potential of the sustainable energy industry have confirmed, with some variations depending on the criteria applied, that a significant number of people could find meaningful and secure employment in this field over the next decade. I think, for example, of the opportunities presented by developments in marine energy, including wave, tidal and offshore wind. If we are to avail ourselves of such opportunities, at least two things must happen: Northern Ireland companies must exploit the opportunities arising from growth in the sector in the United Kingdom and Europe, and we must ensure that we have a strong skills base. Indeed, those things are two sides of one coin. With our manufacturing heritage and mindset, we could and should lead the way.

It is important that DETI, which takes the lead on energy issues, continue to work as closely as possible with other Departments. I know that that is already happening through the sustainable energy interdepartmental working group, which is chaired by my colleague Arlene Foster. I pay tribute to the Minister, who has shown commendable vision and determination in the development of sustainable energy, to the extent that Northern Ireland is setting an example for others to follow. A key Department represented on the interdepartmental group is the Department for Employment and Learning.

The need for a joined-up approach between educational qualifications, skill development and job creation has been mentioned by others in recent debates in the House, and I want to re-emphasise the point. Relevant courses of study, such as STEM subjects, and academic research and development can all contribute towards a skill base that will supply the industry with suitable employees, who will be able to

avail themselves of high-value, well-paid and secure work. We need also to ensure that our IT institutions provide us with those who have the required skills in project management and leadership. Success in those areas will, in turn, encourage further growth in the sustainable energy sector. That can only be good for business and for our communities.

Mr Frew: I support the motion. This is a very important motion to the Chamber, and it is on a subject that we have talked about on countless occasions, as has already been said. Nonetheless, it is a very important issue and one that we have to keep our focus on.

I have heard comments commending the Minister on the work that she has done in this regard. I echo those sentiments and congratulate her on that work. That work is evident when you look at the work being done in the tidal sector of renewable energy. It gives me great pleasure to see that even off the shores of my constituency, North Antrim, there are ventures being put in place for tidal renewable energy. I will meet Tidal Ventures on Friday 15 March to discuss that very issue and see how we can add to an already flourishing renewable energy market.

That brings me to my point: if one message gets out of the House tonight, it should be that we cannot do this on wind alone, and we cannot survive on renewables alone. If you ask businesses, they will tell you that security of supply and cheap energy are the most important things to them. I am not yet convinced that renewable energy on its own will bring any price dividend to our businesses and industry. There has to be a mix, and there have to be choices for our industry. That is the most important thing that should come out of the debate. Of course, we must progress renewable energy; of course, we must progress wind energy, where it is best placed; and, of course, we must progress tidal energy and offshore wind where we can. It is great that there will be offshore renewable wind farms that produce as much energy and electricity as some of our smaller generators. That is very important, and it is good that we will work on, support and enhance that industry. However, government cannot create these jobs; we can only set the standard and set the arena so that companies move into the space. So it is very good that we push on.

Alongside renewable energy — wind, tidal, anaerobic digestion and every other sort — we must sustain the choice for consumers and industry. That means supporting them when they choose the gas route or remain with oil.

That is important to our businesses. The Minister is due to meet representatives from Michelin, which is in my constituency. Michelin is very reliant on cheaper energy prices. It is a global company that used to be top of the league of the most costly plants in the world. No company or plant would ever want to be top of that league. I am grateful that, in the past few years, it has been able to reduce its energy costs so that it is no longer top of that league. That gives confidence to its workforce and to North Antrim, and I commend the company for what it is doing. In the past month, it has installed two wind turbines to help it to reduce its energy costs. However, it still relies on oil and electricity.

We need to get smarter with our grid and make sure that it works, but we also need interconnection. It really annoys me that parties in the House — I mean Sinn Féin — do not support the North/South interconnector and the ways in which they want it to be installed. It is vital to the economy and business in Northern Ireland to help the security of supply and to keep prices down. Where the security of supply is concerned, I also worry about our ageing generators and our problems with the Moyle interconnector.

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

Mr Frew: So, it is vital that we get North/South interconnection as quickly as possible to help our industry.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the motion and the debate. There are recurrent themes in this motion and in the debates that have taken place in the House about the energy sector and renewable energy in particular. We have to give credit to the Minister for her work in the field. We also have to give credit to the ETI Committee. Even though it is under new Chairmanship, it is still the best Committee in the House. It works away for the common good and works to persuade the Executive to take on the challenge of developing the renewable energy sector.

I think that, although we should support the Minister's good work, there is still a lack of collective Executive commitment to the development of the sector. I agree with Mr Lunn that government cannot create jobs, but government can create the conditions in which jobs can be created and the economy stimulated. That is what we need to do. As legislators, we should put pressure on the Executive, because we know that the jobs

potential in this area is significant. The Carbon Trust has spoken about between 8,000 and 33,000 jobs by 2020, which is a substantial addition to the number of jobs in Northern Ireland. The DEL report on skills refers to almost 6,000 jobs that will be required by 2015. We are not talking about unskilled jobs; those are skilled jobs that will have a high value, will pay people well and will create further job opportunities in the sector.

