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Contents

Private Members' Business

Lough Neagh.....	45
Kinship Care	62

Assembly Business

Committee Membership: Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and Committee for Education	66
---	----

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development	66
Culture, Arts and Leisure	73

Assembly Business	79
--------------------------------	----

Private Member's Business

Kinship Care (<i>continued</i>)	80
---	----

Adjournment

Counselling Services: East Belfast	94
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 17 April 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Lough Neagh

Mr 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 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Molloy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to convene a working group to explore and pursue actively the potential for a cross-departmental approach to bring Lough Neagh back into public ownership.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This morning's motion is very important as far as my constituency is concerned, because Lough Neagh surrounds it so much. I thank the Business Committee for allowing the opportunity for the debate to proceed, and I thank the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for attending to reply.

Although the motion calls for the two Departments with direct responsibility for Lough Neagh to explore the possibility of bringing it back into public ownership, at the end of the day, if the motion is successful, it will no doubt bring together the various Departments that have responsibilities or interests in the Lough Neagh basin so that they can get involved and be part of any working group that would come into operation. There is an important cross-departmental role, as well as a role for the Executive, in exploring this in the future.

The motion calls for the lough to be brought into public ownership to realise the full potential of Lough Neagh for citizens and for the benefit of the economy. Lough Neagh is the most dominant

feature on the map of Ireland. On every map, you clearly see that blue spot, so it is a very important location. It is also an important basin that supplies 40% of the water that we drink in this part of the world.

The lough plays a significant role in the local economy, particularly through commercial eel fishing, sand extraction and the leisure facilities around it, but it could have greater tourist potential in the future. If properly utilised and developed, it could create substantial investment and much-needed employment opportunities. At present, 300 fishermen travel to Lough Melvin in Fermanagh for its fishing competition once a year. Think how that could be expanded and how fishing and various competitions and events could happen across the North. Lough Neagh could become the key development there and start to expand fishing and other aspects of tourism.

When David Burnside was MP for the area, he raised in Westminster the question of exploiting the full potential of Lough Neagh for tourism, sports, culture and various things. I would like us to take the same line and develop ideas to explore that potential. I do not think that anybody should have any concerns about this. We are talking about a working group that will explore all the issues that come up. That group will have to make a decision and come up with a business programme to see whether this idea is viable.

We are in the probably unique situation of there being no contest, because the 10th Earl of Shaftesbury wanted to sell and approached the Government about buying the lough. He was prepared to sell the rights and the lough to the Government but was turned down, despite the water company's recommendation that the Government should buy to protect the future water situation here in the North. We have the potential here, because things have changed. The tenth and eleventh earls died, and the

twelfth now owns Lough Neagh. Whether he is still approachable and the situation negotiable, I am not certain, and that would have to be explored.

The development of any activity is at present curtailed because of the procedures that have to be gone through at Lough Neagh and with the Shaftesbury estate. Bringing the lough back into public ownership would open up the potential to do whatever would be required across it. The bed, soil and surrounding shore of Lough Neagh are privately owned by the Shaftesbury estate, including the shooting and mineral rights and the extraction of sand and gravel, as well as the rights to charge for the use of Lough Neagh.

It is a pity that Jim Shannon is not here today. In our last debate on this, Jim Shannon promoted the idea that the lough could be a great venue for shooting and bringing in tourists from across the world. I am sure that Jim would want me to explain again the potential of Lough Neagh for him and others across the world.

The situation is that you cannot drive a post down into Lough Neagh without paying a fee. If a council wants to develop a jetty or anything else on or around Lough Neagh, it has to pay fees to the Shaftesbury estate. If, for instance, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development or any other person or developer wanted to extract sand from the lough, again, they would have to pay for that.

On a number of occasions, rivers flowing into Lough Neagh have been backing up. This happens because a ramp has been created by the waters of the lough blowing in from one side. The water from the river creates a ramp at the end, which curtails the water flow, despite the fact that the Rivers Agency may already have cleaned out the river. It still creates a barrier as it approaches the lough. Fishermen have found that they cannot get out of a lot of the quays because the build-up of silt and sand has created a barrier. Any sand that is extracted at the moment has to be considered as waste product. However, if Lough Neagh were under public ownership, the sand could be sold and that money reinvested in the lough. So, there is potential to develop that resource and, consequently, the economy. It would not be a drain on any Department's resources; rather Departments could benefit. So, the opportunity exists to develop a cross-departmental response to ensure that Lough Neagh's tourism potential

and economy, as well as the fishing and all the other elements, are developed.

Pollution is another serious problem. Lough Neagh is a big water bowl, and it collects sewage from a lot of sources. It is important that we improve the water in Lough Neagh and clear the pollution. Some say that algae on the lough create flies, which can be a major problem around the lough shore. That could also be dealt with through cleaning. The Department of the Environment has a role to play in cleaning the lough to ensure that we have good, safe water that is free from pollution. European funding could be accessed for that. Now that the Barroso task force is back in operation, I would like Departments to look at whether there is any potential for European funding. Instead of that funding going back to Europe, under the present processes for the Peace programmes and rural development funding, there may be potential to get European funding to develop the whole thing, and possibly even for the other Departments.

From a DRD point of view, the big problem is that, although we have water access at the moment, nobody is paying for it to be extracted and nobody is charging to extract it. However, who knows what could happen in the future? The lough has been offered to the Government here and to direct rule Ministers in the past, and it could be offered to anyone. It could be offered to an international or foreign water company, which would then be able to levy fees on NI Water to extract the water. So, there is a potential risk to our water supply. It is, therefore, important that we plan for the future and secure the supply by taking control of the water bowl, which is a source of water for everyone right across the North. It is important that we protect DRD's role in providing water supplies to all facilities in the future so that we do not face a levy that would curtail that supply.

The fact that we have no overall responsibility for Lough Neagh prevents us from putting in place a strategic approach for its future development. We need management, control and ownership of the lough so that we can create that approach and Departments can come together to put in place a working arrangement and business plan. There is an urgent need for a management structure. There is no navigation authority on Lough Neagh, so, if you went on to Lough Neagh with a boat one morning, you could either finish up on a sand

bank or get across; there is the potential for either to happen. So, it is important that there is a navigation authority to direct boats. However, we do not have that at present, and nobody has responsibility for navigation, because the lough is under private ownership.

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

Mr Molloy: The possibility of training and various other things could come from the development of Lough Neagh. I will leave it to others to conclude.

Mr Hamilton: Although I have a role as Deputy Chair of the Environment Committee, I was worried for a time about how somebody from the shores of Strangford lough could credibly speak on a debate about the shores of Lough Neagh. However, Mr Molloy then helpfully introduced the name of my friend and colleague Mr Shannon and mentioned his passion for shooting. In my experience, there are few parts of Northern Ireland where Jim does not see the potential for shooting.

I agree with much of what Mr Molloy said. I do not think that anybody in the House would disagree with him, particularly what he said about the need for better management of Lough Neagh. From my reading on the issue and, indeed, from talking to colleagues who represent constituencies adjoining Lough Neagh, I have observed that there is a serious problem on many fronts with the management of the lough. As Mr Molloy outlined, there is clearly a key public sector interest in various aspects of the better management of Lough Neagh, whether that is from a leisure perspective and the potential to exploit tourism around the lough, some of which is already happening at Oxford Island and through leisure pursuits, or whether it is about the rivers to which he referred and their pollution, or, indeed, the extraction of water from Lough Neagh for consumption in our towns and villages across Northern Ireland. Given that there is a clear public sector interest, the debate is useful. I have read reports that point to pollution and problems with water quality, biodiversity and recreational use, and it would be difficult to dispute the fact that there is not an interest for us in looking at the better management of Lough Neagh. My party and I are happy to pursue that. The lough is huge, is of huge significance and comes with huge problems. There have been reports of problems with bird populations, pollution and the theft of

fish stocks in the lough. I agree with Mr Molloy that action is needed.

10.45 am

I always support more cross-departmental work when there is a shared interest for all the citizens of Northern Ireland. I can bring some experience from Strangford lough. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development will be familiar with the concerns about the management of Strangford lough, which have led to potentially serious problems with the European Union. If a problem is seen to arise, there is a need to deal with it, not simply for public sector interests but because Europe will examine those problems and tell us that if we do not sort them out, as they are contrary to some directive or other, we will have to pay fines. The lesson from Strangford lough is that cross-departmental work should start as early as possible.

No one will have a terrible difficulty with Mr Molloy's sentiments. The difficulty for some of us on this side of the Chamber is one that he would expect from someone with an interest in the Department of Finance and Personnel. The final few words of the motion refer to purchasing Lough Neagh and taking it into public ownership. I understand Mr Molloy's arguments, which are worth exploring in a working group. No one will have difficulty with looking at a working group on better management of the lough, which would include discussions on those issues. Such a group would have to discuss those issues in that context. However, if we pursue the line that the Member wishes us to go down, which is to purchase Lough Neagh, that comes at a cost, and none of us knows what that cost will be. It is not prime development land, so it will not have the same value as land in the centre of Belfast. However, it has a price and added value because of a number of factors. The Member mentioned mineral rights and shooting rights: mineral rights and the extraction of aggregates from the lough will have a value that has to be factored into any price rather than simply the cost per square kilometre.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member's point is relevant, but, given that neither the Shaftesbury estate nor its predecessors since 1641 paid anything

for the lough, perhaps it might be magnanimous enough to give it back to the Irish?

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

Mr Hamilton: For many reasons, I do not think that we should go back to 1641, as the Member will know from the history of her constituency. She is right: we can always rely on people to be generous in that regard, but my experience of landowners, particularly when government shows an interest, is that the value of the land goes up. If I wanted the Member's car and was desperate to buy it, she would try to get more out of me than it was actually worth.

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way very briefly, because I want to conclude.

Mr Molloy: We should recognise the fact that the Shaftesbury estate has been very generous in the past and that a number of properties that it owned were given over to public ownership.

Mr Hamilton: I accept that point. However, when someone wants to buy something from you and you put the value on it that the Member put on it in his contribution, the price will inevitably go up. I throw that out as a serious note of caution. In order to achieve the aims that the Member expressed, with which I and others agree, do we have to own it ourselves? Times are difficult, and I can imagine that, if we purchased that land now, someone may look back in 50 or 100 years' time, when we are going through economic difficulties again, and ask why we purchased it and whether it could be sold again to get a few pounds back.

The purchase of public land goes against the general direction of the Assembly and the Executive, whereby we have been trying to divest ourselves of public assets so that we can invest, in particular, in infrastructure projects without using some of that money to buy new public assets.

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

Mr Hamilton: So it is a serious note of concern that I issue, but we do not disagree with the sentiments that the Member put forward or, indeed, the idea of getting a working group to look at the better management of the lough.

Mr Kinahan: Normally, I would welcome any motion on better management of Lough Neagh, but the Ulster Unionist Party does not feel that it can support this motion. However, I will listen to what other Members say today to see which way we will vote. I am concerned that hidden behind the motion is the taking away of property rights and stealth towards a united Ireland and that it is driven by Marxist and communist philosophies. They are just hints at the back of it, but, put together, they are very much driving this. Already, Mrs Kelly has hinted that there could be something hidden behind it. I do not feel that the motion is purely about better management of the lough, although we would all like to see that. It is not just about the potential for tourism, because all of that already exists. I am saddened that our amendment was not taken up. It would have allowed for a more lengthy debate in which we could have gone into more detail on why we would like to see Lough Neagh better run, but I do not think that the motion leads the debate in that way.

When you first look at the motion, it looks harmless, until you get to the last seven words:

"bring Lough Neagh back into public ownership."

We are left not really knowing what is meant by Lough Neagh, and the motion plants the myth that it was once in public ownership. If Lough Neagh is about water, I can say that we already manage that pretty well in government through Northern Ireland Water. It does not necessarily need protection for the future, although we have to decide what direction we are going in with all our water concerns. It is a huge area, and I feel that this is more about taking than about public ownership. It is about the lough bed and mineral rights, but how deep do you go? Indeed, when it comes to the lough, how wide do we go? If you take the ownership, the bed and the minerals back, where do you stop? Is taking the quarries next?

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I would like to carry on with my points for the moment.

Will the rivers, streams and sheughs that belong to farmers be next? On the question of how wide we go and the shoreline, which, of course, changes as the water goes up and down, is it one foot, one metre or one mile? If we take the lough back, does that extend to taking back farmers' fields, hedges and tracks? Does it mean taking things back from the property of businesses? Of course,

capital is often the basis of all good businesses. Where does this stop? Behind this is the fact that the lough is a big chunk of Northern Ireland. It is one chunk that we can see being taken away and slowly going into that myth of a united Ireland.

My colleagues will touch on the facts of taking it back. In the Stone Age or the time of the Vikings, it did not belong to the public. In the time of the clans, it did not belong to the public. In fact, Agricola, when looking at whether he should invade Ireland, was told that they were so divided that he should not go there. He never did, so the Romans never came to Ireland. If you read Jonathan Bardon, you will see that he talks about Ireland always being divided by its natural boundaries. Hidden behind the motion is the wish to take away one of the biggest chunks of Northern Ireland.

The issue of the cost of taking back Lough Neagh has been raised. We do not know the cost, and we certainly cannot afford it at the moment. There is no harm in looking at different ways of going forward, but the motion is about taking, not bringing it back.

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No, not at the moment, thank you.

We would all love to see better management of the lough, and we have heard of all its various uses. We do not have any good examples of us as government running such properties well. Strangford lough, for example, is a disaster. Fines are looming. We asked for a management group, and no management group is yet set up, so we cannot even do it with one smaller lough. The five Departments are all failing to work together on how we manage our rivers.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No, not at the moment.

Most of the environmental action of this body is only done because of Europe. Our actions on waste and on wildlife protection are all done half-heartedly until Europe comes in and tells us what to do. So, to take it back or to bring it back into public ownership is not the right way, and that is why I oppose the motion.

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

Mr Kinahan: This is really about taking it back. It is the red, communist side of life trying to take things away from people who have big property.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Kinahan: It is also about a united Ireland. We oppose the motion at the moment.

Mrs McKevitt: I am pleased to have an opportunity to share my views on the motion. In principle, I welcome the proposal to establish a working group to consider the return of Lough Neagh to public ownership. Lough Neagh is an important natural resource, and, therefore, its management and future must be carefully considered.

The return of Lough Neagh to public ownership seems like a logical and sensible idea, but it will take the involvement of all interested parties and Departments to establish whether that will be the case. If it is to be achieved, the Minister of the Environment should be central to such a group, given that the areas of the lough are of such environmental importance and are protected as an area of special scientific interest and with a Ramsar designation. The role of the Department for Regional Development should also be considered, given that Lough Neagh supplies 40% of the region's drinking water. All parties with an interest in the activities on the lough or the protection of it and its environs should have a seat on the working group. Much needs to be considered and consulted on before a recommendation can be drafted prior to full consideration by the Assembly, and the report to the House should contain detailed information on the mechanics of returning Lough Neagh to public ownership, if that becomes the recommendation of the working group.

I support the proposal to establish a working group to put all the right people around the table and to bring this beautiful asset to its full potential.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party fully supports every effort to encourage tourism, recreation, jobs etc, and it seems to me that the motion, which asks DCAL and DARD to set up a working group to explore the potential for Lough Neagh if it were brought back into public ownership, makes a reasonable request.

I am extremely grateful once again to our Research and Information Service for everything that it has put together in our pack. Reading the history of the ownership of Lough Neagh and about what and who can have right of access is very interesting, to say the least. The term

"absentee landlord" can be applied, and, if it had not been for the hard work of local people and, indeed, the whole area, it might well have been well out of reach of the general public.

There seems to me to be a similarity between Lough Neagh and Strangford lough. I tried to intervene during Mr Kinahan's speech — he is gone now — when he stated clearly that Strangford lough did not have a management committee. I do not know where he has been for the past 20 or 30 years: Strangford lough does have a management committee and many other committees that look after the lough. That was what I wanted to bring to your attention, sir. In both cases, an advisory body and management strategy committee were put in place, and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency was involved. At least Strangford lough, for the most part, is, as far as I know, in public ownership, unless somebody can say otherwise.

As Members will be aware, Strangford lough can create employment. We have a fishing industry in the lough, albeit a small one, and I fully support it, provided that it is looked after and not destroyed. We also have a tourist attraction right around the lough, and I must plug the villages of Greyabbey and Kircubbin. If you are ever out and about, come and enjoy the car park beside where I live. You will have a tremendous time. *[Interruption.]* I am trying to explain the similarity of what we are talking about. We have sailing, yachting, canoeing, skiing etc in the lough.

Our packs contain reports on an Assembly debate on 9 February 2010, and Mr Molloy mentioned it quite a bit when moving today's motion. Indeed, there was an Adjournment debate on 21 October, and the Assembly gave its full support to that at that time.

Also in the pack are interesting reports from various newspapers from as far back as 1999. It seems to me that Lough Neagh, which is the largest inland waterway in these islands, has had a troubled past, for one reason or another. Perhaps now is the time to take a joined-up approach to seek ways to have that facility reach its full potential for the benefit of local residents and, indeed, all of Northern Ireland. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion.

11.00 am

Mr Frew: I share the same sentiments as my colleague Simon Hamilton. First, the debate has not been progressed by the history lesson

that we are being taught. The year 1641 was mentioned, and I am sure that we would love to get into a debate about what took place in 1641. Comments were made that we should give it back to the Irish. We then had Members asking whether it was just a piece of the jigsaw towards a united Ireland. Is this going to unite Ireland by stealth? Communism has been raised. Red flags have been raised. This has got out of all proportion. We really need to get back on track.

As a party, we think that the wording of the motion is unfortunate. We have nothing against looking at a cross-departmental approach to anything in this Province, and I think that we should all be working together, as should the Executive, on these issues, so I have no problem in supporting the convening of a working group to explore the potential to make the lough and everything about it better managed. However, the motion states:

"to convene a working group to explore and pursue actively the potential for a cross-departmental approach to bring Lough Neagh back into public ownership."

I would like the working group to explore the potential and see whether it would be worth actively pursuing bringing Lough Neagh back into public ownership. That is the unfortunate bit about the wording.

That said, we as a party have no problems in supporting the motion and the spirit in which it has been debated by the Members across the Chamber. The Member is absolutely right when he talks about the potential of what Lough Neagh could and should be. We have the mineral rights, the sand extraction, the fishing opportunities, the shooting rights and a much greater potential for tourism than exists at present. We also have areas of large concern and potential for concern, including security of supply for our water and high water levels, which can impact greatly on agriculture, and which we control, as a Government, with the sluice gates at Toome. We have a certain control over and responsibility for the lough at present.

We have major problems with water quality and with illegal and reckless fishing on the lough. I am told by our fishermen and anglers that Lough Neagh could be so much better and could attract many people from all over the world to come to fish there and in the rivers of our Province. It is good to get away from the historical issues; let us not talk about them

again, please. We should concentrate on the future of Lough Neagh and what it could mean for this Province.

Mr Clarke: I know that you do not want to look at what they talked about concerning the past, but let us just explore it slightly further. If Lough Neagh was brought back into public ownership, what is public ownership in Northern Ireland at the moment? I would have thought that that is actually part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his contribution. I agree.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

We have nothing to fear from public ownership. Of course, we have to be careful. There is a lot of responsibility that comes with things like that, but I certainly do not mind whether it is called a working group, whether it is two Departments, one Department, three Departments or four Departments. Any decision will have to be made at the Executive table. That is when any decision on the issue will be taken. To call it a "working group" may not be the right way in which to put it. A management group might have been better to see what we can manage on the lough, because we could have public ownership of something without owning it. Ownership depends on the degree of management and control that you have over any lough, issue or item. We have a certain amount of responsibility for water levels and the sluice gates at Toome. Therefore, it is very important that we get this right.

I have no problem supporting the motion. As I said, however, I regret its wording. I respect the way in which Francie Molloy debated the issue. Unlike other Members, he did not go into the history. It is right that we should explore with the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury whether there is the potential to do something. However, we have to do that right. We have to make sure that we make the right decisions and those that are in the public interest. We could manage this better than we have. The potential of Lough Neagh is great for tourism, fishing and, in Jim Shannon's case, shooting, and for everything else around that. The lough is a massive area of Northern Ireland, and the Assembly —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: — and Executive should have more control over what can and cannot be done on its waters.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, like Mr McCarthy, thank the Assembly's research team for providing the information packs for the debate.