As I have said before, we are uniquely blessed here with wind, sea and grass. We can grow grass and vegetation and produce the means for renewable energy. We have the sea and the tremendous power of the marine. We also have the tremendous power of wind. As Mr Frew said, we should not be overly dependent on wind. Wind is only one source, and it has its deficiencies as well because it is not constant. Nonetheless, we should be developing as much as we can in that direction.

4.15 pm

As Mr Frew also said, to develop that aspect of renewable energy, we have to have the North/South interconnector. If we do not have it, you can forget about renewable energy in Northern Ireland, because we have to be able to transfer electricity from one part of this island to the other. If we do not have the interconnector, we cannot do that. We can argue as long as we like about the track of that interconnector and the route that it takes, but we have to have a solid commitment to that interconnector; otherwise, we will imperil the renewable energy sector in Northern Ireland. The regional colleges have an important role to play in developing skills and giving our young people opportunities. I appeal to government to get its act together —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

Mr McGlone: I am wearing another hat as the chair of the all-party working group on construction. Will the Member accept that the huge pool of skills that we have at the moment could, tomorrow morning, with additional investment through the likes of green new deal, be put to use immediately to help create jobs and protect our environment? As well as that, installation schemes could protect those who are vulnerable to cold-related illness and fuel poverty, many of whom are older people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member very much, and I wish him well in his election campaign. *[Laughter.]* Mid Ulster is a suitable place for the green new deal, and I am sure that, from the Benches in Westminster, he will be even more resourceful and even more forceful in putting forward the green new deal. I wish him well, and I know that he will continue to advocate when he is elected on 8 March —

Mr McGlone: On 7 March.

Mr A Maginness: On 7 March —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we get back to the motion, please?

Mr A Maginness: Right. I know that he will continue to advocate —

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

Mr A Maginness: — renewable energy.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. At a time when unemployment rates continue to cause concern, it is imperative that the Executive capitalise on every opportunity to enhance job creation and develop further our economy.

Renewable energy is by far one of Northern Ireland's biggest economic opportunities. Recent figures from the Northern Ireland Renewable Industry Group (NIRIG) estimate that approximately £1 billion will need to be invested if DETI's 2020 renewable energy targets of generating 40% of energy from renewables are to be met. I am not aware of any other industry in Northern Ireland that can talk about that level of investment. However, if we are to secure major investment in a sustainable energy sector and the job creation and economic advantages that come from it, the Executive must address a number of issues. Given the initial financial outlay required for the majority of renewable energy projects, DETI must ensure that the incentives offered remain at a level that will continue to make renewable energy schemes financially viable and attractive for would-be investors. Long-term stability around policies and avoiding regular reviews of the level of incentives offered will strengthen investor confidence and encourage investments in the types of scheme required to reach the 2020 targets, such as small-scale single wind turbines.

DETI can also play a role in encouraging high standards in our sustainable energy sector.

The failed project at the Woodbrook eco-village in Lisburn, where the biomass heating was deemed not fit for purpose, shows that it is crucial that viable and effective systems are put in place. A gas installation had to be put in in that development to meet the project's heating requirements.

Planning outcomes for renewable energy applications must reflect the encouraging nature of the overarching policies of the DOE and have DETI's 2020 targets in mind. On that basis, the recognised benefits of renewable energy development must be given significant weight when decisions on such applications are made. It is important to note that planning decisions must not be influenced by the number of applications that are received because that is not a true reflection of the number of projects that are actually developed.

Even with long-term, stable policies, incentives from DETI and planning decisions that reflect the promotive policies of DOE, achieving growth in the sustainable energy sector raises other significant challenges. Perhaps the most significant of those challenges is the electricity infrastructure and its inability to harness the levels of generation needed to meet upcoming targets. To help to create sustainable, high-value jobs in the renewable energy sector, develop the green economy and enhance security of supply, it is vital that the Executive do all in their power to ensure that the proposed North/South electricity interconnector is progressed as soon as possible. The recently launched renewable heat incentive scheme is a welcome development for non-domestic properties, and I look forward to the extension of that to the domestic market in the near future.

Not only is a strong, indigenous and sustainable energy sector vital to the economy, job creation and security of supply, but it is in the best interests of the consumer. Supporting further growth in the sustainable energy sector will mean that Northern Ireland is much less reliant on the importation of fossil fuels, leaving us much less exposed to volatile international prices. That is good news for consumers, who, in many cases, are already crippled by rising energy prices. In my continuing support for the sustainable energy sector and the benefits that come from it, I support the motion.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the debate and the general support for renewable and sustainable energy that we have heard around the Chamber. In some cases, it has been hard-won, and, in some cases, it has been entirely

surprising to hear the positive comments. That said, I welcome them.

I will not rehearse too many of the figures, but I will highlight a few. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills estimates that, in Northern Ireland, just over 31,000 jobs exist in the low-carbon and environmental sector. If we break that down, we see that that probably equates to around 25,000 jobs in the sustainable energy sector itself. That sector has continued to grow despite the recession. It has bucked the trend and has continued to provide increased employment across Northern Ireland. Indeed, it has brought clean, green energy to this part of the world.

There has been a significant number of new start-up businesses, and there are a number of small and medium-sized enterprises in the sector. Renewable and sustainable energy is also helping to maintain some of our big, key players, and it is worth noting that 75% of Harland and Wolff's contracts are now in the offshore renewables base. The Carbon Trust estimates that up to a further 33,000 jobs can be created by 2020 if we meet our 40% renewable electricity target. The report that the Assembly Research and Information Service produced for the Committee has been mentioned in the debate. I am keen that we focus not only on meeting the 40% target but on maximising job creation for Northern Ireland. Of course I want to see renewable and sustainable energy in Northern Ireland, but I also want to see us maximise the job potential for our citizens instead of importing wind turbines and seeing huge foreign companies coming in. Although I welcome clean, green energy, I want to see the local economy benefiting as much as possible from a move towards sustainable energy.

Although I welcome the success that we have seen to date, I have some concerns. The renewable heat incentive in Northern Ireland is less generous than its equivalent in GB, and, indeed, having spoken to some of the players in Northern Ireland, I know that they see GB and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland, as more attractive markets for their businesses. That concerns me because, as I say, we want to retain those businesses and grow our economy, not lose them to other parts of these islands.

We put £25 million towards the renewable heat incentive, which I welcome, but it is worth noting that that money came from the Treasury specifically for a renewable heat incentive. DETI and the Minister have not chosen to top that up with further moneys, which is why we see the lower incentive rates. It has been said

that we want more people to avail themselves of renewable energy to spread the money further and wider, but, if we topped that up, perhaps we could produce better incentives. Another factor that has been pointed out is that we are trying to incentivise people off oil, not gas, but the fact that GB is seeking to incentivise people off gas suggests that, in the long-term direction of travel, renewable energy and heat is where we want to go. That is why I ask why we are committing £32.5 million to the extension of the gas network to the west. Even with the optimistic outlook that we are potentially connecting 30,000 homes, that is around £1,000 per home. I would ask whether that is the best use for public money, given that further down the line we may well be seeking to incentivise those people back off gas and onto renewables.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will.

Mr Frew: Does the Member agree that, for any rationale for extending a gas pipeline, it is not necessarily households that you should look at with regard to that equation? It is about businesses, and giving businesses the opportunity to choose their source of energy. That is the way that you will reduce bills for companies. It should not be about households. The equation should be about businesses and what businesses can connect to the gas pipeline.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: I accept the Member's point to an extent, but the question has to be whether it is a good use of public money. If, further down the line, businesses are going to be seeking to invest in renewable heat instead, it may not be a good choice for business either. In his contribution, the Member mentioned choice. He said that we should not have a single supply and we needed to have a mix and to have choice. I agree with him, and there is plenty of mix and choice in offshore wind, onshore wind, tidal, wave, biomass, air source heat pumps, ground source heat pumps, solar photovoltaic (PV) and solar thermal. There is plenty of diversity in the renewable sector, and that is where we need to head.

One final concern that I will mention, which has been referred to, is the failure of Departments to start shifting departmental buildings onto renewable heat. There have been some moves within DFP and DARD in particular, but, when I

ask questions of other Departments, they say that they are not considering it, have not considered it and have not assessed it. When you look at DARD, you find that that Minister sees the potential, not just for departmental savings —

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

Mr Agnew: — but indeed for the agriculture industry if we incentivise the use of biomass.

I welcome today's debate. We are right to congratulate ourselves where we do well, but I certainly think that we can do more. I hope that we will.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Maginness said that this was the best Committee in the Assembly. I have not had the benefit of hearing its deliberations, but there are a few questions that I would like some clarity on. Perhaps the Minister or the Chair will be able to deal with them.

The first thing is, when people call for somewhere between 7,000 and 33,000 jobs, I would like to know specifically what those jobs are in. We seem to have a range of issues: onshore wind, offshore wind, biomass, fracking, photovoltaic, the performance, the grid or whatever. Presumably, you do not need the same skills to do all of those. I would like someone to explain to me exactly what is our strategic energy policy. I heard Mr Dunne say that DETI's target was 40% of electricity by 2020. Is that electricity production or electricity consumption?

When people tell us that there are no alternatives, I wonder about the cost of putting in interconnectors that may link us to nuclear power in Cumbria or, for other issues, about how we look at the cost of investment. That is the real issue, and it was actually brought up by Mr Agnew: is this an appropriate use of public money?