Lough Neagh is widely acclaimed for its historic and scenic significance. The lough and its 97-mile shoreline is one of Ireland's best-kept secrets and could be this island's next signature project. The current attractions of the lough and its shoreline include walking and cycling, the Kinnego marina and Oxford Island nature reserve, which, as has been mentioned, has won several tourism and conservation awards. It attracts more than 100,000 wintering wildfowl from all over the world and, as the third largest lake in Europe, contains 800 billion gallons of fresh water that supplies a number of counties across the island.

Lough Neagh and its shore has room for massive tourism development. The annual lough shore cycle trail attracts more than 1,500 people from Ireland and beyond. The lough has Europe's largest commercial wild eel fishery, which produces hundreds of tons of brown and silver eels every year, bringing over £60 million back into the economy here. The lough has its unique fish descendants from the ice age, including pollan, dollaghan and other species. Fishing is the livelihood of many families around the shoreline. Fishing has been passed down through many generations and is in their blood. Many fishermen around the shore work long, hard hours.

The beautifully scenic landscape of the lough and its hinterland has existed since prehistoric times and contains an abundant scattering of ancient religious sites, medieval ruins and historic houses. On the lough shore, the Ardboe cross is over 1,000 years old. One of the finest high crosses that you will find anywhere in Ireland, it is steeped in history.

Lough Neagh needs to be developed as one of the greatest tourism potentials on the island. It needs to be more appealing to the tourist. It needs to develop a way of encouraging people to visit the area in caravans or tents, as is popular, or provide much-needed overnight accommodation around the lough.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I hear what she says about the lough's potential. Does she agree that the last thing that any lough, and particularly Lough Neagh, would want is to have ugly apartments built along its edge? That would create an enormous eyesore, pollution and everything else.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Boyle: I agree. I was not thinking of apartments, Mr McCarthy. If a management strategy were in place, that would obviously be looked at. I think more of small housing and cottages for that area.

Lough Neagh's tourist potential in water and recreational activities can provide a great family day out. There is the Tannaghmore Gardens Farm and the Clementsmount Fun Farm, which I have visited. NITB has fully recognised that the area has huge potential for growth and tourism for our local economy. It has been said — I echo this — that the people are the most important asset of the Lough Neagh wetlands, as they have created for us the beautiful surrounding landscapes over the past centuries. They bring life and vitality to the area where they live, work and relax in the wetlands of the lough. The local people, communities and stakeholders have a vital role to play in safeguarding the future development of the lough while ensuring the future environmental integrity of the area.

I hope that today's debate will highlight the start of an important process on the way forward for Lough Neagh. I hope that all of the objectives that each Member has spoken of will be implemented. It is not just DARD and DCAL that have responsibility; also involved are the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Department of the Environment and, of course, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Those Departments and other stakeholders need to be part of the wider extensive consultation on the way forward and the potential of bringing Lough Neagh back into public ownership for future tourism investment.

Mr Wells: I suppose that I am the only Member who can claim to have worked on Lough Neagh. I worked as the officer of what was called the Association of Lough Neagh Users (ALNUS), and I also worked on the environmental impact assessment of the lignite deposits at Crumlin. I suspect that I have walked every inch of the lough shore in my time; I know it very well.

The reality is that, in any other part of Europe, Lough Neagh would be a jewel in the crown of the community. It would be a tourist asset and a phenomenal nature reserve. It would also produce huge economic gains to society. However, the people of Northern Ireland have, for centuries, turned their backs on Lough Neagh. The roads do not run along the shore of Lough Neagh; they run at right angles away from the shore. Access is particularly difficult in many areas.

The management of Lough Neagh is, quite frankly, a shambles at the moment. It is under enormous pressure. Its fish stocks have declined dramatically. The water quality leaves an awful lot to be desired. Even without Mr Jim Shannon's attention, the numbers of wildfowl species such as pochard, tufted duck, goldeneye and scaup have declined dramatically over the past 10 years. Something has gone very wrong ecologically with Lough Neagh. The planning controls around Lough Neagh have been an utter fiasco. Why anyone would want to visit some parts of the lough shore, given the way in which it has been ruined by unsympathetic development, beats me. We have huge problems.

During my time working for ALNUS, we tried to implement an effective management strategy for Lough Neagh. However, we came across one fundamental problem: the guy who owned it did not want to co-operate with anybody. We wrote many times to Shaftesbury Estates, and the formidable Mrs Murdoch, who was then the chief executive officer of Shaftesbury Estates of Lough Neagh, would write back and say, "Thank you for your letter, but I remind you that the lough is owned by Shaftesbury Estates, and we are not going to co-operate with you." It controls the sand and gravel extraction, the wildfowling and fishing rights; it has control of the bed of the lough. It is very hard to manage a national asset if the person who owns almost all the rights that are associated with it is not going to play ball.

I welcome the motion. It is not pledging the Assembly to compulsorily acquire the assets of Lough Neagh; the motion is saying that we should set up a group to look at the issue. It could be that Shaftesbury Estates will say that it is quite happy to sell the asset to the Northern Ireland Executive, so there may be no aspect of compulsory purchase.

That compulsory purchase was opposed by other contributors, including Mr Kinahan. As

an aside to Mr Kinahan, last Saturday 'The Newsletter' reported that he was a rising star in the Ulster Unionist Party, so it must be true. I wish him well in that, but, if he is a rising star, he will have to start to take interjections. However, that is me just getting my oar in, as I do take interjections.

11.15 am

Mr Molloy: What the Member said about the benefits was correct, and a number of councils have found this a particular problem when dealing with it. However, the fact that the 10th Earl of Shaftesbury said that he was willing to sell means that there is no conflict, and that is something to explore in the future.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Wells: Thank you. I do not know what the situation is with the present Earl, but if a price could be agreed and the Northern Ireland Executive could achieve a good rate of return for that asset, everyone would benefit. Crucially, if we were to acquire ownership of the lough voluntarily, it would enable adequate management of the lough. The lough is not being effectively managed, and that is not to the benefit of anyone, including the fishermen, the wildfowlers and those who extract sand and gravel. It is being exploited in an unsustainable way, because no one has any control over what is going on. I accept the philosophical problems that Mr Hamilton and Mr Kinahan have about the public ownership of the lough, but if it can be done in a voluntary way, I am happy enough to do so.

I know that Mr Molloy spends every working hour trying to run Northern Ireland into a united Ireland. However, to be fair to him, I do not think that bringing Lough Neagh into public ownership would take a united Ireland one step further. We would be bringing an integral part of the United Kingdom into public ownership and the ownership of the Northern Ireland Executive, which is one of the four devolved Administrations of the United Kingdom. It would certainly not be a rocky road, or even a rocky lough, to a united Ireland. Therefore, it is not correct to say that.

If we allow the present situation to continue, the ecological quality and tourist potential of Lough Neagh and the economic benefits that accrue to this society from having it will continue to decline. We will be left with a large body of

water in the middle of Northern Ireland that is of no benefit to anyone. Surely we need to do something about that and try to restore Lough Neagh to its former glory, so that everyone can benefit.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. As has been mentioned by my party colleague, Mr Kinahan, my party opposes the motion. I feel that, had our amendment been selected, it would have added to the debate.

Nevertheless and speaking on the issue at hand, transferring the lough, and, supposedly, the rights that go with it into public ownership is not a realistic call, for a number of reasons. Of course, a debate about the ownership of Lough Neagh is nothing new, and I apologise to my colleague Mr Frew in advance, as he is about to get another history lesson. When Charles II first granted the lough to Lord Donegall in the 17th century, it was not fully clear whether he owned it in the first place. However, that debate was put to rest in 1911 when the House of Lords made a final ruling. As we know, ownership of the lough later passed to the Chichester family and has subsequently fallen into the possession of the Shaftesbury family. Therefore, we are discussing privately owned property. It would be different if we were calling on a public body to transfer a function or asset to another public body, but we are not. I find —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Would she be surprised to learn that the council of which she was a member and her colleague Mr Gardiner were signatories to a previous call by all the councils around Lough Neagh to try to get the lough back into public ownership?

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

Mrs Dobson: Thank you. I thank the Member for her intervention, but there are other issues at stake.

I find it rather tactless of Sinn Féin to have tabled this motion, which essentially calls for the nationalisation of Lough Neagh and its resources. I would be interested to hear whether that party even had the regard to speak to the current owners before tabling the motion. If it has not, that shows that this proposal was as ill-thought-out as its pursuit of bringing the Crown Estate into public ownership a number of months ago.

My constituency of Upper Bann has a deep connection with Lough Neagh. The lough is incredibly important to the local economy, environment and the communities that live cohesively alongside it. It remains Northern Ireland's main source of drinking water and sustains hundreds of jobs locally, primarily through the fishing of its world-renowned wild eels. Given the sheer size of the lough and that it drains approximately 38% of Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that nutrient enrichment, more accurately called eutrophication, is a problem for the water. Indeed, lowland agriculture is responsible for 75% of nitrate inputs to Lough Neagh. However, it is important to note that, given the large number of farms that border the lough and the relatively few associated incidents of pollution, farmers can also be considered quite effective custodians of the lough.

I am aware that Dermot Nesbitt, a former Ulster Unionist Minister of the Environment, launched the Lough Neagh management strategy in 2002. That was the culmination of several years' hard work from the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee. Both bodies brought new ideas to the table. However, it is unfortunate that, a decade later, this House is still calling on all interested bodies, including statutory bodies and individuals, to get together to discover a model that, once and for all, works.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for giving way. The reality is that that management has not worked. During the previous decade, there has been a fundamental decline in the ecological quality of Lough Neagh's fishing stock and wildlife. The planning around Lough Neagh has been an utter shambles. Therefore, how can the Member continue to support something that has so utterly failed?

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your intervention, but I plan to continue. *[Laughter.]*

The debate that we are having will, most likely, leave more outstanding questions than answers. The question of the ownership of Lough Neagh goes much further than the ground on which the lough sits. There are many subsequent rights, such as those to which Mr Kinahan alluded, including rights on shooting, minerals and sand, that need to be accounted for. The current ownership model may not be ideal. That was especially clear when the late Lord Shaftesbury passed away in 2005 and there was subsequently considerable unease

that a private company might seek to purchase the family's rights. Fortunately, that was not the case, and the lough remains in the estate. However, it would be foolish to think that that may never become an issue.

I also accept that the current model of the management of the lough is clearly not working. I would prefer to see the Department of the Environment, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure throwing their weight behind a permanent management body that would be responsible for the day-to-day operation of the lough. That body could be target driven but independently led.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. As someone who was rare across the road from Lough Neagh and who lives beside the fishermen, boatbuilders and basket makers, I am well acquainted with the economic spin-off that Lough Neagh has had to offer and with its rich cultural heritage and the ownership and feelings that the community have for the lough. It is where all my family learned to swim. Unfortunately, these days you do not see many families enjoying the summer at Lough Neagh. Mr Wells is right to point out how the ecological environment around the lough has deteriorated in the past couple of decades.

For that reason alone, one could argue that the lough should come back into public ownership. In fact, there would be quite an absence and dereliction of public duty were the Assembly and Executive not to seek the return of the main source of our drinking water to public ownership. As Mr Molloy pointed out, the Shaftesbury family in some instances, although not all, had been generous to the communities and people of the North with the drinking water, but what if another, private owner were to come, step in and buy it? It might start charging for that extraction, and where would we be then? So, there is a moral obligation.

It is interesting to note that, very disappointingly, the Ulster Unionist Party seems to be stuck in that landed-gentry mode of the past. Really, I am sure that there were no vested interests seeking that land that was acquired during the years of the plantation went back into public ownership. To reassure Members, as I understand it, the Republic of Ireland has never forcibly taken back into public ownership land belonging to the absentee landlords. I am sure that that

will remain the case, and it is not the intention behind the motion.

A numbers of Members spoke about the activities on the lough and how much more could be achieved if it were in public ownership. Tourism is one of those activities. People often ask me why more is not done in the lough and why there is no navigation. Well, who is going to spend the money?

Mr Wells, in mentioning Miss Murdoch, reminded me of the fear that letters from that lady used to cause among local representatives.

Mr Wells: Her very name causes me to tremble as well. However, the fundamental problem with the Shaftesbury Estates is that Miss Murdoch, who is no longer with us, and her management team were there to extract the largest amount of income for the Shaftesbury Estates from Lough Neagh. That is clearly at odds with proper management. You simply cannot match those two competing demands.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Wells is correct. There is no good management of the lough. There is no sustainability with regard to how the lough is going to be managed and cared for for future generations, particularly as a source of natural water. He is quite right to point out the loss of the wildlife, in particular the birds, and he will be well-acquainted with Portmore lough, where the RSPB has a bird sanctuary not so far from where I live, and the good work that goes on there in the protection of wildlife and natural habitats. That is something that could be —

Mr Kinahan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will give way, of course.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you for giving way. Does the Member not agree that the system that we had in place beforehand, in which all the councils gave money into a central pot and allowed the Lough Neagh management company and the advisory committee to carry on, was a very good system? It is because the money was then taken away from them and some councils did not sign up that we are left with the problem we have today.

Mrs D Kelly: I do not agree with the full thrust of your argument. Yes, the Lough Neagh partnership was a good model, but it did not

go far enough and the parameters of its works were reduced because of the ownership being with Shaftesbury. Mr Wells pointed out that perhaps he is the only Member who has worked in anything to do with Lough Neagh. I was a voluntary director of the Gawley's Gate Quay company, which drew down SEUPB moneys from Europe to develop that quay for use by local people. That could happen only with the permission of Shaftesbury, but other projects were not so fortunate. In fact, we very nearly lost the opportunity to draw down that funding because we waited so long on permission from Shaftesbury.

We, as an Assembly and an Executive, could have a vision for Lough Neagh as the jewel in the North's crown if it were in public ownership. Indeed, we could hold Ministers much more to account with regard to the delivery and protection of water quality and the environment around Lough Neagh than is currently the case — they can easily point to responsibilities that are outwith their own gamut of responsibility because they fall to Shaftesbury. It would be a dereliction of our duty if we did not pursue a working group to seek to consider the return of Lough Neagh into public ownership. It makes sense, and I, for one, am an enthusiastic supporter of the motion.

Mr Gardiner: In 2008, I called for the establishment of a Lough Neagh authority, which I saw as a stakeholders' body giving focus and direction to the entire Lough Neagh basin and the area of the Upper Bann and Lower Bann rivers. There is so much unrealised and untapped potential in the area that a body that focused on every aspect of life there, from tourism to river maintenance and protection, could only be a good thing for the entire area.

In 2008, I also called for further tourist development of Coney Island, off Maghery, in Lough Neagh. Coney is one of the inhabited islands on Lough Neagh, and its history is a remarkable asset to the Craigavon area. It recently emerged that King Edward VII stayed on the island for a month with Lillie Langtry in a lodge built by the seventh Lord Charlemont in 1895. That lodge is still there and lived in by the current warden on the island.

That is only one episode of an amazingly colourful history with links to St Patrick, the Bronze Age, the Norman tower and the Gaelic chieftain Shane O'Neill.

It was the O'Neills' treasure house, and prisoners were held there during the 1798 rebellion.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way, and I hope he will appreciate and join my support for the current inhabitant of Coney Island, who is a man from Aghagallon and a neighbour of mine, Peter McClelland. I congratulate him on his good work.

11.30 am

Mr Gardiner: Yes, I do, and I am not for sacking him.

Some 3,500 tourists visited that remarkable place last year. Clearly, it has a tourist potential that far exceeds that level. It can be reached by boat from Maghery and Kinnego marina, and is clearly an undeveloped gem for Craigavon tourism. However, any development should be done sensitively to protect local wildlife and plant species, because there are also distinct possibilities for the island to be eco-tourism friendly.

Enhancement projects in the recent past have included a new boat for Lough Neagh Rescue, a new passenger boat to Coney Island for the Christian heritage trail and an advertising campaign to attract visitors to Lough Neagh. There are six sailing boats for the purpose of training children at Ballyronan marina. Kinnego Harbour Centre, Oxford Island, Ballyronan marina and the Battery harbour are all great successes and potential major tourist draws.

A Lough Neagh group representing all stakeholders should be created to co-ordinate the development of the entire lough shore in much the same way as the Highlands and Islands Development Board made such a difference to the Scottish Highlands. However, I do not agree with the proposal to take private property into public ownership or with nationalising anything. That is an agenda in the motion that I cannot subscribe to.

Mr Molloy: Will the Member accept the point that I have made a few times that the tenth earl offered it to the Executive, and that offer was refused? Northern Ireland Water and the water companies recommended that it should be bought to protect the future of the water bowl and keep it in public ownership.

Mr Gardiner: Yes, but he died, didn't he? *[Laughter.]*

Lough Neagh is a vast and underused resource. It would be better if it could be treated as a whole, rather than having a piecemeal approach. A Lough Neagh authority would provide central direction and organise intelligence to oversee the well-being and potential of the lough.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Earlier, I did not know whether I would be enticed to provide a reading from 'Das Kapital' or give a rendition of 'Only Our Rivers Run Free'. If I had done either, Mr Speaker, it would have very quickly become iniquitous in here, given that I am not a very good reader of either, or a very good singer.

Going back to issues that were raised, I assure Mr Kinahan that his property will be safe with me. I had a brief flirtation with reading about Marxism and communism when I was about 18, but I am firmly a social democrat now so, Danny, you are OK with me. Getting back to the motion, it is about establishing a working group. There is absolutely nothing to prevent that from actively looking at public ownership of the lough. I hope that it would do that, because the only other option would be for it to inactively look at it, which would not be too good a route to go down.

I will provide a wee bit of background. Where I come from is down on the shores of Lough Neagh. The River Moyola ran at the back of my family home. The bar mouth, where that river runs in, is about 400 yards from the back door of our family home. That is where I was brought up, so it is instinctively and naturally part of my heritage, background, upbringing and culture to see the lough, to see what happens around it and to witness the fishing, the sand extraction, the shooting and all the cultural activities that have happened around it. That is very much part of what I am, where I come from and the traditions of my family and generations of it who have lived there.

I listened very carefully as the lough's history and heritage, as well as tourism and environmental issues, were mentioned. Mr Gardiner referred to some places that I have represented and know exceedingly well. In Toome, a project put in new walkways down to the lough so that people could walk there, examine and explore the heritage, and see the ducks that Mr Wells referred to, the eel fishery and all that has developed down through the years. People can come to Toome and to Ballyronan marina, which I know very well, to feed ducks and see the

living aspects of the ecology and environment that is there for us all. It is a natural jewel that is underexploited.

As we move on up the shore, we come to the Battery harbour and the Old Cross, which are huge historical aspects of where we come from. Indeed, when I was there very recently, I read the inscriptions on the Old Cross. All of that is there for us, and it is all part of who we are and where we come from. As a resource, it is totally underutilised and underexploited.

Economic opportunities around the shore include sand extraction, fishing, shooting, and so on. I have heard Shaftesbury Estates mentioned a number of times. Ms Murdoch's name was associated with shooting rights, fishing rights, sand extraction and all such aspects of life around the shore. However, that association was invariably negative: for example, a letter that came back stating, "No, you cannot" or, "No, but you may be able to do so with a bit of extra negotiation around the money."

Mr McCarthy: Thank you very much for giving way. Not being from that area, may I ask the Member this: where exactly along the lough does Lord Shaftesbury or that other lady live?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McGlone: Thank you very much for that. The lady is now deceased, but I think that the address was somewhere in London.

Such negativity was a retardant factor on the development of the lough. Mrs Kelly gave a specific example of how a grant for the development of a quay in her area could have been lost.

This is really about exploring a debate that has already started. I pay tribute to the late, great Paddy Duffy, a former party colleague, councillor and dedicated community activist. With the fishermen from the lough shore, he took the fight for eel rights to London and disputed them. The Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative developed from that and has worked very well. More recently, eel sources on the lough have been somewhat depleted. However, with proper management, those can, hopefully, be resurrected and that part of the economy developed further.

Returning to the matter of public ownership, I emphasise that this is for everyone. What we are talking about here is facilitating and

establishing a working group. There should be input and membership from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment and local government. However, the most important people, who must also be represented on the working group, are the stakeholders, the public. There is the potential for all members of the public to enjoy this jewel and asset when it is fully developed. They, too, have been excluded from ownership of the lough.

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

Mr McGlone: Yes.

As a young lad, I went to the shore with an old farmer who owned the land. I could never understand why he would say, "People can shoot on my ground here but not there, just a yard away."