Offshore wind farms are not being built. If you look at the Committee that I am on, you will see that a number of large construction firms that manufacture wind turbines are closing down in Denmark and elsewhere because the markets are not being fulfilled.

4.30 pm

When people talk about the cost-effectiveness of those interventions, I wonder which is more cost-effective. Is it offshore wind or is it gas-powered generators? What is more important

to the consumer? Is it that the lights are always on, the price that we pay, or sustainability?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. Mr Frew also raised the point about whether renewable or sustainable energy will have a positive impact on price. It is worth noting that, although it is hard to predict how prices will go, we know that gas prices are rising and will continue to rise. The one thing that you get with renewable energy is sustainable prices, because, with regard to solar and wind, those fuel sources are free.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you. Some commentators believe that the United Kingdom's commitment to giving financial support to renewables on offshore wind will cost £160 billion over the lifetime that they are forecasting. You have to say to yourself that, if other countries do not do that and if they invest in nuclear or gas, which are cheaper, or other things, we are at a competitive advantage. All I am saying is that those things need to be looked at so that we can work out what skills we should be investing in.

People are talking about 7,000 jobs. There is a real need to invest in the grid. I am sure that the Minister will agree that we have had underinvestment in the grid and in our assets, and we now need more power transmission engineers. I also think that we need to look at the interconnectors. The question, of course, is this: who is going to pay for the interconnectors? Will it be the consumer or the heavy users — I find it a little bit strange that it is our heavy users who are paying disproportionately more of our electricity bill — or should it be the Government as some form of sovereign investment? Those issues need to be decided before you can decide what jobs you need to invest in.

Mr Agnew mentioned the significance of Harland and Wolff and about how much of its output was now in renewable energies. I had the opportunity to talk to Harland and Wolff, and it said that, unfortunately, because it was not part of the winning consortium — DONG Energy won the offshore bid — it is sitting with no work for its renewable section. It is actually going back to oil and gas in the North Sea. There is an issue about whether we are really creating jobs that we will get.

I also talked to AirGrid and the folks who are trying to manage the amount of wind that we

bring into the whole of the Irish grid, and that includes Ireland and Northern Ireland, and they tell me that we are at 40% at the moment on peak, but that they would like to take it to 75%. That is a tremendous engineering feat, but it leads to certain problems about curtailment. What happens when the wind blows too strongly, and what happens when we cannot balance the load of energy that we make in the middle of the night when we do not have the demand? Those are strategic issues that I hope the Minister will be able to address.

I was also interested to learn that many of the offshore wind farms off the Dublin coast will not now be built, because the Irish Government says that they are already meeting their obligations with onshore wind farms — you will notice that the United Kingdom has just signed an agreement on that — and that it is simply too expensive to invest in offshore.

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

Mr B McCrea: All of those issues come forward. However, I would like to see some form of proper economic strategic framework for energy, and if we had that —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry; I am just finished. I do not have time. We need a proper framework to do that, and then you can decide on the jobs and skills that you want. We must not —

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

Mr B McCrea: — put the cart before the horse.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I value the interest shown by Members in the debate. It had been indicated that we have debated sustainable energy on quite a number of occasions, and what are the benefits of it? The benefits are that you get to spend the afternoon with me in the Chamber debating sustainable energy issues and talking about the real sustainable issues.

In the most recent debate that we had about this issue, someone raised the issue about what falls under sustainability in relation to energy. Indeed, the previous Member who spoke mentioned nuclear, gas and renewables. Those are the three elements that make up sustainable energy, and we need to remember that. I know that we have talked mostly about renewables. If Mr Agnew is wondering where I

got that definition from, it is a Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) definition.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Agnew: You mentioned that it was a DECC definition. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills includes nuclear when it lists its renewable energy and low carbon sources, but it does not include gas.

Mrs Foster: We are talking about energy issues today, so I will take the Department of Energy and Climate Change's definition. Let us look at those issues. We have talked a lot about renewables today, and I think that it is right that we do that. We have an increasing amount of renewables in our energy mix, and I very much welcome that. It gives us the opportunity to insulate against future cost increases of wholesale oil and gas prices, but we also need to look to longer term benefits in relation to security of supply and economic growth.

Basil McCrea asked me about having a strategic vision in relation to energy. I know that he is not a member of the ETI Committee, but that is what the strategic energy framework (SEF) is. That is why we have it there. That sets the whole framework for energy policy up to 2020. I will talk about what will happen beyond that, because Mr McGlone raised the point about what we are doing up to 2050.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Minister for giving way. For clarity, do we remain committed to 40% of electricity being produced from renewable sources by 2020?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. I will talk about that later, because Mrs Overend talked about the fact that we would not reach that by 2020. I am delighted to see the progress that has been achieved with our electricity generation. In fact, we have gone past our interim targets in relation to that.

The strategic energy framework is there to support the development of a range of renewable technologies, and Members rightly make the point that we do not create the jobs; we just set the context for those jobs. That is what we have been trying to do through our work on the strategic energy framework and through Invest Northern Ireland and the many interventions that are taking place at present.

The 40% renewable energy target by 2020 is the cornerstone of our strategy. It is there to help us to increase energy security and is a significant step towards decarbonisation of the power sector. Growth in the sustainable energy sector, fuelled by increasing use of renewables, brings many benefits. Renewables can be a key player in creating investment, exports and jobs, which Northern Ireland's economy needs. For example, Invest Northern Ireland has indicated that the low-carbon energy and environmental goods and services sector presently delivers £3.7 billion to the Northern Ireland economy, employing 31,000 people in 1,500 companies. The sector is a net exporter of goods and services and is anticipated to continue to grow at almost 5% each year for the next 10 years.

We have identified wind, marine, bioenergy and resource efficiency sectors as having the highest potential to deliver significant economic and employment benefits to Northern Ireland through the various supply chain opportunities, research and development and inward investment.

I am disappointed with Mr Agnew's point that it is only local that we want to see investing here. Some of the best investments that have been made here in the renewables sector have been from foreign direct investment, and I will continue to push that in the market because I believe that we can be a real hub for that sector internationally. That is what I want to see being achieved. So, I ask him to raise his aspirations in respect of renewable energy.

We need to facilitate the onshore renewable sector. The Department has developed an onshore renewable electricity action plan, the final version of which I hope will be with the Executive in the next few months. That aims to maximise the amount of renewable electricity generated from onshore renewable sources and is underpinned by the rationale that it is for the market to bring forward the most cost-effective mix of renewable technology.

In 2011, wind energy contributed £620 million to the local economy. It is expected to grow by 8% this year and to rise to 9% in 2014 and maintain that level of activity through to 2020. The established bioenergy sector in Northern Ireland is a net exporter of goods and services, with growth and sales estimated to rise by 20% from 2011-12 levels to £240 million in 2014-15. Importantly for Northern Ireland, offshore wind licensed projects in the Irish Sea region are valued at £20 billion and, if realised, have the potential to provide one of the largest single

business opportunities for this region in a generation.

Our offshore renewable energy strategic action plan was agreed by the Executive in March 2012 and provided the strategic framework within which the Crown Estate announced the results of the first Northern Ireland offshore leasing round in October. As the House is aware, development rights were awarded to First Flight Wind for offshore wind off the south Down coast. In the marine energy sector, tidal energy off the north Antrim coast went to a consortium with international and local connections, which has raised our profile internationally, and I very much welcome that.

The potential for business development in the renewable energy sector is great. Invest NI has developed a strong sector team and employed a dedicated business development director for renewables in Europe to maximise supply chain and foreign direct investment opportunities. Many successes have been delivered, including the South West College, B9 Energy and Fast Technologies working together to develop energy storage solutions to militate against curtailment on the electricity grid, which was mentioned on a number of occasions; Harland and Wolff's offshore developments in transformer substations; and the investment in the sector by Belfast Harbour for the provision of the DONG Energy offshore logistics terminal, which will deliver substantial benefits to the wider economy. In fact, Invest Northern Ireland is matching supply chain opportunities for over 60 work packages associated with the terminal and associated offshore contracts, which is very much to be welcomed.

I previously informed Members that I asked MATRIX to conduct a study of emerging market opportunities for Northern Ireland in the sustainable energy sector. That study, which was led by a team of business leaders and key academics from across the sector, is due for completion shortly. Once I have given the final report due consideration, I will work with the Executive, the economic subcommittee and other relevant stakeholders to take its recommendations forward as appropriate.

There is also much activity in research and development, as Ms McLaughlin mentioned. Support for a centre for advanced sustainable energy, based at Queen's University, is being developed by Northern Ireland's research institutions and businesses in the renewable energy sector. Several Northern Ireland companies continue to be involved in the development, manufacture, assembly or deployment of marine energy devices.

Implementing electricity market reform with the rest of the United Kingdom will be a positive opportunity for Northern Ireland to further reduce its dependence on imported fossil fuels, cut carbon emissions and give the renewables industry the confidence to invest in renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland.

Having highlighted the benefits of renewables, I stress that the key thing that we need to do to prepare for the future is to ensure that we use as little energy as possible — energy efficiency. That is why I am introducing, in a new Energy Bill, a proposal for an energy efficiency obligation that could ensure a step change in energy efficiency in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Energy Bill proposals would increase the importance of sustainability in the hierarchy of duties and obligations for the Utility Regulator and the Department. Where appropriate, the deployment of renewable and energy efficient technologies are embraced within those activities.

I talked about the opportunities in the renewable energy sector, but we can also demonstrate that Northern Ireland continues to excel in another important sector of resource efficiency. It is important that Northern Ireland companies not only exploit opportunities in the sustainable energy sector but look at how they can utilise resource efficiency and on-site renewable generation to increase their competitive position.