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McGlone: We must address that issue and, hopefully, come to a resolution.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will start by declaring an interest in that, like Dolores Kelly, I also swam in the lough and picnicked on its shores many times as a child. I thank the proposer of the motion. It has been an interesting and lively debate, and I have enjoyed it very much. I thank Members for their positive contributions and for constructively pointing out some of the issues that we need to address. The stance that the UUP has taken is disappointing, but I am sure that that will be picked up in the winding-up speech.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Many Members picked up on the need for a cross-departmental approach. The motion calls for action to be taken by DCAL and DARD, which are the two obvious Departments. It is clear, however, that a number of other Departments also need to be around the table and be part of the discussions as we move forward.

Some Members tried to go into a detailed history of the lough. We all know that it has been owned continuously by the Shaftesburys since 1600. That is as far as I will go in the history debate. Many Members mentioned the issue of cost. To bring the lough into public

ownership will be a question of transfer either by compulsory purchase or an agreed sale. Those two methods will have to be explored. Some Members picked up on the Shaftesburys' generosity in the past. Perhaps we will be lucky enough to see that again.

The question of cost was raised, and I do not know the answer. I do not think that anybody in the Chamber could answer that question at this stage. The motion calls for a cross-departmental approach to the establishment of a working group and allowing that group to look at all aspects of cost and what could be the market value of the lough in this day and age.

I will cover a few facts about Lough Neagh. It is one of the biggest freshwater loughs in western Europe, measuring 300 square kilometres and containing 800 billion gallons of water. It is home to the largest wild eel fishery in Europe. As many Members pointed out, the Shaftesbury Estates are the lough's owners. The owners grant lease agreements to commercial operators on the lough, of which there are many including the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society and sand extraction companies, and they also grant sporting rights to wildfowling clubs.

The water of Lough Neagh is not owned by anyone, as water flows freely and cannot be owned by anyone. However, as I believe the proposer of the motion pointed out, a report from NI Water in December 2011 noted that it abstracts up to 50% of the raw water that enters the water supply from Lough Neagh. Members pointed out that that issue has been raised on a number of occasions in the past. In 2003, the Water Council identified the potential for the public to be charged in future for water that is abstracted from Lough Neagh and recommended that the lough be purchased on the public's behalf. It appears that the two Departments that were most closely associated with that at the time were the DOE and DARD. Obviously, they were not inclined to pursue that route at that time.

Many Members referred to an issue that is increasingly obvious to me, which is the extraordinary number of public, private and voluntary interests on the lough. They all have their specific remits, obligations, interests and aspirations. Therefore, it will be an extremely complex picture when it comes to dealing with the way forward.

Although the lough is not in public ownership, different aspects of its management are under the control of a number of Departments and public agencies, which, through their legislative remits, are provided with sufficient powers to safeguard Lough Neagh for public use and enjoyment. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will list them briefly to give people a flavour of how many Departments and agencies are involved.

My Department, through the Rivers Agency, manages the lough's water levels within statutory limits as far as climate conditions allow, while taking into account the needs of various interests and stakeholders. As part of DARD's rural development remit that relates to Lough Neagh and its surrounding wetlands, my Department has provided funding to the Lough Neagh Partnership to take forward the development of the lough and the rural economy around it. That funding is now exhausted. Some improvements have been made to the infrastructure around the lough. The funding supported environmental projects and habitat improvements, and provided assistance to the commercial fishing sector and Lough Neagh Rescue. Although there was some positive work, it has been recognised in the debate that it was not enough and that, perhaps, that body needed more teeth to enable it to deliver more.

Waterways Ireland, a North/South body, is also sponsored jointly by DCAL and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. It is the navigation authority for the Lough Erne system and the Lower Bann. However, it is not actually responsible for Lough Neagh. A Member picked up on that point earlier. It has no statutory remit over navigation on Lough Neagh.

The NIEA is responsible for the protection and conservation of natural heritage and the built environment, with a remit to take enforcement action against polluters of Lough Neagh. The lough has a number of important environmental designations, such as that of an ASSI and a Ramsar site. NI Water provides water and sewerage services in the North of Ireland. Nearly 50% of the raw water that it treats and puts into the water supply is drawn from Lough Neagh.

11.45 am

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has a statutory remit to maintain the navigation channel and markers at the mouth of the Sixmilewater. DCAL also maintains 48 navigation markers in the lough as a non-statutory public

service. It also enforces the provisions of the Fisheries Act 1966, as amended, and associated subordinate legislation with regard to fishing activity in the lough.

There are seven local councils with an interest and a management role in Lough Neagh, the Blackwater and the Upper Bann: Cookstown, Magherafelt, Craigavon, Antrim, Dungannon and South Tyrone, Armagh and Lisburn.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for economic policy development, energy for tourism, mineral development and health and safety. Therefore, its agencies also have a lot of interest in the lough.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency has a role in co-ordinating responses to incidents in the waterways. The Commissioners of Irish Lights have oversight of any navigation authority in respect of the aids to navigation that it places and maintains.

That is an exhaustive list of the public organisations that have interests in the lough. However, we also have to bear in mind the Shaftesbury estate, the Lough Neagh Sand Traders Association, the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society, Lough Neagh Rescue, the Lough Neagh Partnership, the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland, and many others.

Mr Wells: I gave up after the twenty-ninth body that she listed as having some role in the management of Lough Neagh. Does that not make the point that this is a shambles? So many different bodies are pulling in so many different directions, and underlying that is the fact that so many of the interests are owned by a private family: it is a fiefdom. Surely, we need to look at the overall management of Lough Neagh. Indeed, in any other part of the world, this resource would be managed in the form of a national park or similar body, like Norfolk's Broads Authority. That would try to bring some sense of direction and protection to this incredible asset.

Mrs O'Neill: I totally agree with the Member. By outlining that exhaustive list, I was trying to make the point that that is why there is a need for a management structure to be in place. There is a need to balance the varied interests of all the different stakeholders, which is why the working group is the key way to move things forward. A cross-departmental approach will lead to the success of any work that is taken forward.

It is obvious that there is no known or agreed Executive position or co-ordinated approach regarding the management of Lough Neagh and the development of safeguarding it. The debate has highlighted that. As the Member pointed out, it is an unusual situation to have such a large body of water and to have no overarching public or voluntary authority taking responsibility for it.

Mr Kinahan: Everyone here seems to be attacking one owner. I spent four years on the Lough Neagh advisory committee, and the owner's name did not come up once. The smaller owners and the mass of different companies and other interests are the difficulty. That is why we are opposing the motion today. We want to get something that runs the whole of the lough better.

Mrs O'Neill: That is what the proposer of the motion set out from the start, but the Member obviously has a different view. There has been no deliberate attempt in the debate to attack any one individual. The Shaftesburys happen to be the estate owners, so they are obviously the people that we speak of. The Member seems to be the cheerleader, supporter or protector of the Shaftesbury estate. The point that we are trying to make is that we need to get together. There needs to be a co-ordinated approach, so that the public interest is protected. That is key. It is at the core of the debate that we are having today.

The point was made earlier that we believe that, in 2003, it was offered for sale. That is something that needs to be explored again. However, first, the working group needs to look at the many issues that have been pointed out here today. We have to realise the potential that is there. Many Members talked about the potential for tourism, job creation, improved management, the fishing industry and all those benefits. There is massive potential there, and we need to exploit that. We need to look at the barriers, and we need to address that.

To conclude, it is very timely that the Executive take a fresh look at how Lough Neagh-related matters are co-ordinated, including the discussions on the potential for public ownership. There is such a large piece of work here to be taken forward.

I assure Members that I intend to bring the issue to the Executive to outline the reasons that have been highlighted in the debate today and to make sure that whatever way it is taken forward, or whoever takes the lead on it, all

the Departments that have been identified here today — DCAL, DARD, DOE, DRD or the Department of Enterprise for tourism — all need to be around the table. The purpose of forming a working group is to pursue actively the potential for a cross-departmental approach to bring Lough Neagh back into public ownership.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for allowing the motion to be debated in the House today and the Minister for being in attendance.

I, too, agree that Lough Neagh has the potential to be one of our biggest assets. What other location contributes so much to our economy yet is practically unused for tourism, fishing, farming, water supply and employment? I believe that all those benefits can reach their true asset worth only through public ownership. The benefit of that would be careful management, with a strong regard for the ecosystem. At present, the water quality is poor, so we must have a robust system to monitor the surrounding natural and built environment. That would allow the local population to have its say.

Water sports and cruising have a big part to play in the development of the lough, but the big benefit would be the link-up with the Ulster Canal and, then, to the rest of the inland waterways of Ireland. Members, the potential for recreational activities is immense.

What area of water are we talking about? Lough Neagh has a total area of 156 square miles, making it the biggest inland waterway on the island of Ireland. It is the third largest lough in Europe, and its shoreline touches five of our six counties. Some 43% of our rivers flow into the lough. That is six main and two minor tributaries.

Members, you just have to mention the Shannon and its waterways, and everybody knows where you are talking about. That waterway and its surrounding lakes are on everybody's lips, because the Shannon has been exploited to its full potential as a major asset. Ask any tourists or visitors about Lough Neagh, and they will probably never have heard about it.

Members, look at its accessibility. It is within easy reach of airports and ports and the M1 and M2. We have hotels, self-catering accommodation, first-class B&Bs, and so on. With all that infrastructure, we have to ask the question, "What is the problem?"

If we look at tourism with a geographical theme and take a journey around the Six Counties, we see that we have the new Giant's Causeway visitor centre; the Mourne; the Fermanagh lakes; Derry, the City of Culture; the Antrim coast road; and, now, the Titanic Quarter. However, in the middle, we have a massive area of water covering 156 square miles that is crying out for development. Today, we have the opportunity to set up a working group to start that process.

The main problem at present is that it is in the private ownership of the Shaftesbury estate. While that situation remains, public money will not be invested, because we have no control over development rights, pollution or water quality. Under public control, all the relevant Departments would be involved. Up until now, because the lough is in private ownership, the Tourist Board has not been involved.

Water quality in places is so bad that some local authorities have banned water-contact sports, because of the bacterial illnesses that the water causes. Eels used to be held for up to two months after they were caught, simply because they could then be sold for the maximum market price. However, owing to the water quality, they can be held now for only 10 days. We are, therefore, losing out on income.

Public ownership would, for example, allow the Assembly to plan ahead and look at putting funding in place for projects. At present, the lough supplies around 40% of Northern Ireland's water. Can you imagine what would happen if ownership were to pass to the private commercial sector? We could be held to ransom over water supply.

Sewage is just as important but has not been mentioned here today. Sewage has the potential to cost us more if the lough were to go into private commercial ownership, because, at present, raw sewage going into the lough is leading to the bacterial illnesses. I believe in public ownership; it can be attained.

The commercial wild eel fishery is regarded as one of the most productive in Europe. It produces a total of 550 tons of brown eels and approximately 150 tons of silver eels each year. The fishery has an average of 160 boats, and each boat is required to have a helper. Some 320 people are employed.

It is estimated that, in the past 20 years, eel fishing on the lough has put some £65 million into the local economy. I believe that, with public

ownership, we could attract European funding; funding for water quality, a new navigation system, training for boat owners and users, and conservation of the unique fish life, which includes the renowned Lough Neagh eel.

Today's debate, if successful, will allow the two Departments to set up a working group. Nobody should have a fear of that working group. It will be set up to involve all the relevant Departments and, as Mr Frew said, nothing can be done — what is brought back from the working group will have to come to the Assembly. Therefore, I do not understand the fear people have of this working group. I appeal to them to have a second thought on it and come on board. Really, there is nothing to fear here.

If the Assembly shows the same united support as we did for the Titanic project, we could have another potential signature project on our hands. We could, once again, be innovative and forward-thinking, as we have shown the world, just this week, we can be.

I will make a few comments in the time that is left. I thank Francie Molloy for moving the motion. Francie talked about drinking water and fishing, sand extraction and employment. He was quite right in that.

Simon Hamilton from the DUP did agree that there should be better management of the lough and a working group, but had queries on purchasing the lough. All those things would come out within the working group. I agree with him. Although he does have reservations on some things, at least he is mature enough to know that the only way to deal with and answer that is through a working group.

Danny Kinahan? Well — *[Laughter.]* He certainly has taken the whole theme of reds under the bed to a new level. I fail to see how a man of his mature years — *[Laughter.]* — can have so many conspiracy theories. He should really be writing books. I ask him once again to think about what is being debated and come on board.

I see that your new leader is here today. If you are the rising star within your party — and I do not doubt that — let us see some of your shine. You did not really shine today. *[Laughter.]*

Karen McKevitt of the SDLP agreed with us, but had reservations on who would be a member of the committee. Again, that would all be part of the process of the working group.

Kieran McCarthy spoke for the Alliance Party, and invited us all down to the car park beside his house. I wonder whether that could be the Alliance Party's answer to Daniel O'Donnell's yearly tea parties — you could get everybody coming down.

Paul Frew was very intense when he talked about the fishing, and he was quite right too. I know his particular interest in that.

Michaela Boyle of Sinn Féin spoke highly of the tourism potential. She is quite right; the potential is there. We in this Assembly are supposed to be innovative; we have heard that before. Even the Finance Minister has said that, instead of looking for money all the time, we should go out and be innovative and look at ways to raise funding. Here we have an excellent way of raising funding on our doorstep. Let us look at that.

Jim Wells is an ex-worker on the whole thing. I have to take his experience on that, and I do not doubt him. He was quite right to say that there are far too many groups and the thing is not co-ordinated. I totally agree.

Jo-Anne Dobson — Jo-Anne, be careful there. *[Laughter.]*

Dolores, you said that you were reared beside the lough. I take on board your experience of being a lough shore native.

We had a history lesson from Sam Gardiner, right from —

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

Mr McMullan: — lords and ladies to prison camps.

I ask the Assembly to back the motion.

12.00 noon

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 62; Noes 15

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Ms Gildernew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy,

Mr McCartney, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Rogers, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Gildernew and Mr Lynch.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr McNarry, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Kinahan.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to convene a working group to explore and pursue actively the potential for a cross-departmental approach to bring Lough Neagh back into public ownership.

12.15 pm

Kinship Care

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

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes and welcomes the growth of kinship care and acknowledges the valuable role it plays in providing care for the many children who cannot be raised by their parents; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to note the excellent and often invisible contribution made by kinship carers, to identify a number of key priorities and actions for their support and to consider amending the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 in support of kinship carers.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. There are a number of conversations going on round the Chamber. I ask Members to leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

Miss M McIlveen: I have spoken in the House on many occasions about concerns linked to looked-after children and have sought to raise and address issues related to their safety and well-being. These are some of the most vulnerable children, who may have faced significant hurdles in their life and for whom we as a society still have some of the worst outcomes of any group of children. In respect of health, education and employment, looked-after children do significantly less well. It is critical, therefore, that the Assembly demonstrates that such children and young people are a priority. It is for that reason that I tabled the motion, which focuses on children who live in kinship care arrangements, with the aim of improving their lives and providing support, where needed, to their carers. The level of cross-party concern and support on the issue is to be welcomed, and I hope that it will be reflected in today's debate.

At this stage, I pay tribute to the efforts of Jacqueline Williamson from Kinship Care NI for her tireless work in putting the issue on the agenda. Last month, I attended the launch of the Kinship Care Northern Ireland book 'The Hidden Voices of Kinship Carers' and listened to Patrick and Susan, who described their

journeys to becoming kinship carers. Patrick cares for his nephews, and Susan cares for her niece. I listened with real admiration for their commitment and determination to bring up those children surrounded by the warmth, love and connectedness of their extended family. I heard how daunting that journey can be and about the real need for support to enable them to do that. Recently, I met kinship carers through the Fostering Network and was, again, struck by the sacrifices they make and the determination they have shown to raise children in their own family setting. It is very obvious that so many kinship carers have simply responded out of instinct to a child in their family who has become vulnerable and needs the adults around them to act out of love and protection.

It is imperative in this debate and in all our discussions that the best interests of the child are central. Any decisions that are made must fully reflect that and take it into account. On every occasion, the individual child's well-being is paramount for all those concerned. As with so many things, there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution to care provision. So, it is important that I put it on the record that each child requires an individual care decision and that we have available a variety of care packages that can be tailored to a child's needs. That means that there can be no hierarchy of care and that care must be developed to ensure that each child does, indeed, matter. Although I support the many kinship carers who have responded instinctively to the needs of children in their family, it is important to say that the decisions made in relation to care for children must ensure their safety and put their interests first.

The issue of kinship care can be confusing. Not all children living in kinship care arrangements are looked-after children, and it is not appropriate that they would be. Many families will make their own arrangements for children in times of crisis. In many of our constituencies, there are children who have gone to live with a close family relative because of a death, a physical or mental illness or another family crisis or tragedy, such as a parent in prison. For some, the arrangement may be for a short time, and for others it will become permanent. However, it is important that the role of families in coming together to support and protect children is valued and supported. The state should not undermine that, but, at the same time, it should ensure that families are not left to cope alone

or become so overburdened that children are then put at risk.

It is still difficult to fully ascertain the number of children in Northern Ireland living in kinship care arrangements. We know that one third of all looked-after children here live in kinship care and that there has been a substantial increase in recent years. Indeed, between 2009 and 2011, there has been a 53% increase in the number of looked-after children living in kinship care. Of the entire population of children in care, 76% are in foster care, including formal kinship care; 10% are in residential care; and those remaining are in other family placements. Some estimates suggest that approximately 5,200 or one in every 91 children in Northern Ireland are in some form of kinship care, with 717 of them in formal kinship care arrangements. To put that in context, there are around 2,500 children in foster care and residential care combined. The Fostering Network, as the voice of foster care, currently provides support, advice and information for 450 kinship carers who are formally looking after children. However, the picture for informal kinship care is much less clear and is an ongoing issue of concern. Research by the University of Bristol, using the 2001 census, has suggested that, for children in Northern Ireland who live in informal kinship care arrangements, care is provided primarily by grandparents or older siblings. The research also suggests that informal kinship care is much more prevalent among lower-income households and that, particularly for grandparents who are carers, there are likely to be issues linked to disability.

It is clear that finding accurate information on informal kinship care is very difficult. The first step that needs to be taken is for the Health Minister and his Department to undertake research to ascertain the extent and numbers of children involved in kinship care arrangements. At present, we rely on extrapolated figures from GB research that may not accurately reflect the Northern Ireland situation. The 2011 census figures may well provide assistance in that regard.

What kinship carers, formal and informal, usually have in common is that they have stepped in at a time of crisis and with little thought of the long-term practical issues, such as the legal arrangements or the support that they may need. The Minister will be aware that I am concerned about the issues that they face and the need to provide support where possible.

That is why I have tabled an initial proposal for a private Member's Bill on the issue. The Bill aims to assist with the private, temporary and informal arrangements in families that are currently unrecognised. It will use the definition of close family relations set out in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which seeks to allow, without a court process, the transfer of parental responsibility. That will enable kinship carers to deal with some of the simple practical realities of bringing up a child, including being recognised by schools, authorising school trips, registering a child with a GP or applying for a passport. In order to be granted parental responsibility, kinship carers currently have to go to court and apply for a residence order, a process that is often daunting and time-consuming. I hope to begin a process of consultation and stakeholder involvement on the benefits of a Bill, and, in particular, I would seek to consult the full range of agencies that currently support kinship carers, formal and informal. This will include Kinship Care Northern Ireland, the Fostering Network, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC), the regional adoption and fostering team and the other statutory organisations that work with kinship carers. The aim is to create a Bill that will work effectively for kinship carers and make their job easier.

On the issue of supporting and assisting kinship carers, I understand that the Department has drafted standards for kinship care, and I hope that, in his response, the Minister will confirm when those standards and the kinship care policy procedures will be published. Furthermore, I would like the Minister to clarify where his Department sees kinship care fitting into the overall options of care. Clearly, there are issues that need to be addressed in kinship care, such as accommodation, support and mentoring. I ask the Minister to identify the key priorities affecting kinship carers and a range of actions to assist them.

Raising and caring for children is not only a huge emotional and time commitment, one which I am clear the kinship carers whom I have met give freely, but there are also financial issues. It is expensive to raise extra children. If a child is a looked-after child, it is appropriate that kinship carers have a formal approval process and receive the same allowances as foster carers. I hope that the Minister will confirm that the

allowances paid to kinship carers are the same as those paid to non-kinship foster carers. In taking forward the issue, I am also aware that there may be other issues of financial constraint and poverty for informal carers of children who are not looked-after children. I ask the Minister to discuss a way forward with those of his ministerial colleagues and their Departments with responsibility for addressing child poverty and for whom these children are a central and important group.