We continue to deliver the sustainable productivity programme's full range of activities. These include an interest-free energy efficiency loan scheme, a capital grant scheme for water-and/or materials-saving projects, industrial symbiosis services, free audits to identify resource efficiency projects, free technical consultancy to help businesses to take resource efficiency projects forward and a range of other events and activities.

4.45 pm

I will look quickly at incentives. The House will be aware that the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO) has been very successful in encouraging greater levels of renewable electricity generation. Companies such as Brett Martin, Balcas, and Ballyrashane Creamery have all installed renewable electricity generation technologies to offset their energy costs.

At a domestic level, we are starting to see increased interest by homeowners in the installation of solar photovoltaic panels. When the NIRO was introduced in 2005, renewables

accounted for just 3% of total electricity generation. The average up to the end of December 2012 was just under 14%, which means that we have already exceeded our 2012 target of 12% by some margin. I think that it was Ms McLaughlin who said that we only have the one target of 40% by 2020 in the SEF. That is right, but in the Programme for Government we had a target of 12% by 2012. We have exceeded that, and are now at 14%. That is a sure sign that our renewable energy policy is on the right track. I very much welcome that.

I was rather amused when Mr Lunn said that the Alliance Party policy was to get a renewable heat incentive. Well, I can tell him today that that is granted, because, of course, we have a renewable heat incentive. We have been developing a more diverse, sustainable and secure heating market. That is one of the Department's priorities. Northern Ireland is overly dependent on home heating oil, which leaves consumers vulnerable to price fluctuations beyond our control and has a direct impact on the levels of fuel poverty. To —

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will indeed.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for the effort that she has made in making sure that we have a better energy mix. How concerned is the Minister or the Department about protest meetings that are now taking place regarding wind farms? It is something that is beginning to become a concern in west Tyrone. I think that fears are being exaggerated, particularly in relation to health.

Mrs Foster: More than anybody else, I recognise the right of communities to come together and ask questions; that is absolutely the right thing to do. I would encourage those companies who want to put in installations, of whatever nature, to engage at the earliest opportunity with the community so that if there are questions to be asked about health or other issues, they are answered as quickly as possible. The worst way to do it is to ignore the local community and think that you can just talk to them at the end of the planning procedures; that is not the way to engage with communities. I have said that to many installers, whether of wind farms, anaerobic digesters or whatever. Early discussions are key. For the Northern Ireland heat market to become secure and more competitive, it is vital that alternative fuel sources such as renewable heat technologies and natural gas be developed and

encouraged. The strategic energy framework therefore includes a target for Northern Ireland to achieve 10% renewable heat by 2020. To reach that ambitious and stretching target, it is essential that we have support mechanisms in place.

Last November, I was pleased to launch the Northern Ireland renewable heat incentive (RHI). It is a groundbreaking scheme and will provide businesses, community groups, schools, churches and other organisations with ongoing financial support when switching to renewable heat.

In addition, the development of that sector will provide opportunities for local firms involved in the area. It is expected that the incentive could support the installation of over 20,000 technologies by 2020, as well as securing our target for renewable heat. The RHI is available for non-domestic customers in the first instance, with a view to extending it to the domestic market in due course. In the meantime, householders can avail themselves of grant support from my Department, via the renewable heat premium payment scheme, which I launched in 2012.

To go to Mr Agnew's point on why we did not top up the renewable heat incentives —

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

Mrs Foster: I have taken a few interruptions.

The renewable heat incentives are not set because we have only £25 million; they are set because we looked at it from an economic perspective and we looked at the counterfactual, which, of course, is oil and not gas. It is quite wrong, Mr Deputy Speaker, for a Member to try to mislead the House by saying that we are setting it because we have only £25 million and are not looking at a way of topping it up.

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

Mrs Foster: We are looking at it from an economic perspective. However, I know that that is something that is quite alien to Mr Agnew.

Mr Flanagan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response. I am quite glad to be able to go

after the Minister. I do not mean "go after" the Minister — I mean that I am glad to speak following the Minister. That is because it means that I cannot be the recipient of some of the comments that the Minister makes sometimes. I thought that, until her final 10 seconds or so, she was going really well.

I welcome the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on this debate, and I thank the Committee for supporting the motion. I am thankful that energy is a devolved matter and that we are not reliant on DECC to provide policy definitions for us. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment recognises that we are in a prime position to exploit the opportunities that renewable energy development presents across these islands and in the wider European context.

As many Members indicated, it is not the sole responsibility of one Department or one Minister to drive this forward. Many other Departments have various responsibilities regarding the effective roll-out of renewable energy and energy efficiency opportunities, both of which can contribute to the green economy. Many Members have taken the opportunity to commend the Minister. I also commend her for the efforts that she has made in trying to grow this one aspect of our economy as part of her role as the economy Minister and the energy Minister. However, it is clear that there is a great need for other Departments to put renewable energy high on their agenda, and, as the chair of the SEIDWG and as a member of the Executive, the Minister has a key role to play in making that happen.