I look forward to hearing the contributions of other Members on this important issue and the response of the Minister in order that a real difference can be made to those who selflessly give up so much. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to address the House as Chair of the Committee, and I commend Michelle McIlveen for securing the debate. In the course of the debate, you will probably find that most if not all of us will say the same thing, but I will say some things of behalf of the Committee.

Michelle mentioned that there are fundamental differences between kinship care and traditional foster care that make kinship care unique. It often first occurs in an emergency or crisis situation when a parent is taken ill, needs to take a job abroad or experiences some kind of breakdown. In such situations, a family member or close friend will offer to take the child in, usually on the assumption that it will be a temporary measure. People do that because their instinct tells them that they do not want a child to be taken in by social services, either to live with a foster family or in a children's home. Kinship care is often the best option for children, as they are able to remain close to the family circle and, indeed, in the area where they have grown up. It also means that, if the parent resolves their problem, the child can return home fairly easily.

The Committee initially held an informal meeting with representatives from the charity Kinship Care in December 2011. At that meeting, the Committee was made aware that kinship carers face difficulties in the support that they are getting or, indeed, not getting in bringing up the children that they have taken into their home. As

a result of that meeting, the Committee agreed to have a formal session to hear again from Kinship Care and from departmental officials on the matter. That meeting took place on 22 February 2012.

We learned that there are likely to be between 8,000 and 10,000 children living in kinship care arrangements. I take on board the point that Michelle McIlveen made that there are no relevant or specific figures on that. Between 8,000 and 10,000 children live in those arrangements, and the vast majority of those children are in informal kinship care. Indeed, the vast majority are unlikely to have any contact with social services. That means that the kinship carers will not be receiving any financial support from the state or other assistance to look after the children, including emotional support or advice. As a result, many kinship carers find themselves under tremendous strain and pressure. As Michelle McIlveen said, we must remember that many kinship carers are grandparents. They might have their own issues to deal with, including health issues and psychological issues. Indeed, they are trying to bring up another child. In the words of my granny, they are trying to feed another mouth on a pension. That has detrimental effects.

In fairness, officials from the Department recognised that the number of children in kinship care as a proportion of looked-after children is growing. The Committee welcomed their stance that, where possible, children should be brought up and cared for in their own family. We were also glad to hear that the Department was committed to publishing kinship care and foster care standards by 1 April 2012. I am glad that the Minister is here today, because he can more than likely give us an update of where that is. We are now into 18 April.

Mr Wells: 17 April.

Ms S Ramsey: Sorry. I am always a day ahead of myself, Jim. It is important that we get an update on where that is sitting.

Officials stated that, for the most part, when social services become aware of a child being cared for by a family member, it is very unusual for social services to take the decision to end the arrangement unless it is in the best interests of the child. Indeed, the Committee acknowledged that and made the point to officials that many people have a fear, rightly or wrongly, of coming into contact with social

services because there is a perception that they might judge the kinship carer not fit to look after the child because of, for example, their age and might take the child away. The Committee acknowledged that it is a difficult and sensitive area, and a primary and common-sense approach is needed. Indeed, I came across a case in my constituency where social services were involved and threatened to take children into care because the parent forgot to buy a fireguard. The common-sense approach to that was to ask why the social worker who was there to support the parent did not buy the fireguard, and we would not have had that issue.

The Department also talked about the role that special guardianship orders could play in formalising kinship care arrangements. Those orders require an amendment to the Children Order, and that could be done by means of the proposed Adoption and Children Bill. The Committee welcomes that and asks the Department to bring forward the Bill as soon as possible.

12.30 pm

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

Ms S Ramsey: The Committee is glad that there seems to be co-operation between the Department and the organisations involved in supporting kinship carers. I support the motion.

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

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Assembly Business

Committee Membership: Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and Committee for Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we move to Question Time, I inform Members that today I received the resignation of Mr Tom Elliott as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the resignation of Mike Nesbitt as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Mike Nesbitt, has nominated himself as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Mr Nesbitt has taken up the appointment with effect from today. The nominating officer has nominated Mr Danny Kinahan as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education, also with effect from today. Mr Kinahan has accepted the appointment.

I am satisfied that this correspondence meets the requirements of Standing Orders. I, therefore, confirm Mr Mike Nesbitt as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and Mr Danny Kinahan as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education, both with effect from today.

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Food Tourism

2. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the potential for food tourism across the island of Ireland. (AQO 1721/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With the development of food tourism, visitors across the island of Ireland increasingly expect to eat and drink local produce during their stay, and many choose to visit eating establishments whose menus are based on fresh, local delicacies. That, in turn, drives up demand for our local produce and regional specialities. Although we already have a fantastic reputation for good, wholesome food, I have no doubt that there are further opportunities associated with food tourism for the agrifood sector to capitalise on. Initiatives such as Taste of Ulster, Naturally North Coast, Flavour of Tyrone and various farmers' markets already support the food tourism offer and promote local produce.

The Food Tourism Insights report of 2009 found that, in 2008, 33% of the £540 million spent by overseas and domestic tourists was spent on food and drink. That was the largest spend category and illustrates the importance of food and drink to visitors. You may be aware that the draft tourism strategy for the North emphasises the importance of local produce, and I encourage those involved in food production and hospitality to exploit the opportunities for collaboration with local farmers, growers, processors, farmers' markets and retailers. Also, the 'National Food Tourism Implementation Framework 2011-2013', developed by Fáilte Ireland, gives us the opportunity to work with Bord Bia, Tourism Ireland and others when considering food tourism on an all-Ireland basis.

To realise the potential of food tourism, it is important that we continue to promote our quality food. The EU's protected food names

scheme is being used successfully to help to protect local products against imitation and to showcase the quality of food that we produce. My Department also administers the regional food programme, which is designed to raise the profile of quality regional food and thereby increase its consumption. The potential for food tourism presents opportunities for the agrifood sector to meet the demand for top-quality local produce and, in doing so, to strengthen our economy further and sustain farmers and the general well-being of the countryside.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. I was going to ask whether there is scope to work with the South in developing food tourism, and she has gone some way to answering that question.

Mrs O'Neill: I will add to what I said. The South has published 'Food Harvest 2020', which outlines its strategy for agriculture, fishery and the forestry industries. It outlines plans to develop sustainable growth in the agrifood industry. Fáilte Ireland's national food tourism implementation framework also includes a priority task to improve the co-ordination of food tourism promotional activities between Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland, Bord Bia and the NITB. A subsequent InterTradelreland report has shown that all-Ireland co-operation greatly benefits both sides, and there are, of course, similarities in our own Focus on Food strategy. Therefore, we hope that food tourism can be developed on the island as a whole. My Department will take that approach in supporting the activities of our tourism partners and looking at all the avenues open to us.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give more detail on the recommendations of the InterTradelreland report on the agrifood industry and on what it is in her gift to take forward? Will she give us an indication when she, along with the ETI Minister, will announce the other members of the Agri-food Strategy Board?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that it has taken some time for the InterTradelreland report to be published. We now have the report and are actively looking at it, and I think that it will be a key tool for the new Agri-food Strategy Board in developing its work plan and looking at the potential that is already there. As I said, one area on which it focused was food tourism and the existing potential. I see that as a key and integral part of the new strategy in moving

forward. Over the next weeks, Minister Foster and I will appoint the remaining members to the Agri-food Strategy Board. We will make an announcement shortly after that, within a number of weeks.

Mr Swann: Has the Minister any idea of the potential successes for food tourism under the rural development programme?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to write to the Member about any projects with all-Ireland co-operation that have benefited from the rural development programme. Many tourism and food projects have been taken forward through INTERREG programmes, and I am happy to write to the Member in more detail if he so wishes.

DARD: Headquarters

3. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department is consulting staff in Dundonald House in relation to the relocation of the headquarters. (AQO 1722/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has consulted and will continue to consult staff in Dundonald House in relation to the relocation of the headquarters. Under our agreed industrial relations mechanisms, known as the Whitley arrangements, a subcommittee of departmental and staff representatives has already been set up, specifically to consult formally with NIPSA on all issues relating to relocation. The first meeting of the subcommittee took place in January 2012.

Staff throughout the Department have been kept informed of progress in relation to relocation through regular monthly updates in the DARD staff magazine, 'DARD Bizz'. As we move forward, my intention is that all staff in DARD will continue to be kept informed of progress and, as appropriate, are fully consulted and engaged with throughout the programme. The previous Minister gave a commitment to NIPSA that she would fully engage with it throughout the process: I stand over that commitment and reaffirm that position. To date, the engagement with NIPSA has been extensive and meaningful, and I intend to ensure that that continues.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister. I am familiar with the Department's argument that the new headquarters would help to share wealth across the economy. However, surely taking the £26 million that this may cost and adding it to

existing schemes to tackle rural poverty could do that better and more pragmatically without creating staff uncertainty for those working in Dundonald House, which is in east Belfast.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is being very parochial. I absolutely stand over the need to bring high-value public sector jobs into the rural economy. The benefits in stimulating the rural economy speak for themselves. There is the potential job creation in the construction and ongoing maintenance of the building and the increased local spend. As I said, I will continue to consult staff, from whom I have received positive feedback about their mood. It is important that they are kept informed as we move along the entire process.

Mr Frew: What criteria will be used to determine the proper location of the new headquarters?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that any project of this nature has to go through the normal DFP procurement procedure. The outline case has already been through DFP. The programme board has been established. It is formally constituted and includes representatives at senior level from DARD, DFP, Land and Property Services and the Strategic Investment Board, as well as a non-executive board member. That board is chaired by the Department's senior finance officer, and it is its job to work with the consultative forum and the unions to develop the criteria. That process is in hand. I am happy to keep the Member, who is the Chair of the Committee, up to date as things develop.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What views have been expressed by NIPSA about the relocation of the DARD headquarters?

Mrs O'Neill: NIPSA, as I have said, expressed support for the relocation. It is widely recognised that it has been a long-standing supporter of the policy of decentralisation. In an article in the February edition of 'NIPSA Reports', it updated its members on its participation to date with the programme through its work on the HQ relocation consultative forum and the ad hoc Whitley subcommittee on relocation. That article was very positive. NIPSA recognised that the relocation is a major opportunity for a large number of its members to get a job closer to their home.

Mr Rogers: What criteria will be used to determine the suitability of the location of the new headquarters?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in answer to Mr Frew's question, the criteria are being worked up with the programme board. A number of issues and areas will need to be looked at, but I am happy to keep the House updated as we go along. At this stage, the outline business case has been approved by DFP. Other things need to be taken forward before I will be in a position to publicly say where the destination will be. Nothing is ruled in or out at this stage.

Rivers: Maintenance

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the criteria for designating a river for maintenance and whether the criteria are kept under review.
(AQO 1723/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Designation is required to enable my Department to undertake maintenance and schemes for drainage and flood defence purposes at public expense. Applications to designate a watercourse should be submitted to the Drainage Council, which operates as an independent advisory non-departmental public body. Criteria for the designation of watercourses are used objectively by the Drainage Council to ensure uniform treatment across the North.

The two key overriding conditions are that the proposed works offer value for money, with benefits outweighing costs, and that the works have sufficient priority to be included in my Rivers Agency programme. Viable works are programmed, and the second condition has not resulted in designation being refused due to availability of funding. There are five additional criteria beneath the two overriding conditions, with an application for designation needing to satisfy one or more of them. The first is that there is a sufficient area of disadvantaged agricultural land that is subject to poor drainage or flooding. The second is that the works to reduce existing or potential flooding are outside the capability of the riparians to organise and carry out at their own expense. The third is where works are required but it is not possible to identify the occupier. The fourth is where the watercourse requires works but does not perform any function connected with the drainage of the land. The last one is that works are required to provide an outfall for increased run-off from a new housing or commercial development.

The Drainage Council has recently been reconstituted. At its first meeting on 15 March, members were asked to assess the current criteria to satisfy themselves that they remain fit for purpose. It is proposed to review the criteria after receiving comments from the Drainage Council members at the next meeting in June. My officials will recommend to the Drainage Council that the criteria for designation ensure that designation is determined on need and is not dependent on the availability of funding. A broader review, including a full consultation, of the whole designation process will be undertaken in the future as part of a planned review of the current legislation and potential drafting of replacement legislation to be led by Rivers Agency.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her reply. Does she have the opportunity to review a decision of the Drainage Council where designation has been refused?

Mrs O'Neill: No. The Drainage Order 1973 provides that any individual who is dissatisfied with the determination of the Drainage Council can have the matter reviewed on appeal by the Lands Tribunal. I encourage people to do that if they feel that it is necessary. I do not have a role to play in that process, but the Drainage Council has the authority to make those determinations in a way that will ensure uniformity of treatment across the North. As I said in my initial answer, I have asked the new members of the Drainage Council to look at the criteria to ensure that they are satisfied that they are relevant and reflective of need. As I also said, a bigger piece of work will be carried out in the longer term through a review of the legislation.

2.15 pm

Mr Kinahan: Given that non-designated watercourses are the responsibility of riparian landowners, will the Minister indicate how frequently her Department's Rivers Agency inspects those non-designated watercourses? Will she further detail the timescale for enforcement actions to be taken under schedule 5 or 6 to the Drainage Order if inadequate maintenance is found?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to write to the Member about the technical nature of schedules 5 and 6 and the appropriate timescales. It is important that we continue to liaise with the landowners that the Member referred to and with the other

Departments. Quite often, you will find that pollution or other issues may need to be dealt with. The focus of designation is drainage and the reduction of flood risk. Therefore, any potential negative impact needs to be reviewed.

Lord Morrow: Does the Minister accept that our rivers are one of our best natural resources? Will she tell the House what percentage of her budget she designates to the upkeep and maintenance of our rivers?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the figures with me, but I am happy to forward that information to the Member.

Land Parcel Identification System

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to address the errors found in the test maps for the land parcel identification system, given that nearly a third of farmers found errors. (AQO 1724/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Following my statement to the Assembly on 21 November, a test was commenced to assess the processes for developing the maps, the quality and accuracy of the maps, the clarity of the guidance that we provide to farmers and the adequacy of support for farmers' queries via DARD Direct offices. Farmers responded with a range of issues, only a very small proportion of which could be said to constitute errors. Most of the responses concerned issues that had arisen after the photographs of the land were taken or areas that were not visible on the photography but may have needed to be included.

DARD made it clear from the outset that the test was a vital part of the map improvement process. We asked farmers to examine their maps carefully so that they could tell us about any inaccuracies and/or changes that had taken place in their fields since the date of the aerial photography. It is important to note that the maps that we produce are based on information from the most recent aerial photography available to us. So, they will always reflect a snapshot of the land at that point in time. It was always anticipated that clarifications and corrections would be required, as it is not possible to be fully up to date without information from farmers on, for example, buildings that have been added, scrub that has been removed or yards that have been

extended. I cannot emphasise enough that the improvement of the maps is a joint effort, and, when farmers receive their maps, they should get out and walk their land and make sure that the maps are correct.

I am very pleased that a significant number of farmers responded to the test. The information received has helped us to refine our technical protocols for the correction of boundaries and the capture of ineligible features. Important lessons have been learned, and I will ensure that they are taken on board as we move forward. That was always a major planned benefit to be derived from carrying out the test. DARD will provide assistance to farmers who requested changes to their map to help them to complete their 2012 application forms.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her reply. The substance of her reply seems to suggest, to me at least, that she is putting an onus on the farmers rather than on her Department to rectify errors. However, as a result of those errors, there has been considerable delay in the single farm payments. What will the Minister do to assist those who have been so badly affected as a consequence of the errors?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member has taken me up wrong: I did not put the onus on farmers. It is very much a two-way process. It is about the Department producing the best maps that it can, but it is also about farmers walking their fields when they have the maps in their hands, identifying what should and should not be included and informing the Department. That will mean that the map that is used from thereon in is the most up to date and accurate. That was certainly not what I was trying to say; as I said, it is a two-way process.

A total of 94% — £248 million — of this year's single farm payments have been paid out to date, and 6% of farmers — just over 2,000 — are still waiting to be paid. Obviously, I have listened to the cases of many of those farmers, and often they are in financial difficulty. I have put additional staff into that end of the process and tried to get those payments made as quickly as possible. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from this year, and I hope that mistakes will not be repeated in next year's round. However, the number of people who are unpaid at this stage is 2,003, and we hope to have the majority of them paid by the start of

July. Some 1,300 of those are inspection cases, but the remainder are the results of probate or failure to give correct bank details. There is a variety of reasons why some people have not been paid.

Mr Irwin: I represent a constituency in which there is a large area of apple orchards. Just last night, I saw a farmer who has orchard land, 99% of which is shaded as shrub on the map and therefore is ineligible for the single farm payment. Can the Minister give an assurance that that will be sorted out? A large number of farmers involved are orchard growers.

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. If the guidance that was sent out is unclear in any way, I encourage the farmer, through you, to contact the DARD Direct offices or Orchard House to ensure all that is clarified. When a farmer gets the map, if there is anything on it that looks like it is ineligible but is, in fact, eligible, that needs to be clarified. As I said, this is a two-way process. DARD wants to get it right, but we need the farmer to assist it in doing that.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister confident that she has now resolved the technical and quality problems encountered during the test exercise?

Mrs O'Neill: We have revised the technical protocols for the capture of ineligible areas and boundaries in the light of the lessons learned. As I said, lessons have been learned as a result of the test maps that we issued across three areas. We have looked at the quality assurance process because that was an area highlighted as needing to be refined. Quality assurance is now carried out by DARD staff in the Land and Property Services offices, which negates the need for transfer of data between Land and Property Services and DARD systems. That has resulted in a significant saving of time and an improvement in the data. The ICT issues that were identified occurred due to the differences between the DARD and Land and Property Services mapping systems. That is being addressed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

European Fisheries Fund

7. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given the number of fishermen adversely affected by

developments in the industry, whether she plans to draw down funding from priority axis 1 of the European Fisheries Fund article 27. (AQO 1726/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Article 27 provides the opportunity to provide financial support for fishers affected by developments in fishing. Basically, it looks at socio-economic compensation for the management of community fishing fleets. It can involve diversification of activities, upgrading professional skills, retraining in occupations outside fishing, early retirement schemes and assistance for young fishers to acquire first-time part ownership or full ownership of a vessel.

Such investments were considered recently when looking at a range of possible interventions to address the current imbalance between fishing capacity and fishing opportunities. That is the fundamental problem and, although the interventions noted above could address some of the consequences of the imbalance, they do not address or eliminate the root cause of the problem. DARD will consider implementing some complementary socio-economic measures as part of its fleet restructuring proposals once a decision on decommissioning has been taken.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response. Has she had any discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning regarding the reskilling and retraining of some of the fishermen?

Mrs O'Neill: As a result of the decommissioning scheme which we are currently working up, some people will come out of the industry. Once that business case has been cleared and we move forward on it, there will be a clear need to look at reskilling and the provision of every opportunity to those coming out of the industry. I intend to do that.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for her response. She will be aware that the final report from the Fisheries Forum in the summer of 2010 recommended that processing companies should develop plans for the strategic uptake of resources from the European Fisheries Fund to make the most effective use of those limited funds for the long-term benefit of their businesses. Can the Minister provide an update on how her Department has worked with the industry on that recommendation?

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is very proactive with regard to fisheries and how it works with

industry. At the moment, we are concentrating on the whole area of gear trials and meeting the requirements of the European Commission.

To date, we have worked with the industry to make sure that as much money as possible is drawn down from the European Fisheries Fund. To March this year, a £930,000 grant had been paid to beneficiaries of the fund. However, I am happy to write to the Member with any more detail that he may require.

Mr Ó hOisín: Will the Minister update Members on the gear trials project to exempt the fleet from the days-at-sea regime?

Mrs O'Neill: There has been an extensive series of gear trials. I met AFBI yesterday, and a lot of proactive work is being done with the industry. The industry has come up with what it believes is a solution, which will be trialled over the next number of weeks. It will test a number of alternative, highly selective nephrops gears, which is what the Commission suggested that it wanted. If we are successful and the fishermen are happy with the resulting gear, I can have it fast-tracked through the European Commission's science team. If that is acceptable, we will have done what we said that we would do during our negotiations with the Commission in December, which is to exempt our fleet from the days-at-sea arguments.

Rural Development Programme

8. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the strategic projects that were requested from local action groups under the rural development programme. (AQO 1727/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In December, I announced a refocusing of axis 3, which was, in part, driven by low project spend and high administrative spend. I have asked for all areas urgently to examine their progress and to refocus by reallocating funds to higher investing measures and larger strategic projects. All clusters have been engaging with my officials to bring forward potential strategic projects. I thank them for that, although I am concerned about the lack of progress in one area. This year, we have an underspend against the targets set by the clusters in their implementation plans. Therefore, it is important that we underpin the programme with those strategic projects to help to boost investments in rural areas and

avoid funds having to be returned to Brussels. I encourage those of you in the House involved in JCCs and local action groups to ensure that as many strategic projects as possible are brought forward in conjunction with the reprioritisation of funds across measures.

As Minister, I must emphasise that I will take whatever action I deem necessary to ensure that axis 3 funds are invested in our rural communities and not handed back to Brussels. I have asked officials to draw up mechanisms for more robust financial monitoring, including options for clawback, redistribution of funds and other contingency measures. Be assured that I will do whatever I can to make sure that the money is invested in rural areas.

Mr McElduff: Is it the Department's intention to invest further funds in rural broadband provision rather than, as the Minister said, handing the money back? The Minister will know of my interest in securing proper broadband provision for rural communities such as those in Greencastle and Broughderg in County Tyrone.

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of the Member's interests and know that he campaigns strongly for those rural areas. He is a great advocate for our rural community, is Barry McElduff.

It is my intention to continue to invest in rural broadband. It has been one of my key priorities for almost a year, so I want to continue to do that. I have already announced that £5 million under this current phase will be invested in work, and we will work on a programme with DETI. However, it has to be about targeting not-spots with lines of under two megabytes, because those are the areas most affected. There is no point putting the money into broadband if we cannot be sure that it is being targeted at rural areas. That is key in the time ahead.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister and the previous questioner referred to broadband, and I am more than aware of problems with that in my constituency. The Minister spoke about working with DETI to, I presume, deliver broadband. During recent discussions at joint committees, there was a bit of a grey area in respect of government bodies being able to apply for funding. Is the Minister happy that DETI could not, indeed, fulfil that duty if the £5 million was available?

Mrs O'Neill: I recently met Minister Foster to discuss the £5 million and how best it could be spent, and we tasked officials to look at that. As you say, the issue was raised with the JCCs and LAGs. I am interested in ensuring that the money is spent to best effect. That means making sure that it is spent in rural areas rather than just bolstering money already available for a broadband package.

I want to follow through on that, and I do not want to enter into any agreement and work with DETI if that is not going to be the case.

Mr Cree: It was decided at the very beginning of the year that axis 3 required a new focus to assist with the low level of spend. Will the Minister detail the final underspend against the local action groups' projections at the year end?

2.30 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have that figure with me. I can tell you that, since the start of the axis 3 programme, the local action groups have committed a total of £38.7 million, but "committed" and "spent" are two different things. That is what we need to address. We need to address the letters of offer that are out there and try to get them processed and seen through until the end. There has been underspend across the board. Some areas are better at spending than others, and I want to work with each group to make sure that they maximise the spend and that we spend all this money to the best effect for the rural communities.

Waterways: Drainage

9. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many times in the last five years her Department has taken enforcement action in cases where structures were found to be unsound with the potential to block waterways in contravention of the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973. (AQO 1728/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Drainage Order 1973 allows Rivers Agency to issue enforcement orders under schedule 5 and schedule 6. Over the past 5 years, my Rivers Agency has issued three enforcement notices in cases where structures were found to be unsound and have the potential to block waterways in contravention of the Drainage Order 1973.

Mr G Robinson: What penalties were imposed?

Mrs O'Neill: In relation to the cases that are subject to the three enforcement notices, I will write to the Member to update him on where they are sitting. As I said, three enforcement notices have been issued. I think that people were instructed to remove the blockage, but, if that has not been successful, I will write to the Member to let him know.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 2, 9 and 12 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Cookstown 100

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding her Department provides for the Cookstown 100 road races. (AQO 1735/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My remit in relation to road racing, including the Cookstown 100, is to encourage the organisers to address public concerns about safety in the sport. As part of that process, my Department, through Sport NI and the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Ltd, provided £2 million during the period 2009 to 2011 to support safety improvements in motorsport, including road racing. The Cookstown 100 road races received almost £26,500 of that funding to assist with the safety works within the paddock area of the circuit.

Mr I McCrea: At a recent press launch for the Cookstown 100, it was announced that it costs approximately £85,000 to £90,000 to run the event each year. Will the Minister give an assurance that she will task her officials with working with the Cookstown 100 officials to try to ensure that measures are put in place to help them?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) responsibility is primarily around safety. I am not passing the buck to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), but it is going to sound like I am. In 2010, responsibility for events, including major sporting activities, was transferred to DETI, along with some of the budget for them. In fairness to DETI, and I have asked it for input

in the answer to this question, Cookstown 100 has not applied to it or to the NITB events fund for any programme costs.

I appreciate that, as an active constituency representative, sometimes you are led to believe that things are one way when there are sometimes things in between. October is usually the time when event organisers apply to NITB for funding for events the following year. I think that the process has closed for this year, and I certainly expect organisers, or anyone else for that matter, to be talking to NITB about their plans for future years.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister may be aware that this year is the 90th anniversary of the Cookstown 100 road races. Having been a local representative on the council, I commend the organisers, sponsors, participants and volunteers for making it such a success over those years. Does the Minister recognise the benefits that the race brings to Cookstown and the wider local area through the attraction of visitors?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise those benefits. Certain events, particularly big sporting events like the Cookstown 100, attract visitors from near and far. It is unfortunate that the organisers missed an opportunity to apply to the Tourist Board, which, to be fair, has been very willing to try to support local events. As I said in response to Mr McCrea, if people do not apply, money cannot be awarded, and the Tourist Board cannot be accused of not helping events organisers or areas to promote activities.

Mr Molloy: Will financial support be available to the organisers to implement the code of practice?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The code of practice should be in place. The season will start around 26 or 27 April. The organisers are very much aware that it is incumbent on them to have the code of practice in place before the season can commence. DCAL has provided over £2 million in the past two years to help motorsport to improve physical safety at venues. Any further financial implications arising from this or any other code of practice will be a matter for the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland to consider, along with race promoters. The issue is not additional money but managerial and procedural practices for events organisers. They are more than aware of the amount of money that my Department

has committed to ensure better provision for sporting safety.

Salmon Fishing: Netsmen

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her discussions with the netsmen. (AQO 1737/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Discussions between the Department and the coastal salmon netsmen have centred on finding a formula that respects the position of the netsmen and provides them with an opportunity to confirm their readiness to take voluntary action to conserve salmon, as I called for in January. To date, four of the six netsmen have provided the Department with a satisfactory undertaking not to fish for salmon in 2012, and they have been issued with licences.

Discussions are ongoing with the two remaining netsmen with the aim of achieving an agreed voluntary cessation for the 2012 season.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her answer. What will happen if no such agreement is reached, they start fishing and we face EU fines? What actions can she take in such a situation? Will she assure us that people being granted licences will not lead to infraction proceedings?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The four netsmen who received their licences gave assurances to the Department. The licences were awarded on the basis of those assurances. The same assurances have not come from the two remaining netsmen. If they do not give us the proper assurances, they will not get licences. Anyone found fishing for salmon will be prosecuted. The Department will make sure that we do everything that we can to honour the EU habitats directive. That is very important, which is why we brought forward this proposal in January.

Mr Rogers: Does the Minister feel that she has done enough to conserve and protect salmon stocks by entering into voluntary agreements with the netsmen, who she says will not fish this year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and congratulate him on becoming a Member of the Assembly. I feel that the Department has done everything that it can to ensure that no one fishing is killing salmon. It is catch and release. The commercial netsmen have given us a guarantee that they will not fish for salmon, and their licences were awarded on that basis. If anyone has any evidence or information that that is not the case, it is

incumbent on them to bring it to the Department and the relevant authorities.

Mr McMullan: On what will the Department consult in the forthcoming conservation consultation? When will that consultation begin?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The consultation is due to commence at the end of April. A paper will be forwarded to the Executive and notification of the consultation will go to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The consultation should, therefore, start in May and last for at least 12 weeks. If we find that the consultation runs into a holiday period and is impeded by that, I am happy to extend it.

The consultation should be broad based and robust. People should have every opportunity to feed into it. It will look at options to ensure that we honour our responsibility with regard to wild Atlantic salmon. It could look at our conservation policy and limited or extended seasons. It could even look at the possibility of not catching salmon at all. Rather than predetermine what it may look at, the Department will bring forward a paper to the Executive and the Committee. It will then put it out for consultation.

As is the case in all consultations, even what is not in the paper will be consulted on. I am looking forward to that. The fishing community, in particular, has been very robust in letting the Department know what is right and wrong. I appreciate that. They are the people who know better than me or anyone else. I believe that we will receive helpful suggestions in that consultation. We need to ensure that they are taken on board and brought forward.

Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant

4. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Department's preparations to mark the centenary of the signing of the Ulster covenant. (AQO 1738/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In March, the Executive agreed that they would help to set an inclusive tone by putting in place an official acknowledgement process—*gabh mo leithscéal*—to mark the significant centenaries in the decade ahead. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I will bring forward jointly a programme that is based on the principles of an educational focus, reflection, inclusivity, tolerance, respect,

responsibility and interdependence. Work on developing that programme has begun. However, organisations that are supported by my Department have already been planning a diverse range of events and activities. For example, NI Screen is part-funding a documentary called 'The Covenant Trail' and intends to use its digital archive to deliver illustrated talks that reflect on the events of the period. The Public Records Office (PRONI) will deliver a lecture series that explores the decade of centenaries. PRONI will also revamp its Ulster covenant website. Libraries NI is planning an exhibition on the covenant and a series of talks in branches throughout the North. The Ulster Museum plans to extend the section in the 'Plantation to Power Sharing' gallery that deals with the home rule crisis, the Ulster covenant, the Great War, 1916, and partition. Those are just a few examples. There will be more events.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for her response. A convergence of those events in 2012, when we remember developments such as the signing of the Ulster covenant, which retained Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, could bring Her Majesty The Queen to Northern Ireland. The Minister talked about tolerance and respect in her response. If we talk about tolerance and respect, will the Minister reverse her previous assertion that she would refuse to meet the Queen?

Mr Deputy Speaker: One question, please.

Mr S Anderson: I have one question. Will the Minister reverse her previous assertion that she would refuse to meet the Queen, particularly given the recent statement by her colleague Martin McGuinness that he would not rule out such a meeting?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is a bit of a hypothetical question because I have not received any invitation. I consider each invitation that I receive on its merits. Therefore, with regard to what his party colleagues have agreed with my party colleagues on bringing forward a series of events that are based on non-triumphalism and mutual respect, I suggest that Mr Anderson talks to his party colleagues about future questions and approaches to the decade of centenaries. We all have a responsibility to ensure that they are recognised respectfully.

Mr Allister: The core theme of the covenant was the preservation of our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom

— something that the Minister is in office to destroy. Therefore, rather than peddle the fiction that, nonetheless, the Minister will supposedly celebrate the covenant, I ask her for an assurance that she and her party will not sully the centenary by imposing herself in some false spectacle of support?

2.45 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Unlike Jim Allister, I believe in the Irish proclamation, which cherishes all the children of the nation equally. I recently attended an event in Dublin at which Peter Robinson delivered a lecture on Carson and referred to the Ulster covenant, and I did not impose myself, I did not sit on anybody's knee, and I did not become a nuisance. I did so willingly, in a genuine and respectful way, and other Members of this House were also at that event. Therefore, if anybody is being silly and imposing themselves, it is you.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister outlined the principles that will guide her and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's approach to marking and planning the centenaries. They were principles such as understanding, but the word "reconciliation" was not mentioned. I wonder what place the Minister and Ms Foster have placed on reconciliation in the context of the decade of centenaries and the centrality of reconciliation in remembrance.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The word was not missing deliberately, Conall. I just threw some sentiments out by way of example. There are huge opportunities for reconciliation, and I fully appreciate the point that the Member is making. Our approach — and when I say "our", I mean the Executive — is based on the principles that were set out by the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Reconciliation is in the middle, in the centre, sideways, in between and underneath those principles. Therefore, by the Executive accepting those principles, DCAL's arm's-length bodies, or anybody else applying for funds that may become available as a result of commemorative events, have to do so on the basis of signing up to those principles.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the mature approach that the Minister and other Ministers in the Executive are taking on this issue. A number of significant centenaries are coming up, including the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Irish

Volunteers next year. The Minister has talked about what she and the Enterprise Minister are looking at, but what are the Executive going to do to mark those centenaries?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is a list, which is not exclusive, but, within the decade of centenaries, we are looking at: the Ulster covenant; the First World War, 1914-18; the Treaty of Versailles, 1919; Easter rising, 1916; the battle of the Somme, 1916; the rise of the labour movement and the Belfast strike, 1917; Lloyd George's convention, 1917-18; male and limited women's suffrage, 1918 — there are people out there who think that women were given full suffrage, which is a myth; the general election, 1919; the war of independence; and the civil war and partition.

Those are just some examples of the things that the Executive have agreed. Work on developing that programme has begun, but I am sure that there will be others. We hope to advance the programme very quickly, based on the principles that I have mentioned from the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Líofa 2015

5. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she will revise the current targets for her Líofa 2015 initiative. (AQO 1739/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since I launched Líofa in September 2011, I am pleased to announce that it has received very good support across the North. We reached the target of 1,000 people in December, and we have already surpassed that, as more than 1,700 people have now signed up. Therefore, we are now looking at a new target, which is 2,015 by 2015.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I congratulate the Minister and her Department on the work that has been done. Cá huair a mbeidh an comhairliúchán um straitéisí na Gaeilge agus Ullans ag tosú? When will the consultations on the strategies for the Irish language and Ulster Scots begin?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The initial paper will be brought to the Executive at the end of May, and it will go to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for consultation thereafter. As I said to Roy Beggs, I am conscious that we are moving into the summer recess. Therefore, I will extend the consultation period to 12, 16 or even 20-plus

weeks to make sure that everybody, particularly the two sectors, who needs to inform and shape the structure of the strategies that we are bringing forward has an opportunity to do so.

Mr Swann: I note you intend to increase your targets for your Líofa 2015 initiative. Is there an implication there that Foras na Gaeilge or the other Irish language promotional bodies are not completing their remit or meeting their targets and that, therefore, this needs to be carried out elsewhere in an initiative directly within a ministerial remit?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, Líofa has no implications for Foras na Gaeilge. Líofa is just about trying to get more people to learn the Irish language. If anything, it supports the work that is already under way in those groups. People who want to go to classes will probably go to classes that are funded by Foras na Gaeilge, or maybe not. For example, I go to a class in the local GAA club that does not receive any funding from anyone except itself. I go there because it is handy to me, and it has an excellent tutor. It is not to undermine any work that is being done by Foras or any other Irish language groups.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. Given that the project will conclude in 2015, can the Minister advise the House of what the cost of the project will be to the Northern Ireland exchequer between now and 2015?

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are probably talking in the region of, so far, £30,000, and that includes the recruitment of a development worker to roll out the Líofa programme. The initial costs of the launch were just over £2,000. I believe that those costs are very modest, considering what has been achieved. We will bring forward a better sense of what it will cost by 2015. It includes promotional events that have not been costed for. Ideas about how this can be done are coming from everybody, and they are all very good and very positive. However, as the Member and everyone else in the House knows, Irish language activists are taxpayers too, and they are entitled to a service, and I am going to make sure that they have it.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí ar an cheist go dtí seo. Agus caithfidh mé a rá go bhféiltim roimh an scéim seo, Líofa. Ach tuigfidh an tAire go raibh Gaeilgeoirí ag súil le beart i bhfad níos

cuimsithí ná an scéim áirithe seo: le fírinne, le hAcht Gaeilge a bheith ann faoin am seo. Agus seo muid tar éis bliana gan tásc ná tuairisc air. An féidir leis an Aire a rá cén uair a fheicfidh muid a cuid moltaí ar an ábhar?

I welcome the Líofoa scheme, but the Minister will understand that Irish speakers were expecting a much more comprehensive approach to the language than that particular scheme. Indeed, they were expecting something in the form of an Irish language Act. Here we are, after more than a year of the Minister in office, without any sign of that Act. Will the Minister tell us when she will bring forward her proposals on the Irish language Act?

May I take the opportunity to congratulate Raidió na Gaeltachta —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think we have one question there.

Mr D Bradley: — on achieving 40 years of Irish language broadcasting in this country?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and for speaking in Irish. It is helpful for me as a Líofoa learner to hear people speaking in Irish and to try to pick some of the things up. Tá Gaeilge dheas agat. You have beautiful Irish.

I have not met anybody who signed up for or joined Líofoa in conjunction with Acht na Gaeilge. I think that the Member has been very clever in wedging those in to make a point. At the end of the day, are people asking for Acht na Gaeilge? Yes, they are. They are absolutely asking for it. I expect the Member, along with other colleagues, to try to convince those who are yet to be convinced that an Irish language Act is a good thing. Rather than him asking me each month what I am doing about Acht na Gaeilge, I need cross-party support for it.

Mr D Bradley: I do support it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that you are cross at times, but I assumed your support; I took your support for granted. We need to talk to people here who are yet to be convinced of the merits of an Irish language Act. I look forward to your endeavours, along with our endeavours, to see how you are going to do that.

One thing that does surprise me though — and maybe you are not aware of this, Dominic — is that your party did not raise Acht na Gaeilge

once during negotiations on the Programme for Government.

Entertainment Events: North Down

6. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of North Down Borough Council's recent decision to permit in north Down only acts which can be broadcast on mainstream media. (AQO 1740/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I understand that North Down Borough Council's decision to permit only acts that can be broadcast on mainstream media relates to Ward Park and not to other areas of Bangor. The decision, however, is a matter for the council. My Department does not directly fund events at Ward Park. Funding in support of the arts is disbursed through the Arts Council, and administration of community festivals' funding is devolved to councils. Both operate competitive schemes, and applications are determined on the basis of merit.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her response. The council's proposed policy goes further by targeting acts aimed at those aged over 25, in order to — in its words — avoid antisocial behaviour. Does the Minister agree that it is important that we include our young people in cultural events, in particular? Our youth often has little voice or input to society. For a council proactively to prohibit young people from engaging in events that it puts on is counter to a lot of the work that her Department is trying to do.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. Aontaím go hiomlán. I totally agree with you. You are a member of the council. Councils have a section 75 responsibility, which includes children and young people. All being well, children and young people will become ratepayers and taxpayers. Even forby that, they are entitled to services. The community festivals fund is administered by councils. They have to try their best to make sure that all the citizens of each borough get a service. If the Member wishes, he should ask for the Arts Council to meet the council to see how that is not the case. I support the Member's sentiments that children and young people are entitled to facilities in North Down just as they are anywhere else.

Mrs McKevitt: Last year's performance by Eminem in Bangor brought great benefits to the local economy. Under the new decision, such

acts will not be able to perform in north Down. Is the Minister concerned about the impact that the decision could have on the potential to grow the local economy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I confess that I had to think who Eminem is. I am showing my age. I was thinking that it was M&Ms — chocolate or peanut M&Ms — but I know who he is.

Part of the issue is that young people spend money when they go to events. They spend money in the amenities. Why it did not have Eminem back is a matter for the council. It sounds like a missed opportunity. I have children who are young enough to travel into other areas, and I have gone to north Down for concerts. It seems as though there is a bit of censorship going on in the North Down Borough Council area. It is up to the Members from that area to sort that out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Jennifer McCann is not in her place.

2012 Olympics: Training

8. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many countries have confirmed their use of training facilities in Northern Ireland in preparation for the Olympics. (AQO 1742/11-15)

10. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the Olympic training camps being held in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1744/11-15)

13. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the preparations for Olympic teams using Northern Ireland for training. (AQO 1747/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 8, 10 and 13 together.

To date, there are nine pre-games training camps confirmed for here. The Olympic teams are the Chinese men's and ladies' artistic gymnastics team —

Mr Bell: At Salto.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, your constituency, Jonathan. From a sedentary position, I hear you.

There is also the Cuban boxing team — yo ho — the Australian boxing team, the Kuwaiti athletics

team, the Sudanese athletics team, the Egyptian athletics team and the Qatari athletics team. So far, the Paralympic teams coming are the Irish Paralympic team and the Jordanian Paralympic team. In addition to the nine teams that we have secured so far, negotiations are still under way, even at this late stage, with other nations about securing pre-games training here.