From a personal point of view, I think that the failure to introduce a radical retrofitting scheme that is based on the proposals that the green new deal group put forward is, and has been, disappointing. Such a scheme would have brought multiple benefits through reduced energy costs, reduced carbon emissions, the tackling of fuel poverty and the creation of thousands of jobs in the construction sector.

The boiler replacement scheme, which was brought forward as an alternative, is a welcome scheme. However, I will return to this question: why could the boiler replacement scheme not have been implemented as part of a wider energy efficiency/retrofitting loan scheme? It could have been done as part of a loan scheme. Are we expected to believe that those who are in the greatest deprivation, which means those who are living with the worst aspects of fuel poverty, can afford to shell out £1,000 to get a new boiler installed, even

though there are considerable long-term benefits to having a fully efficient boiler?

The fact that those in gas areas cannot avail themselves of any kind of a grant to switch to renewables reinforces the point that I have often made about the level of protection that is afforded to the gas industry here. We have had gas since 1996. It is a very well-established industry, and it is very attractive for potential investors. It is my view that that protection does not need to be there any more. As Paul Frew identified, we need to move to a situation where there is choice. However, that choice does not exist for those who are living in gas-enabled areas.

The launch of the renewable heat incentive is a very welcome move. However, Mr Agnew mentioned the facts that only £25 million was invested in it, that all that was provided directly by the British Government and that the scheme is, in fact, being administered by the British regulator. So, the £25 million that the Executive put forward came from the British Government, albeit with tweaked incentives, given the high proportion of our households that pay more for oil. However, the fact that that £25 million has been dwarfed by the £32.5 million incentivisation that the Executive have provided for the gas pipeline has raised some concerns, particularly among those who are employed in the green economy sector, about the Executive's seriousness about the renewable energy sector. I am glad to hear positive comments from the Minister towards that sector, and I am glad that initiatives to support that industry are still being taken forward.

I genuinely hope that the RHI scheme is a huge success and that, in the future, its budget can be further increased.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I take his point regarding gas. However, does the Member realise that Michelin, for example, did not remove itself from the top of a league table of the most costly plants because of the two turbines that it has installed at the back of its yard; it has removed itself from that position because it has connected to gas. That is the most important thing here. Businesses in the west deserve gas as much as businesses anywhere else. Sinn Féin should not be denying them, or trying to deny them, that choice.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am glad that he mentioned Michelin again. It is an issue that he raises all the time. A resource that also exists in north Antrim and is not being tapped into but is very

accessible for both businesses and households is geothermal energy. It needs to be given serious consideration. It is not included as part of the renewable heat incentive. The potential of geothermal energy would be very attractive for many businesses in the Member's constituency. I encourage the Minister to think seriously about how it will be incentivised and what changes need to be made to allow that industry to grow here.

To return to the Member's comments about the gas network, I can say that most of the information provided to the Committee about it concerns domestic households: the impact that it would have on fuel poverty; the number of households that would benefit, which is potentially 40,000; and if 70% signed up, how much it would cost. Very few references were actually made to businesses. That is why, as Committee members, we talk about households.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will in a wee minute. We have been told that it is there to benefit domestic customers. Obviously, there is a clear benefit for very intensive manufacturing businesses. There is no doubt about that. If that is why the gas network is being expanded, that is the reason on which it needs to be sold. It should not be sold on the potential savings for domestic customers, only for people to turn around and say that it is not about domestic customers.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for giving way. His party supports the gas network to the west, by the way, and it did so at the Executive. I am very pleased that it did so, because it recognised that the issue is not just about domestic customers but businesses. Yes, it is about domestic customers, but it also about businesses. He knows fine well that the load factor that is provided by people such as the Quinn Group in Derrylin has made that an economic decision for the Executive. I am very disappointed that a Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone does not recognise the economic benefit that that will bring to that company. It is quite unbelievable.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for her intervention. I do not need any more information on how much benefit it will have for businesses. That is clear: no one is questioning that. We are talking about domestic customers. Sinn Féin has supported the gas extension. However, there are questions about domestic customers. If it is

being done for businesses, sell it for businesses.

Mr Flanagan: Do not come out and say that it is for domestic customers and then tell us not to bring up domestic customers.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: Go ahead, Paul.

Mr Frew: If the Member admits that this is Sinn Féin policy, where does he stand?

Mr Flanagan: What I am articulating is the Sinn Féin policy. My party has supported the roll-out of the gas network because it makes sense for everybody. However, when you say "everybody", that has to include domestic customers and businesses. You cannot send papers to a Committee and say that it will benefit a certain number of domestic customers with very little reference to business and then stand up here and say that it is only about business and that we should not think about domestic customers. The debate is about the positive nature of the renewable energy sector. I want to get back to that.