Mr Easton: Does the Minister agree that the Olympic Games has great potential, with teams coming here, to bring great economic benefits to Northern Ireland? Will she assure us that she will continue to chase other teams to try to bring them to Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes; I absolutely agree that there is huge potential. Even in the past week, the Chinese Government visited here. Our local media might not have been impressed because they did not get the access that they hoped that they would. However, I know that, when the Chinese gymnasts train at the Salto gym in Lisburn, we will have a lot of media from China, whose coverage will go into billions of people's homes around the world.

The Chinese team is number one in the world in The Chinese team is number one in the world in its gymnastics field. That alone will bring huge benefits to the North, particularly the Lisburn area, even for people filming the activities at Salto. Between us, DETI and the rest of the Executive, that is the sort of initiative that we are trying to encourage with other countries, even at this late stage, because it will have a benefit.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the Minister's comments. Could she indicate whether the level of sporting infrastructure was acceptable to interested countries and participants or whether that was an area that, at times, proved detrimental to attracting teams? Are we getting any feedback on that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have just talked about the teams that we attracted. The Chinese team is number one, and the Cuban boxers are number one. They were more than happy with the facilities here. In fact, they were very, very impressed. They were impressed not just with the facilities but with the professionalism behind Salto and the boxing clubs in west Belfast. These people come with a worldwide reputation. I think that sometimes we do not have a strong appreciation of what we have

here. However, facilities are not an obstacle to countries coming here.

3.00 pm

Mr S Anderson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. For clarification for me and others in the House, was it in order for Mr Bradley to speak in two languages and to take the time that he did to ask a question?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The answer to that question is yes. It would be helpful if other Members remained quiet during Question Time. I had great difficulty trying to listen to Members speaking while others insisted on having conversations. I hope that that message gets around the Chamber.

I ask Members to take their ease for a moment, please.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we go back to the business that we left behind before Question Time, I want to address a matter that was raised by Mr Alban Maginness regarding remarks made by the Health Minister on Monday 26 March.

I reviewed the Official Report and footage of the proceedings in question upon my return from Kosovo. I spoke to the Minister directly and then wrote to him, the Alliance Party's Chief Whip and the Member who initially raised the point of order. I believe that the language used did fall short of the standards that I expect, and I asked the Minister to apologise. I convened a meeting in my office at 2.30 pm today, to which the Minister had indicated he was prepared to come and apologise to the Member. However, the Member, Mr McCarthy, was unwilling to attend to receive and accept the apology — *[Interruption.]*

Order. Standing Orders are clear: the Speaker's ruling is final.

Let me also say that I am not happy with how other Members have dealt with this issue. If something is referred to the Speaker, Members should leave it until the Speaker has dealt with it. What Members should not do is refer something to the Speaker and then go to the press, almost trying to second-guess what the Speaker's ruling on the issue might be.

I therefore consider the matter closed. The Minister agreed with my ruling and agreed to apologise at a meeting in my office with the Member. That is where the issue is settled. As far as I am concerned, the matter is now closed.

Private Member's Business

Kinship Care

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes and welcomes the growth of kinship care and acknowledges the valuable role it plays in providing care for the many children who cannot be raised by their parents; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to note the excellent and often invisible contribution made by kinship carers, to identify a number of key priorities and actions for their support and to consider amending the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 in support of kinship carers. — [Miss M McIlveen.]

Mr McCallister: I thank Michelle McIlveen for proposing the debate on kinship care. I also pay tribute to the work that she has done over the past number of years to highlight issues around children and young people who go missing from the care system. This is an important issue, and I welcome the debate. I have worked with her in the past to see how we can achieve better statistics and follow-up action on this issue. It is important to keep chipping away at it and to see how we can improve the outcomes for children.

As colleagues have said, our primary focus should always be on outcomes for children. We want the best outcomes for children and young people who enter into an arrangement, whether formal or informal, in kinship care, foster care or the care of the state. Those children are often at a very difficult stage of their lives. I will be interested, if Miss McIlveen introduces a private Member's Bill, to see what it contains. I look forward to it coming before the Health Committee so that we can scrutinise it and see what value we can add to it.

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

There are statistics on children going missing, and one thing that alarmed me when the Committee had a presentation from Kinship Care recently, was the number of children that can fall out of the system, particularly if the kinship care arrangement is informal. Although you would hope those numbers are very small, there is a risk of some children falling between two stools. That is a worrying aspect of any part of the provision of care for our children and young people. I am interested to hear whether the Minister will mention any better ways of keeping a closer eye on how we can manage

that. We must make sure that children are not falling between those stools and possibly being placed in danger.

I pay tribute to those involved in kinship care for promoting the concept. The issue has really moved up the political agenda over the past year as a worthwhile way of dealing with and helping to secure good outcomes for children and young people. Many in this House will have seen it on an informal and possibly on a formal basis. The fact that it works well has been recognised.

We should support kinship care, and, as colleagues have mentioned, we should support it not only through our words in this House but through our actions, and through financial support to families. Ms Ramsey, in her contribution as a Sinn Féin Member and as Chair of the Committee, talked about the possibility of grandparents picking up that role, some of whom may be on little more than a state pension. Although they would not want to see children turned away or be unable to fulfil that role, they might find it very difficult financially. We should and must take our duty seriously in providing that financial support.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that, at times, the Department or social services may take advantage of the love that those families have for those children in the family circle? Those families would not want the children to be given up to the wider care system, and would look after them even though they do not have the financial support or remuneration to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My colleague makes an excellent point. As Mr Elliott and Ms Ramsey said, no one would want to turn away a child, so of course they make the sacrifices that the Member talks about. That is why it is incumbent on the House to make sure that financial arrangements are put in place to make support available and to do what we can to support the system and carers. Very often, the care given to children and young children who are kept in the family circle provides excellent outcomes. We should all cherish that and want to keep it going. We have to make financial resources available to ensure that that happens and that when it happens, it is supported and works well.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the motion tabled by Michelle McIlveen, and I wish her well on her trek towards her private Member's Bill. I sincerely hope that the Department, if not taking the lead in producing legislation, fully co-operates with her. The legislation will be hugely important in providing kinship carers with some equality and protection.

Like the mover of the motion, I want to thank Jacqueline Williamson and a number of other kinship carers who have taken the lead and championed the cause for a short time. Thankfully, those people were prepared to take the lead. They came at it with an array of experience, but they also struggled with it greatly. The Minister is coming into the Chamber now. I certainly hope that, at some stage, Kinship Care Northern Ireland will get more capacity and that his Department will find a way to provide money to enable it to deliver its programme. Awareness and the availability of information are important, because, in many respects, kinship carers become parents when they take on that role. So they need access to information, and I make a direct appeal to the Minister to ensure that that is provided.

Today, I want to draw attention to the relatives and friends of children who are collectively known as kinship carers and take responsibility for raising someone else's child. The research paper on kinship care that we received states that there are between 8,000 and 10,000 unrecognised kinship carers. The mover of the motion pointed out the importance of having adequate research so that we know exactly how many formal and informal kinship carers there are across Northern Ireland. Once we have that research, the Department can look at the outcomes of children in kinship care compared with those of children in other caring environments. Hopefully, the Minister will also take that on board.

The research paper also identifies that most families involved in informal kinship care are not supported and are, therefore, experiencing huge financial difficulties, as many Members said. We need to find a way of remedying that. The paper refers to a study that shows that the work of many kinship carers goes unrecognised and unsupported and that kinship families are more likely to experience poverty. That sets off alarm bells with us all, especially when we are trying to provide equality and an environment in which children are not caught in the poverty

trap. The consequence to a family's lifestyle of adding a child can clearly be financially detrimental, because there is an extra person to feed, clothe and care for. One more child may not sound like a great deal to a lot of people, but the commitment required by those who have not had the experience of raising a child can be onerous and daunting. For those who have had the wonderful opportunity of raising children, it can be a gift, but it can also be a financial burden and a test of mental strength for the people involved.

The hurdles faced by kinship care families are tremendous because of the lack of Executive support. Under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, a private agreement between birth parents and relatives or friends does not require legal notification to social services. There is no pressure from the Executive to make that process legal. However, there is a sense of fear, and that keeps families from applying to become formal kinship carers. It is a fear of being denied the opportunity to take care of a very close family member because the trust deems that a caregiver does not have the appropriate accommodation or, importantly, the appropriate welfare. There is no room to account for the love, affection, effort, compassion and security that kinship carers give and share with the children whom they look after.

3.15 pm

The revision of the 1995 Order to include assistance for informal kinship care is important and absolutely essential. It is important that the Minister makes a commitment to ensuring that there is equality and recognises the need for a public awareness campaign across Northern Ireland aimed at families and professionals, backed with an advice and information line to support kinship carers at a time of crisis.

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

Mr P Ramsey: It is important that Kinship Care Northern Ireland has the capacity to go forward, for which it needs funding.

Mr McCarthy: I wish to put on record my thanks to Michelle McIlveen and Mr Wells for bringing this important topic to the Floor of the House. It has been said many times that our children are our biggest asset, and of course they are. Our future depends on the generations to come, so it is imperative that we, in this generation, do our

utmost to nurture, encourage, rear, educate and love all our children to the best of our ability, from the moment that they come onto this earth.

Human nature dictates that the parents of our children have a duty to bring them up in a comfortable and loving home. Unfortunately, for one reason or another, that simply does not always happen, and because we live in a society, thankfully, in which our Government take their responsibility for safeguarding our children very seriously, measures are taken so that our social care services ensure that those vulnerable children are looked after.

We are all very aware of fostering, adoption and children's homes, all of which provide excellent services. Recently, the service of kinship carers has been brought to the fore, and of course we acknowledge the excellent work of friends and relations when a young member of their family requires a loving and stable home environment in which to grow up.

The motion is worthy of support. It asks the Minister:

"to note the excellent ... contribution made by kinship carers"

and

"to identify ... key priorities and actions for their support"

so that this sometimes invisible work can be recognised, and we can help to continue this valuable service.

As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I welcomed the opportunity on 22 February 2012 to hear about the work, dedication, hopes and aspirations of Kinship Care Northern Ireland, presented by Jacqueline Williamson, who was accompanied by Kevin Wright. That presentation made a clear distinction between formal and informal kinship care. As they saw it, when children and parents have difficulties, kinship care was or should be the first option, if at all possible, for children, simply because, as Ms Williamson said, children in kinship care:

"maintain an important sense of identity and belonging"

and

"have greater placement stability because they live with people whom they already know".

She went on to say:

"Kinship care is also an effective form of early intervention because it avoids the need to place children in the formal care system."

However, it seems very unfair that youngsters who are looked after in an informal setting find it much more difficult to receive sufficient support for this vital assistance. Kinship care represents a cost-effective way to help and support youngsters who might otherwise end up in residential care or other institutions, costing, I understand, anything up to £2,000 a week.

It is vital that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the trusts listen to the voices of ordinary people. It seems to me that Kinship Care Northern Ireland has the knowledge and experience to do just that. Its main aim is to improve outcomes and life chances for children who are unable to live with their own parents. It wishes to see kinship placements have a better chance of success, and it envisages a cross-departmental working group that includes external experts, including voluntary sector organisations, to produce an integrated and coherent kinship care strategy.

What is required is a statutory framework that places a statutory duty on all health trusts to provide children who are being raised by family and friends and their carers with proper support in relation to contact, access to respite, mediation and therapeutic support, as well as specialist counselling, advice, training and information services. The least that our authorities can do is listen to the experiences of children and their peers and work together to ensure a better and brighter future for all of our youngsters who, unfortunately, find themselves in these difficult situations. On behalf of the Alliance party, I fully support the motion.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to support the motion, and I commend my party colleagues for bringing this important issue to the Assembly. Kinship care plays a very important and special role in Northern Ireland. It often goes unnoticed just how great a sacrifice and dedicated service kinship carers provide daily in supporting vulnerable children and young people who rely on kinship carers to meet their daily needs. Kinship carers themselves are often among the most vulnerable and often make great personal and financial sacrifices to provide care for those children who rely on the love,

care and support that those dedicated carers so freely give.

The benefits of kinship care for the child are wide-ranging and cannot be bought. They may often only be realised by children in later years. It is the preferred choice of the vast majority of children and young people who, for one reason or another, are not able to live with their natural parents. We need to do all that we can to give these carers the necessary support that they deserve. Kinship carers should not be disadvantaged in comparison with foster carers in the support that they receive. It is a very difficult and challenging job and one that merits suitable government help and support. Children in kinship care can often have a wide range of challenging and difficult needs due to a very disruptive and sometimes traumatic upbringing during their early years.

As well as the obvious benefits to the child, kinship care also helps to reduce the need for a child to be placed in residential care. Residential care is more expensive and often has poorer outcomes for the child compared with a child in a kinship care arrangement. I commend the work of Kinship Care Northern Ireland, which helps to support and improve the lives for kinship carers and children. I was most impressed with the work of that organisation during a briefing to the Health Committee last December.

One practical avenue that could be further explored is the campaigns to improve public awareness on the level of support that are on offer to kinship carers and on education around accessing support. Public awareness campaigns are often cost-effective and can bring long-lasting benefits on many issues. Given that numbers are growing and that more children are now living in kinship care than in foster care and residential care combined, this is now estimated to affect between 8,000 and 10,000 children in Northern Ireland. Now is the time to put in place the right infrastructure to support and develop the role of kinship carers and ultimately ensure the best outcomes for children. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Until relatively recently, I was not familiar with the term “kinship care”. The Health Committee, of which I am a member, has had a number of presentations on kinship care. It is coming more to the forefront. Part of the reason why

it is not that widely known, is that there no legislative definition of a kinship foster carer, formal or otherwise. The term “formal kinship care” has been coined by the Department to describe an arrangement involving a child who is a looked-after child under the Children Order 1995 and who is placed with a kinship foster carer. I think that it stated that the use of the term was deemed necessary in response to a number of Assembly questions for the purpose of clearly distinguishing between a looked-after child arrangement made with the approval and agreement of a health and social care trust and other kinship care arrangements established within and by a family outside of a looked-after child arrangement. It really describes an arrangement where a child lives with and is cared for by relatives and/or family friends. Here, kinship care is divided into informal kinship care and formal kinship care, or kinship foster care, where the state, in the form of social services, is responsible for the care and upbringing of a child, and, where a decision is made for the child to be formally looked after by social services, the child can be placed with relatives or family friends. That is formal kinship care.

A number of statistics have already been mentioned, and, interestingly, children here in the North are living with relatives. Almost one third of children are living with relatives and family friends, and, between 2009 and 2011, the number of looked-after children in kinship care increased by 53%. That obviously needs to be addressed urgently. The statistics show that, in the North, we have the highest prevalence of sibling kinship care, with 49% of children being raised by an older brother or sister. It is stated that children in formal kinship care arrangements are satisfied with the standard of care that they receive from relatives and friends, and, most tellingly, many kinship carers live in poverty. That needs to be addressed.

In 2001, an English court ruled in favour of relative foster carers who are not being paid the same rate towards the cost of caring for a child by their local authority as non-kinship foster carers. That became known as the Munby judgement, which ruled that a local authority policy that financially discriminated against foster carers who are related to the children they foster was unlawful, and more recent cases in England and Wales have ruled in favour of kinship grandparents, who won cases against the local authorities for not providing

remuneration equivalent to that provided for traditional foster carers.

The Minister, in response to an Assembly question, said that the HSC board has indicated that while there are no direct measures in place to monitor the Munby judgement, all five trusts have indicated that they are compliant with that judgement. He said that specific funding has not been allocated to enforce the judgement in the past three years; rather, trusts are required to deliver all their legislative responsibilities from within their overall financial envelope. The difficulty is, of course, that there is no legislative framework for kinship care, and Michelle McIlveen mentioned bringing forward a private Member's Bill to put that in place, because, at the moment, it seems to be a very ad hoc arrangement by the trusts. That needs to be addressed, and I ask the Minister to look at that.

There should be an awareness campaign on kinship care aimed at families and professionals and backed with an advice and information line to support kinship carers at the time of crisis. A lot of these situations arise at a time of crisis, and research is needed to evidence the current level of provision of formal and informal kinship care here in the North, to assess outcomes for children in kinship care compared with those in other care provision and to take into account the additional difficulties faced by formal kinship carers. I ask the Minister to look at the current legislation and to amend it to enable kinship carers to deal with the practical realities of bringing up a child and to ensure that proper remuneration is made available. I support the motion.

Ms Brown: I support the motion proposed by my colleagues. Kinship care allows children who can no longer live with their birth parents for whatever reason to live with other family members or friends instead of having to be placed into the care of a foster care family or children's home. There are two types of kinship care: formal and informal. Formal kinship care involves social services, whereby the health and social care trust acts in accordance with the law. Informal care is the care of children by family without the involvement of social services and is more likely to happen in circumstances where there are no child protection issues.

The safety of children unable to live with their birth parents is paramount, and, although many of those children are unable to live with their

birth parents for a variety of reasons, social services are most likely to become involved in cases where children are at risk of abuse or neglect. The make-up and circumstances surrounding family units differ, and I suspect that there are many children who are cared for by other members of the family whom we do not know about. Those children, therefore, do not show up in the official statistics.

3.30 pm

It is generally conceded that the outcomes for children who live and grow up in an established family unit with people they know are better than those for children who go to live with unrelated foster parents or in a children's home. I therefore support kinship care where at all possible and believe that social services should ensure that all possibilities for trying to place a child with another family member or friend are exhausted before other options are considered.

I pay tribute to the families who offer up their homes and lives for fostering. I know that, in the previous mandate, the issue of foster care was discussed, and the fact that the number of foster carers is in decline was raised. That places an onus on every health and social care trust to look at placing a child with another family member or friend with whom the child is familiar.

At a presentation to the Health Committee earlier this year, a representative of Kinship Care Northern Ireland gave evidence. It was stated that just under one third of children in foster care are placed with other family members or relatives. That number was found to be increasing, with the number of looked-after children placed with family or friends going up by 53% between 2009 and 2011. Kinship care is therefore on the increase and is more popular than it was.

Although I believe that social services have the best interests of the child at heart, as laid out in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, the state is sometimes overwhelmed by bureaucracy in such cases, with the best options prioritised under procedures. For that reason, I believe that kinship care must be allowed for and prioritised in legislation and potential changes must be investigated to provide a child with a home in a settled, comfortable and, most important, safe home environment. I therefore support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: Of 2,500 young people in care in Northern Ireland at any one time, 76% are in foster care, and, of those, 30% are in kinship care. Of the 1,700 individual foster carers in Northern Ireland, there are 450 kinship carers who care for 717 children and young people.

Formal kinship care increased by 53% between 2009 and 2011. A major study published in 2011 by the Buttle Trust and the University of Bristol revealed for the first time the number of children being brought up by a relative other than their mother or father. That research was based on the 2001 census and showed that over 170,000 children across the United Kingdom were being raised by other family members because their parents were unable to care for them. That equates to one in every 77 children. The report's authors believe that that figure will have increased significantly in the past 10 years.

The study found that more than 90% of kinship care arrangements in each region were informal agreements between parents and relatives, and carers were, therefore, not entitled to financial support from social services: an invisible population who have little contact with social services. The report shines a light, for the first time, on that hidden group, who play a critical role in raising a generation of children and young people with little assistance, financial or otherwise. Even in economically difficult times, we owe it to those families to give them the support they need.

Kinship care is a positive solution for many children, and it is vital that we plan for their needs to improve their life chances. The study revealed that in Northern Ireland half of all kinship care children were being brought up by a sibling, as opposed to another generation of the family. It also found that, in each region of the United Kingdom, one in five sibling-headed households was overcrowded, with more than one person per room. If the Government are to meet their target to reduce child poverty, children in kinship care must be recognised as a group with specific needs. That is why I support the motion and wish it well.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh mile maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join colleagues in the House in thanking Michelle McIlveen for tabling this important motion. I am pleased that the Minister is here to hear most of what has been said, because this issue needs to

be taken seriously by him and by the Health Department. I am delighted to participate in the debate. I also thank people such as Jacqueline Williamson who have brought kinship care to our attention. As the Chair of the Health Committee said, we had a successful informal meeting followed up by a formal meeting with the Health Committee, which I, unfortunately, was not able to be at.

Rather than repeat what has been said — I cannot disagree with anything that any Member has said in the House today — I would like to make a few observations of my own. People talked about a child being able to stay in their own area, but one of the points not raised is that in rural areas that can make the difference in whether or not they are able to stay at their own school. A foster care place may only be available 10 or 15 miles away in a rural area. If kinship arrangements cannot be put in place to facilitate a child staying in their local area, taking that child not only out of the community and away from the people that they love but out of the school that they have been attending is a further blow. That is just one point that has not been made that needs to be highlighted as we try to create as much stability and continuity for children during a trauma, whether it is a bereavement, marital break-up, illness or the consequence of drug and alcohol abuse. I would say that not one of us, as constituency representatives, is unaware of the fact that drug and alcohol abuse can lead to children being displaced and taken away from their home and family. There are a myriad of reasons why children may need to be taken into care or looked after, to which, I believe, there is one very practical, pragmatic and sensible solution.

The poverty issues that many Members have raised are real and tangible. Like a lot of parents, you sometimes think about worst-case scenarios and ask "What if?". Coming back from a function late at night, my husband and I may think, "What if you are hit by a drunk driver? What if you have an accident? What if we are not able to raise our children? Who will pick up the pieces and give those children a stable home?". I have three wee ones, the youngest only three. My family and my husband's family would obviously want to rally round and help, but it is a big undertaking for anybody to take in three children and to clothe, feed and look after them for 15, 16 or more years. In many scenarios in many homes, that would create real problems of poverty and deprivation for those

children. The fact that families cannot access even basic rights, such as family allowance, if the proper arrangements are not in place, can lead to huge poverty for those children. That is a very serious issue that needs to be addressed.

I recall a conversation that I had with the Minister one evening before Christmas. We were talking about other things — I think that it was the night before the Compton review came out. We talked about looked-after children and the number of children in foster care. I said to the Minister that evening, “Two words, Minister: kinship care.” I felt that that was the solution that would work for everybody and, most importantly, for the children. I noticed that Michelle’s opening comments were that the children were the number one priority, and that is very true. We have fabulous foster carers. Families have adopted children and given them a loving home, but kinship care is the best way forward for looking after such children, whether the arrangement is temporary or permanent. I do not want to break confidences by repeating what was said that evening, but, if there is a feeling in the Department that people would cynically use the issue to get money that they were not entitled to, I do not feel that that is the most helpful way of dealing with the issue.

There are many ways that families can be traumatised —

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

Ms Gildernew: There are many ways that families can be traumatised, and they would not put children into foster care if it could be helped. The Minister could take an approach through the public awareness campaign, the research and the current legislation — the Children Order — which should be amended to deal —

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

Ms Gildernew: — with this issue. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Ms P Bradley: I thank my party colleagues for bringing forward the motion, which I support. Historically in Northern Ireland, there have been few families where kinship care has not happened in some guise. Research has indicated that children’s first choice of placement would be to be cared for by another family member or a close friend. The reasons why children may have to live apart from

their parents can be varied and complex. Ms Gildernew touched on it, but it is worth noting that 80% of care orders in Northern Ireland are due to drug or alcohol misuse. That is a very worrying statistic. Ultimately, regardless of the reasons, a child having to live elsewhere is an unsettling experience. Therefore, common sense suggests that, where possible, the first option should be to place a child or young person in a setting with which they are familiar.

Kinship care can be a positive experience for all involved, although there are limited resources that the carers can access. Often, the carers in informal arrangements receive very little, if any, financial assistance, which, in turn, can lead children into poverty. We already know that outcomes for children who live in poverty are lower than those for children who do not. Why many are reluctant to inform the necessary authorities of their informal arrangements needs to be understood and addressed. It can be as simple as the arrangements being temporary while a parent is ill, or it could happen through fear either of authorities or removal of the child due to family circumstances, such as the involvement of an elderly relative, which was touched on earlier. Often, that fear is through misconceptions of the role of social services. We must ensure that people know what they can expect and what the role of social services is.

There are no statistics to suggest that informal arrangements go wrong more often than formal kinship arrangements or other types of fostering arrangements. We must ensure that no stigma is attached to that vital service that families provide. We must be satisfied that we, as elected Members, ensure that all vulnerable people, including carers and those who are cared for, are adequately protected. Children in informal arrangements are there for the same reasons as those in the formal structures. They need access to the same resources and services as formal arrangements have. The carers have the same financial and family pressures and personal issues, and they also need to be helped and supported. We must ensure that the arrangements for those who are placed informally are not seen as second class simply because the family does not, for whatever reasons, wish to invoke a formal arrangement. The reasons for that can be varied. I support calls for that important service, formal and informal, to be recognised and for more information to be made available to the public about kinship care and how it can

be formalised. I also support calls for people in informal arrangements to have the same access to support services as those in formalised arrangements.

Kinship care, in the right circumstances, is an invaluable resource. It has the potential to reduce the number of children in care. With the number of registered foster carers falling, it can ensure that children and young people do not have to enter the care system. That has a dramatic saving for our society, but, more importantly, it can provide positive outcomes for families and our communities.

3.45 pm

Mrs Hale: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on my colleagues' motion. As Members, we all have a duty to ensure that children who are unable to live with their parents due to a variety of life-changing circumstances can be cared for in the best possible way, while ensuring that their voice is at the centre of all decision-making. It is vital that the Assembly and wider society recognise the vital contribution that kinship carers make to the lives of children and young people who cannot be raised by their parents. Indeed, their role in society not only dramatically lowers the costs associated with looked-after children but provides a stable and caring environment for children and young people who cannot remain in their family home.

I spent three and a half years working in a residential unit, looking after children who were placed there on full care orders, so I have an insight into how young people view themselves, their families and the childcare provision provided by the state. With the shortage of available foster care homes, coupled with the view that children in kinship care are more likely to attain better educational results and less likely to become involved in crime, it is vital that we do all in our power to support relatives and friends who are able to offer a caring home at a time of great need and emotional distress. It is a testament to kinship carers that, of the 2,500 children and young people living with foster carers today, approximately 30% are in kinship care. There are large numbers of unseen friends and relatives who have never received any recognition from statutory authorities for the role that they play in children's everyday lives. They offer stability and continuity at a time of uncertainty and great emotional upheaval.

I welcome the fact that my colleague Minister Poots and his Department are in the process of finalising kinship care standards and arrangement services and the training, guidance and support procedures that need to be in place to help to meet the needs of kinship carers and the children they care for. I believe that will greatly enhance the support available to kinship carers and recognise the important role that they play in our society.

Going forward, it is vitally important that key points and issues are addressed to ensure that kinship carers feel equally supported and that the culture of misinformed perceptions and fears associated with becoming a formalised kinship carer are challenged. This must be needs-led. Issues and priorities that should be addressed include kinship carers being represented on fostering panels in a lay or non-professional capacity and the experience of kinship carers and their children being reviewed as part of a statutory review process. We need to ensure that no kinship carer, either a relative or a friend, is put at a financial disadvantage. We should be aware of issues of poverty among children in formal and informal kinship care situations, give those full consideration and address them in a child poverty strategy for Northern Ireland. We need to look at how we can close the gap in educational success by increasing access and equity to children in kinship care so that they can have every success in life.

One area that I am slightly cautious about in informal kinship care is that there is no legal requirement to inform or notify social services of any voluntary arrangements for children. I have slight concerns that informal kinship care may face some difficulties in relation to child protection and safeguarding issues and that social services would be unaware of children and young people who may be subject to trauma or difficulties in their life. It is widely accepted that, often, problems that separate children and parents are endemic in the wider family structure, and informal kinship care in those cases would not be in the best interests of the child or young person. Although I am sure that regulations and processes such as inspections and reviews may seem unpopular and excessively bureaucratic, they are vital in ensuring that children and young people are safeguarded and protected from adverse risk.

If barriers and fear exist that prevent carers from coming forward, they should be challenged. If grandparents fear that a child or young person will be taken away by social services due to their age, financial standing or health, we need to challenge that cultural stigma. We also must ensure that we educate people in how the formalised process works and remove any perceived and actual barriers, so that they may be encouraged to come forward.

I make no apology for taking the view that children and young people who find themselves in this position need to have the best possible care and support available to them. The voice of children and young people should be at the centre of all decision-making, and it is clear from consultations with children and young people that there is an indication of a preferred option, which is to be cared for by other family members or close friends.

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

Mrs Hale: I welcome the debate and support my colleagues Michelle McIlveen and Jim Wells on their motion.

Mr McClarty: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to take part in the debate.

Although kinship care is a relatively new term, the concept is very much older. It is not uncommon now, or indeed in generations past, for grandparents or older siblings, for example, to assume the role of a parent to a child whose own parents, for whatever reason, were unable to fulfil that obligation. That does not make the role any less important; on the contrary, kinship care plays a valuable role in providing care for many children who are unable to live with their parents, whether in the short or long term.

It is also important to point out that kinship care can occur in circumstances as simple as those of a parent falling ill, with grandparents assuming care. It is not always a reaction to extreme and difficult situations. I appreciate the fact that the Department is working on a strategy to address the issues surrounding kinship care, but to date there is limited research. I urge the Department and the Assembly to explore kinship care extensively. We have an obligation to acknowledge and support the valuable contribution of kinship carers in our community.

There are several reasons why kinship care is the preferred option, but the welfare of a child should always be central to the debate. That is not to say that other reasons are not valid and should not be taken into account. Savings to the public purse are significant. The financial aid provided to kinship carers by the state is substantially less than, for example, that to children in residential care. Kinship care also eases the pressure to find suitable foster parents, of whom there is a shortfall.

I go back to the linchpin of the debate, which is the welfare of a child. Of course, kinship care will not be for everyone, and in some situations it suits that a child be placed elsewhere.

Everyone accepts that individual needs will be assessed and the right outcome put in place for specific circumstances. However, in cases in which there is an option, kinship care should be prioritised, and I support the motion for the Department to consider amending the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to ensure that.

It is important to point out why kinship care is the preferred option, and many Members have already done that. I will reiterate some of those points to ensure that we highlight the positive role that kinship care plays. Uprooting children for whatever reason is unsettling. It is important to maintain a smooth transition and ensure that their sense of identity and belonging is not interrupted. Kinship care is the only option that will nurture that. Kinship care provides greater stability because children are placed with people whom they already know and are more likely to be placed with siblings and maintain regular contact with birth parents and members of the extended family. That is important because most cases of kinship care are temporary, and it is expected that a child will return to his or her parents. Maintaining close contact will facilitate that. Kinship care can also be an effective form of early intervention because it avoids children being taken into formal care. The existing family connection and bond mean that kinship carers love the children and will do anything and everything to protect them and place their needs above all others. I have not exhausted the positives of kinship care, whether stand-alone or compared with other forms of care. I think that that only goes to prove why it should be given priority.

There is another side to the debate, which concerns the support already provided by the state. Over 700 children in Northern Ireland

are in formal kinship care arrangements. It is speculated that 5,000 and possibly up to 10,000 children live in informal kinship care arrangements. That is a huge difference at either end of the scale, and it suggests that there is an issue involving the state. Of course, informal kinship care arrangements are populated with those who do not want and/or do not need financial or non-financial support, perhaps because the arrangement is very short term. Others, however, are reluctant to involve the state because of the bureaucracy and perceived interrogation that is involved.

I know that I have almost run out of time. I support the motion.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I have listened with considerable interest and welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate and the issues that Members have raised.

I suppose I have some interest in this, in that my mother was raised in kinship care. Her mother died when she was five years old. She had six older and two younger siblings. The 14-year-old sister, who was the eldest in the family, took on the role of raising the family. That was mighty hard work, and she did a very good job of it in terms of the family that was raised.

My Department has, for some time, consistently stressed the importance of family and friends and kinship care. A key principle of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 is that, where possible, children should be brought up within their own family, with one stipulation that we should not move away from: when it is in their best interests to do so. The guiding principle of the Children Order is carried through to 'Care Matters in Northern Ireland', the strategy that was published in 2007. Once again, it promoted the placement of children with family and friends in circumstances where they are unable to live with their birth parents. It will not come as any surprise to learn that that is what children and young people themselves tell us that they want. What child, in circumstances where they could not live with their mother or father, would not want as an alternative to live with the grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, sister or brother?

Research tells us that a kinship placement can produce better outcomes for children and young people than may be achieved in other care placements. It is because it can work

better for children that kinship care has the support of my Department. I welcome the fact that there has been a significant growth in the number of kinship carers in recent years. A percentage increase of 53% in just three years demonstrates the degree of commitment to that. However, I acknowledge that kinship care comes at no insignificant cost to the grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, brothers or sisters who selflessly enter into care arrangements. The book of short stories, 'The Hidden Voices of Kinship Carers', launched in March of this year by Kinship Care Northern Ireland, illustrates not only how quickly decision-making can be thrust upon families and friends but how a decision about kinship care can impact on the whole family to an extent that life and lifestyle will probably never be the same again. For that reason, kinship carers need support, including financial support.

A main aim of the Care Matters strategy is to offer more support to kinship carers and, where possible, to make becoming a kinship carer more flexible and sustainable. When a kinship arrangement is put in place with the approval of a health and social care trust, those supports should also be made available. Maintenance and enhanced allowances are paid, and training is made available to meet the needs of individual children and their kinship families. However, all of us need to acknowledge that a kinship arrangement will not be possible in all cases simply because the problems that separated the child from his or her parents can be endemic in the wider family structure, and we must remember that as an Assembly. I return to the paramount consideration: a decision to place a child in kinship care or any care arrangement must be in the child's best interests.

I want to take Members through some of the initiatives that have been brought forward by my Department and the Health and Social Care Board to support the continued growth of kinship care. First, we are in the process of finalising kinship care standards and guidance, which will set a minimum standard of practice by health and social care trusts across Northern Ireland. The emphasis of the standards is on placing the child or young person at the centre of the process and making their welfare, safety and needs paramount; ensuring that payments to kinship carers are maintained at the same levels as those for foster carers —

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr Wells: Is that the same document that the acting Chair of the Health Committee mentioned in her speech, which she indicated was to be published by 1 April? If it is, when does he expect that document to be published?

4.00 pm

Mr Poots: We will come to that shortly.

One of the other standards that we want to deal with is the provision of services that are delivered consistently, effectively and efficiently and are capable of achieving equity of services provision for all young people and carers. We want to publish those standards in the near future. We do not have a precise date for that, but I am very hopeful that it will be next month. I do not want to be wholly definitive on that in case there is some slippage, but I am very hopeful that it will be done within the next month.

The Health and Social Care Board is in the process of developing regional kinship care policies and procedures, which will be modelled on the Department's standards and guidance. The board has also established a regional adoption and fostering service, which centralises training and recruitment services. It is anticipated that a new assessment process, supported by a training programme, will be introduced regionally. It is hoped that the introduction of a new process of assessing kinship carers will lead to an increase in their number, provide them with a better understanding of their role and purpose and, ultimately, provide greater protections to looked-after children on the ground so that they are being cared for by trained, supported families and friends who are working in partnership with the trusts.

In terms of legislative change, you are aware that it is my intention to introduce an Adoption and Children Bill in 2013, which, among other things, will make provision for new special guardianship orders. Those new orders have the potential to work well in kinship care situations. They have been working in England and Wales for a number of years, and we are considering their operation there before making final decisions as to how they should be implemented in this jurisdiction.

There are a number of other Adoption and Children Bill proposals which could, again, help

and benefit kinship carers. Those proposals include a reduction in the time a child is required to live with a foster kinship carer before the carer can apply for a court order, such as a residence order, which affords the carer parental responsibility and empowers him or her to make decisions relevant to daily living. We will, of course, give consideration to any other changes to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and kinship developments in other parts of the United Kingdom that could provide better support for kinship carers and potentially improve the standard of care being provided.

We also need to look at some of the initiatives that have already been brought forward by my Department to determine whether, with some modification, they could become a resource for kinship carers. I am thinking specifically of some of the developments under the Families Matter strategy — the parenting helpline and the family support database, for example.

I will deal with a number of the comments brought forward by Members. First, on the issue of best interests, I thank Members for acknowledging that any care decision must be based on the best interests of each child. What works for one child may not work for other children, so decision-making must always be based on the assessed needs of the child. Where it is assessed that placement with family and friends best meets the needs of the child, I am clear that that arrangement should be supported to ensure that it works for the child.

In terms of support for kinship carers, I can confirm that supports, including financial support, are already provided to those formally caring for the children of family members, which follows the Munby judgement and is in line with the allowance paid to foster carers. My Department also provides funding to a number of organisations, including Fostering Network and the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), which provide advice and information to kinship carers. That has been acknowledged in today's debate.

Perhaps we need to consider how those supports can be tailored to the specific needs of kinship carers, and we are happy to work with Fostering Network and BAAF to see how that can be done. I have also referred to some of the supports provided to parents generally, and perhaps we need to look at how, with a bit of tailoring, those can be made more relevant

to, and inclusive of, kinship carers, who are effectively undertaking a parenting role.

Some Members raised awareness of what is available. That ties in with awareness-raising. Unless kinship carers are aware of the support available to them they will never be able to access it. I agree that there is work to be done to raise awareness of the support available to kinship carers. I will ask my officials to look at how that might be taken forward. In that awareness-raising activity, we could also address the sense of fear experienced by kinship carers.

A number of pieces of research in connection with kinship care have been undertaken, some of which have been referred to in the debate. Michelle McIlveen mentioned undertaking research in bringing forward her private Member's Bill. I welcome that and look forward to seeing what it finds. My Department is more than happy to support applications for research into kinship care. We recommend that bodies recognised for their expertise in this field of research consider and formulate proposals and forward those to my officials.

I can confirm that my Department continues to pursue the use of the 2011 census to provide a more up-to-date measure of the extent of kinship care in Northern Ireland, including care provided without the involvement of social care agencies. It is hoped that we will have updated prevalence rates for kinship care Northern Ireland by the end of 2012.

As regards working with other Ministers and Departments, Members are correct that the needs of kinship carers can be met in a range of ways. We heard, for example, that some kinship care is carried out in families who experience poverty. There is a need to get the needs of kinship carers onto the agenda of other Ministers. We have an established mechanism to do that, namely the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people. This issue is of relevance to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Social Development Minister, the Education Minister, and the Employment and Learning Minister. I will ensure that the needs of kinship carers are brought to the attention of all the relevant Ministers through that ministerial subcommittee.

Standards are always important. Unfortunately, our timetable for the publication of kinship care standards has slipped. As I indicated to Jim

Wells, I hope to have it published in May 2012. I will give an undertaking that the standards will be reviewed again within two years of their operation. I understand that the policies and procedures being produced by the Health and Social Care Board will be published within six months of the publication of the Department's standards. The standards will cover a range of issues raised in the House today, including the payment of allowances to kinship carers.

As regards key priority actions, we are reviewing the strategy relating to the care of children. In the context of that work, we will consider future priorities and actions in connection with kinship care. That will extend to consideration of an appropriate statutory framework. As already stated, there is opportunity to make changes to legislation through the Adoption and Children Bill.

We all need to be aware of the point about children falling between stools. Statutory and voluntary agencies also need to be aware of the needs of children. In circumstances where a child needs our help, there is an onus on all of us and all the appropriate organisations to bring it to the attention of social services. I thank Kinship Care Northern Ireland for the work that it has done in profiling the issue of kinship care. We will continue to work with that organisation and other organisations that are relevant to this agenda.

The research based on the 2001 census indicates that the majority of kinship care placements were in urban settings. I accept that there may be issues specific to those living in rural areas. Regardless of where the arrangements are put in place, we must ensure that they are in the best interests of the child and that we meet all the expected safety standards.

I accept that educational outcomes for children in care are not as good as those of their peers in the wider population. We have made good progress in recent years to narrow the gap between the outcomes for children in care and those of their peers, particularly in education, but more needs to be done.

The costs of providing residential care are greater than other forms of care for children unable to live with their parents. However, we must accept that residential care can be the best and, indeed, the preferred option for some children. In that respect, the comparison of costs is unhelpful.

I realise that my time is gone. I thank everyone for their comments and look forward to hearing the winding-up speech.

Mr Wells: I thank everyone who took part in what I thought was an interesting and comprehensive debate. Useful points were raised from all sides of the House. I congratulate Michelle McIlveen on proposing the motion. She attracted strong cross-community support for her views on the issue. She was absolutely right to pay tribute, at the outset of her speech, to Jacqueline Williamson from Londonderry, who is the main organiser of Kinship Care Northern Ireland.