I want to talk for a moment about the draft heating policy that has recently been produced by the Housing Executive, because, once again, it returns to the choices that Paul Frew brought up. Once again, people who live in a gas-enabled area will not be afforded the choice to move from gas to renewables. If we are going to have that choice, the option has to work both ways.

Very few public buildings actually use renewable heat. This one, of course, continues to use gas. I would like to use this opportunity to encourage the Assembly Commission to assess the potential for renewable heat here. When I table questions to Ministers, I get responses from DFP that state things such as it is still trialling solar panels. In 2013, it is still trialling solar panels.

Recently, I visited the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise in Enniskillen, where there is a very effective biomass boiler. It is supplied with biomass by local farmers. That is having a good impact on the local economy. Last week, there was a good event there at which local companies were able to showcase the renewable products that they offer.

Mr Dunne raised the issue of district heating schemes and how one in his constituency was not very successful. The reason that it was not

successful was not because the technology did not work; it was because the houses did not sell owing to the slump in the housing market. Economically, it was proven that it would have worked if all the houses had been sold. We need to go back and look at the potential for district heating schemes. An eco-village is proposed for Enniskillen. At the centre of that should be a biomass boiler.

I have 30 seconds left, and I am mandated by Sinn Féin to talk about the North/South interconnector at every opportunity. Other Members have raised that issue and how Sinn Féin has opposed it. It is very clear to realise

—

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

5.00 pm

Mr Flanagan: At the minute, there is no planning policy in the system in the South for a North/South interconnector. The recent expert report notes that it will be slightly more expensive to build it underground, but that does not take into account the additional costs of pylons and overhead power lines. It also does not look at land devaluation and environmental impact assessments.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to encourage and support further growth in the sustainable energy sector to help maximise government's contribution to creating sustainable, high-value jobs in the renewable energy sector, developing the green economy, enhancing security of supply and encouraging consumers to use renewable energy.

Mr Agnew: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to accuse a Member of trying to mislead the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will ensure that the Speaker and his office take a look at that transaction in Hansard and review whether any further action is required.

Adjourned at 5.01 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.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Proposals to Suspend Commercial Eel Fishing in Europe

Published at 4.00 pm on Monday 18 February 2013

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I am writing to update Members on proposals to amend the EC Eel Regulations that could potentially result in the suspension of commercial eel fishing across Europe, including the eel fishery on Lough Neagh. This is to be discussed at a meeting of the European Parliament Fisheries Committee today.

The European eel stock has been in rapid decline since around 1980 and the European Commission introduced the Eel Conservation Regulation in 2007 requiring the establishment of National Eel Management Plans (EMP). The Plans must demonstrate, among other issues that at least 40% of adult eels from each river basin are escaping to spawn. The Lough Neagh Bann catchment area is the only area in the North where eel fishing is permitted.

As you will be aware, Lough Neagh is the largest commercial wild eel fishery in Europe and is unique in that there is no other eel fishery in Europe similarly structured and managed. The fishery is run by the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society which has the rights to the eel fishing in the Lough and administers its own regulations, in addition to National and European imposed regulations, to ensure standards and sustainable fishing practices.

The Society has successfully balanced commercial activity with the effective conservation and management of the fishery over the past 40 years aimed at ensuring the

sustainability of eel stocks. Scientific advice from the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) confirms that Eel stock in the Lough Neagh/Bann basin are currently meeting its conservation targets. The vast majority of the eel catch is exported and it is estimated that the livelihoods of some 300 families in the area are dependent on the fishery with a value to the local economy in excess of £3m per annum. The EU has also recognised the regional importance of the eel and it enjoys protected geographical indication status.

I know that Members will share my concerns about the Commission's current eel measures regarding the proposal to automatically suspend fishing for eels across the EU. This would have a significant impact on the sustainability of the Lough Neagh eel fishery and the wider local economy within the catchment. While recognising the importance of conserving eel stocks, I am not prepared to consider any future proposals for the recovery of EU eels stocks without independent scientific evidence, an appropriate equality impact assessment in accordance with Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, consultation with all stakeholder interests and appropriate compensation for fishermen affected during any proposed suspension.

I am also firmly of the view that these proposals should be rejected and I have written to the Minister responsible for Fisheries in the Department of Environment Fisheries and Rural Affairs to express my concerns and to ensure that these views are conveyed to the European Parliament Fisheries Committee.

I am meeting with a delegation from the Lough Neagh Eel Fisheries Co-operative and other stakeholders this week and will also be meeting Michelle O'Neill, Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in view of her interest in the matter.

I will keep Members updated on developments.



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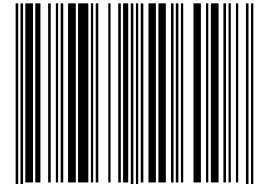
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