I have to be absolutely honest and say that, even though I have been a member of the Health Committee for quite a long time, I had never heard the phrase “kinship care” until I received a letter from Jacqueline. She then came to meet me. I was lobbied intensely for an hour on the subject. I must say that my knowledge of the subject grew dramatically in that 60 minutes. Much of what has been discussed today by honourable Members is almost entirely the result of information that has been supplied by Jacqueline and her organisation. That is a very interesting example of what can be achieved by one dedicated individual who has genuine concern on an issue. With very little support and funding, she has achieved so much in such a short time. She is to be congratulated. Several Members, including Pat Ramsey and Kieran McCarthy, also paid tribute to her work and that of her organisation.

Michelle McIlveen outlined the sacrifices that are often made by those who are involved in kinship care. Often, that is based on instinct. Coming from a rural area and looking back on it, I can now think of many examples of situations in which a mother or father died young or in tragic circumstances and the automatic assumption was that a grandmother, aunt or other family member would take control of the situation and care for the children. It was informal. It happened. It was probably never registered with anyone. However, it meant that many people who would have ended up in care had very fulfilled and happy childhoods. We need to pay tribute to those who did that without recognition for so many years.

Many Members who spoke in the debate, including the proposer of the motion and, of course, the Minister, made the fundamental

point that whatever decision is taken on care must be in the child's best interests. The child's needs are absolutely central. As the proposer said, each child has different needs. In the vast majority of cases, kinship care is the best option. However, as Brenda Hale, quite rightly, outlined, that is not always the case. There can be complex issues that surround the reasons why the child required care which may have travelled around the family. Therefore, it cannot be assumed automatically that kinship care is the best way forward. However, in many cases, it is, of course, and should be encouraged.

There was considerable debate on statistics by many Members. I am not quite sure whether Ms Ramsey is the acting, interim or permanent Chairperson. I do not know. We will find out in a few weeks. Ms Ramsey made the point that the statistics are not clear. We seem to be very aware that, in the past three years, there has been a 53% increase in kinship care arrangements and that there are 717 formal care arrangements. Beyond that, however, the statistics are a bit hazy. We need more information on the extent of this important issue. In her contribution, the Committee Chairperson stated that the likely figures are between 8,000 and 10,000 arrangements; the vast bulk of them, of course, being informal. That is quite a wide range. It may not even be an accurate range. We need to get more hard and fast statistics on that.

Ms Ramsey questioned the whereabouts of the document that was promised on 1 April. I am glad that the Minister clarified that issue. We now have a commitment from him that the document will come in May, which is good news. I am sure that, as he has delivered on all of his other promises on health during the past year, he will deliver on that as well. No pressure.

Mr McCallister knows an awful lot about childcare from his ruthless exploitation of the recent birth of his child. However, he raised the more serious issue of the need for strong financial support for those who are involved. I have been watching Pat Ramsey carefully over the past few months. I have noticed his ruthless campaign of written questions to the Minister on the issue. Every aspect of kinship care has been scrutinised through written questions to the Minister. That is what he is there to do. There is no doubt that he represents the strong lobby from his neck of the woods that I have also encountered. That has been very helpful in

producing additional information about kinship care in the formal sense. Two years ago, very few people in this Chamber would have even known about it. Therefore, I was pleased that Mr Ramsey was able to tease that information out.

Uniquely, he raised one very important issue, which is that, as far as I know, Kinship Care Northern Ireland has received no core funding from any trust, Department or government organisation. It has almost been an entirely voluntary effort, and it indicates just how successful it has been if it has received no funding for its campaign. One of the issues that I urge the Minister to pick up on is whether we should consider some form of core grant for the excellent work that that organisation is doing. I am not talking about vast amounts of money. A few thousand pounds would make the world of difference to how that organisation functions. I think that it has shown itself to be capable of using such money wisely and efficiently.

4.15 pm

Mr Ramsey also indicated the importance of public awareness and tried to increase the public's perception of this important issue. I will be very careful about what I say about Mr McCarthy, given the Speaker's earlier ruling. He made a very interesting and positive contribution to the Assembly, and I do not want to criticise him for one moment. He highlighted the importance of the event that was held in the Assembly on 22 February, which I and many others attended, and we heard, at first hand, the experiences of those involved in kinship care. I was particularly impressed by the contribution made by Kevin Wright at that very interesting meeting.

The Member for North Down Gordon Dunne highlighted the importance of the informal kinship care role. As usual, Mickey Brady gave a very interesting insight in his contribution. He has vast experience of income support and other benefits. He became the welfare rights officer in Ballybot House in Newry just before the Boer War. Certainly, I cannot remember a time when he was not the welfare rights officer in Newry. He brought a unique contribution in the Munby judgement, which was made in England, and he tried to tease out the implications of that judgement for Northern Ireland, which, of course, is another part of the United Kingdom. It is important that we assess court cases in other parts of Her Majesty's realm and decide

whether they are relevant to us, and I know that Mr Brady was very keen to do that.

The Minister alluded to that court decision, but I am not 100% clear whether it is binding on providers in Northern Ireland. It will be interesting to know whether that decision applies throughout the United Kingdom or whether it is discretionary and can be taken or left.

Pam Brown paid tribute to those involved in kinship care and emphasised the crucial work that they undertake. Michelle Gildernew, who is not with us, has made her return, phoenix-like, to the Chamber after her recent injury in the Dáil. If you insist on foreign travel, that is what happens to you. She emphasised another interesting point, which is the importance of kinship care in rural areas. Often, that can be forgotten about. In a rural area, that can be so crucial, because the trauma of moving a child who has suffered some terrible tragedy in their life from a rural community into some form of care home in a town or city could be absolutely traumatic. Again, in rural areas, I have found that the norm is for an aunt, uncle or grandparents to take on that role.

Paula Bradley made the point that informal care must not be a second-class option, and she made the useful interjection that more information must be provided to the community on the issue. I am glad that Brenda Hale raised this issue, and we have to face it square on: the fact that it is kinship care does not simply mean that those arrangements can escape the scourge of various types of child abuse. If a relative takes on that role, it usually means that the child is safe, but it is not automatically the case. Therefore, we cannot have such a blinkered view on kinship care that we ignore the risks, and, if there is any perception of risk, that cannot be an option for the child. I have to say that those issues are few and far between, but we have to be aware of them.

David McClarty was very supportive and said that everything must be done to avoid children being taken into formal care. The Minister made the point that the best interests of the child must be paramount. He also spoke of the problems relating to the costs to the carers, which are often borne with no recompense whatsoever. He made the very welcome announcement that the guidance and standards would be implemented in May.

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

Mr Wells: I thank everyone who took part; it was a very useful debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes and welcomes the growth of kinship care and acknowledges the valuable role it plays in providing care for the many children who cannot be raised by their parents; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to note the excellent and often invisible contribution made by kinship carers, to identify a number of key priorities and actions for their support and to consider amending the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 in support of kinship carers.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Counselling Services: East Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and, on this occasion, all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr Douglas: I am pleased to bring the Adjournment debate on counselling services in east Belfast to the Assembly. I thank the Minister and other colleagues for attending this late session, although it is not that late yet.

Yesterday morning, three local parents called to my office on the Newtownards Road. They were very distraught that needles used by illegal drug users had been found near their homes. That find was in addition to the discovery and seizure of needles in a play area close to Connswater shopping centre last Friday night. Before I go on to my main points, I pay tribute to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Belfast City Council for their rapid and professional response to what was, after all, a very dangerous and frightening situation for residents in the Connswater area.

I am not using that example solely to highlight the growing problem of drug abuse and the whole aspect of drug abuse with needles, because that is not the biggest problem in east Belfast. I certainly do not want to highlight it as a huge problem; it is one of the smaller problems, but a problem nonetheless. It is not about only drug abuse, but alcohol abuse and other addictions. With that growing problem of addiction there is a growing need for preventative work and support for cost-effective counselling services. Let me give an example: statistics given to me recently show that one in four people in Northern Ireland are affected by a mental health problem. The cost of mental ill health in Northern Ireland is approximately £1,680 a head, and investing in preventative psychological therapies, for example, would cost just £250 a head. It is, therefore, very much about preventative care as well.

When we look at what counselling is available currently in east Belfast, it is obvious that excellent work is being carried out by a number of community and voluntary organisations. I am sure my colleague Chris Lyttle would agree with me on that. Some sterling work is being carried out. However, it appears that that sterling work, much of it voluntary, is under-resourced, lacking in cohesion, and, at this time, there is no agreed strategy or plan, to my knowledge.

I want to put things in perspective. The current service provision includes East Belfast Community Counselling, which is based in inner east Belfast. It dedicates 95% of its service delivery to the local community of that area and currently works with 35 to 40 clients weekly. It does an excellent job in the area. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it survives not only on minimal grant funding, but client donations. It is the only voluntary and community organisation in the area working on the suicide prevention helpline, Lifeline. It has also been awarded a small contract with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to provide counselling sessions. All counsellors are members of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and adhere to its code of professional standards and ethics.

Pathways is another organisation. Its base is on the Newtownards Road. It provides counselling for loyalist ex-prisoners. People who have been in prison or have been involved in the conflict may, many years later, struggle with their past and with coming to terms with life outside prison. It is funded through Charter Northern Ireland. To my knowledge, it is the only counselling service in east Belfast funded under the Public Health Agency's Protect Life strategy.

There are other organisations, such as Anchor Counselling, which is very much a church-based organisation. It provides Christian counselling to anybody who comes to the Christian Fellowship Church on the Newtownards Road. Addiction Northern Ireland is a voluntary organisation operating in the area for those affected by addiction. It has been operating from its base on the Albertbridge Road for something like 24 years. Addiction Northern Ireland has seen a growth in demand for services in all locations, but it is interesting that the biggest growth in demand has been in east Belfast. We should take note of that.

An organisation outside east Belfast is New Life Counselling. It is a charity. Although it is based in north Belfast, it works in east Belfast and offers one-to-one free counselling services for children, young people, adults and families. It is funded through a range or cocktail of funding.

We also have the East Belfast Community Development Agency's health development and connections programme, which seeks to support local individuals, groups and community workers engaged in improving health and well-being. Finally, we have the East Belfast Partnership. It is involved in regeneration, but part of its remit is about tackling health inequalities.

That is just a snapshot of activity in east Belfast. In my constituency office, I meet people who are affected by stress, anxiety, depression, relationship breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, self-harming and suicidal thoughts and actions. We all remember last summer's rioting and disturbances in east Belfast, which led to trauma. A lot of people in the area fled their homes. Many of the people affected by that have had to receive counselling. Nearly a year later, they are still receiving that treatment. That is a new aspect for us in relation to the recent conflict.

For me, there is little doubt that a significant problem exists around the issue of mental health in east Belfast. I acknowledge that considerable efforts and successes have been made in regeneration, particularly through organisations such as the East Belfast Partnership, and we are talking about some of the most disadvantaged wards in east Belfast. However, there is a need to provide support for the emotional well-being of our local residents. It is clear to me that the area is under-resourced in terms of counselling and that there are insufficient services to help people in need of support.

The latest East Belfast constituency profile, which is from last September, shows that East Belfast is a constituency with an estimated 13.8% of people on prescribed drugs for mood and anxiety disorders. The Northern Ireland average is 11.5%. At a recent meeting in east Belfast on the Welfare Reform Bill, there were major concerns that various benefit cuts will exacerbate the problems around mental health and well-being; in particular, for those in the most disadvantaged areas. There is certainly a fear out there that the welfare reforms will have a major, negative impact on many communities, particularly those in disadvantaged areas. There

is a feeling in advice agencies and counselling services that their workload will definitely increase, and I certainly agree with them.

We need a defined strategy and clarity of vision to provide a joined-up service. It can be very confusing to work out who has responsibility at different levels. I suggest that we agree an area action plan to include all the current providers and to find out what level and type of counselling services are available in east Belfast.

I understand that a mapping exercise, commissioned by Belfast local commissioning group, for east Belfast counselling and support provision is under way.

4.30 pm

Finally, I hope that the debate will be the springboard for a more effective, efficient and proactive counselling service provision. That should lead to improved partnership working between providers, such as the various groups that are involved in counselling, the Public Health Agency and, indeed, the Minister's Department. Again, I thank the Minister and other Members for attending today.

Mr Copeland: I support the Adjournment topic and congratulate those who brought it forward. I endorse and underscore, in so far as it is in me, what Sammy said. I do not intend to go through the range of organisations that are involved or the statistics for the problem, because that would simply mean that we have both been reading the same briefing notes.

How do you judge a place? Do you judge it by its scenery? Do you judge it by its climate? Do you judge it by its industries, its roads or its infrastructure? Do you judge it by the cleanliness of its streets? Do you judge it by its education system? Or do you judge it by how it looks after those who are least capable of looking after themselves?

I know something of counselling, but I have never been a beneficiary of it myself — although it has been suggested to me on a number of occasions. My wife found counselling necessary shortly after being injured in a shooting incident while serving as a police officer. She eventually trained as a cognitive behavioural therapy counsellor, paying for that through the Police Rehabilitation Trust. She currently works in a number of institutions that are largely to do with bereavement and that are centred particularly

on cancer, which she herself survived. In many ways, she has made herself a receptacle for the unpalatable troubles of others, as have all those who put their head above the parapet and care enough to become involved in this as a profession — if profession is the right word. It is a profession that requires very high standards of training and dedication and a very large begging bowl when you go to get somebody to pay you for doing it. Those people have made themselves receptacles to such a degree that, in pursuance of the exercise of their skill, they have to attend supervision regularly so that, in some way, their own mental health can be protected from their efforts to protect others.

The problem does not exist solely in working-class districts. It is more prevalent there perhaps, but depression, black-dog days and potential thoughts of suicide and self-harm affect everyone in society. Indeed, Winston Churchill, one of the greatest wartime leaders of all time, was perpetually plagued through the darkest of days by deep, deep depression.

This morning at 3.00 am, I received a call from an unknown phone to my mobile. When I answered, a voice that I knew but could not place said, "Michael, I can't take this any more. I'm going to kill myself." I spent from 3.00 am until 7.30 am trying to work out who it might have been, before eventually establishing at 9.30 am that nothing had befallen the 20-year-old female. She is a product of the city and district of her birth, but she cannot yet find either a relevant place or slot in life, an outcome or something that gives her a reason to believe that she is special and can contribute. I know all the organisations that Sammy talked about.

East Belfast is peculiar in some ways. We have a very high proportion of ex-servicemen. There is a condition, post-traumatic stress disorder, which I know that many senior officers in the army do not believe exists. The Minister will recall that I have plagued him — I think that he would agree that that is the right word — with questions on post-traumatic stress disorder. We have a very high proportion of ex-servicemen in our community. That includes not only those who served in the locally raised units during the Troubles but those who currently serve in Iraq or Afghanistan or in any of the other corners of the earth where democracy has to be defended by force of arms. When the comradeship of the mess, the unity of the platoon and the guidance

of the officer have gone, some of those people find themselves in a lonely place.

One case in particular sticks in my mind: that of a soldier who was sitting in the back of a Land Rover many years ago preparing to go out on a patrol when his company quartermaster sergeant recognised him as someone with stores experience. He took him out of the vehicle and placed him in the stores, replacing him in the Land Rover with an 18-year-old who I believe was on his first day's duty. Twenty minutes later, the soldier was taken from the stores, put into a Land Rover and taken to the scene of an improvised explosive device. There was a hole in the ground, at the bottom of which was a red stain. That was pretty much all that was left of the Land Rover and the four people on board.

He broke down in our office recently, and I do not mean that he threw a hissy fit. He shook and sobbed. He could not understand why his source of income — employment and support allowance — had been removed on the basis of a test that was carried out in the absence of any medical records. He just walked out.

A burden falls on us as a society to do what can be done. As Sammy said, the cost of mental illness or depression — call it what you will — left unattended is around £1,680 a year, while spoken therapies cost £250. The difficulty with spoken therapy is that you cannot tell how well it is doing because you cannot tell how many drugs have been given. You cannot have a photograph taken at a nice, shiny building, and there are no instant fixes. However, I will tell you, as my wife tells me, it works. Not in all cases, but in enough cases to make the effort worthwhile.

Therapies have difficulties with the medical profession, which tends to look at non-chemical or non-physical interventions with a sideways gaze. We are building up long-term, massively disabling conditions in all sections of our community.

Mr Douglas rightly referred to welfare reform. I understand and accept the need for a realignment of the economy, as does his colleague the Minister for Social Development, but the difficulty is that it took 30 years to bomb and destroy our industries, communities and the streets that people came from. Now, because of a fiscal requirement in Westminster, we are being given the same treatment as everybody

else, disregarding the fact that it will impact here in a way that it will not do on the mainland.

Living with single-room rates and in houses of multiple occupancy are things that we do as students. I do not want to be prescriptive or make bland statements, but generally in Northern Ireland if you are by yourself and you reach 35 years of age, there may in some cases be a reason why. A suitable antidote to that is not to stick you in a house with a bathroom and kitchen that dear knows who is using, a common living room, and then, up the stairs, a bedroom of your own. That will simply reinforce the difficulties that were there to begin with. Sometimes I think that the people who come up with these policies need to go and experience what life is like in certain quarters.

I do not know whether what we are talking about is the solution, but I believe that we need to develop a strategy to establish at least whether it is worthwhile. I heard the Minister a few moments ago pledge financial assistance for kinship care, and that is laudable and supportive, but I ask about his travels through his admittedly empty coffers. Well, the coffers are very full, but there are many demands on them. I am not sure that we have ever adequately come to terms as a society with the long-term emotional effects of living on or near interfaces, spending every single day of your life thinking about your children playing in the back garden, your car parked out the front or every rattle in the roof. We need a

piece of work on the long-term effects of living in those locations for the folk who are living on them. I know many cases of people with absolutely impeccable character who, within six or seven months of moving home, have acquired a criminal record. Generally, the criminal record is rooted in the person taking the law into their own hands, because the law failed to take sufficient steps, in their terms, to protect them, their homes and their families. There are many questions. My view is that spoken therapies, the gentle hand of friendship and an emotional lifebelt will always work more satisfactorily than drugs or other therapies, which, in my view, can be very addictive. I support this. Thank you for your time.

Mr Lyttle: I, too, support this and thank Mr Sammy Douglas for securing the debate. Mental ill health is no respecter of party political background, and I have welcomed the opportunity to work with Mr Douglas at

constituency level. Indeed, I think that it is incumbent on all the MLAs for East Belfast to come together to work on the issue. Mr Douglas mentioned an area action plan and referred to some of the mapping exercises that are ongoing at the moment. It is my understanding that the East Belfast Partnership's health strategy manager, Linda Armitage, is overseeing some of that work. It has been my pleasure to redirect some groups to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's south and east Belfast mental health community of interest group; it is a bit of a long-winded title, which the group will maybe reconsider at some point in time. It is the working group that is bringing together groups from south and east Belfast to focus on the issue. Hopefully, the MLAs for the area can work together to support that work.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on what is a serious issue not just in east Belfast but across Northern Ireland. As we have heard, it is increasingly the case that many of us will have direct experience of mental ill health. I have close friends who are dealing with the issue at the moment. Indeed, I lost a close friend to suicide a while ago. He had exceptional abilities and a wide and diverse background, as has been mentioned, and I pay respect to him. It is true that, for many years, the issue of mental health has carried a stigma that has prevented people from accessing the help they need. I hope that the Assembly will play a leading role in defeating that unnecessary shame and in providing the resources to which people are fully entitled.

I think that it is important to base an examination of provision on evidence, and I would like to thank Assembly researcher Dr Lesley-Ann Black for her work in examining the extent of mental ill health in east Belfast compared with other constituencies in Northern Ireland. The facts about mental illness among people in Northern Ireland speak for themselves. As has been said, it is estimated that one in four people in the region will be affected by mental health problems at some point in their life. As Mr Copeland said, there is a difference in terms of mental health problems between Northern Ireland and England, Scotland or Wales, and consequently, incidence of such problems is 25% higher in Northern Ireland. That, of course, comes from having a legacy of violence and a divided, rather than a shared, society. I agree that there is a lot of work to be done in relation to dealing with unique interface challenges.

There is a range of indicators that allow us to examine the extent of the problem in east Belfast, and those have been mentioned throughout the debate today. Indicators such as self-harm admissions, anti-depression drug prescriptions and suicide rates show that east Belfast is in need of assistance in that area of provision. Statistics show that the east Belfast constituency has the third highest hospital admissions for self-harm, is the fourth highest dispenser of antidepressant drugs and has the joint second highest suicide rate of any constituency in Northern Ireland. I know that the increase in suicides is of serious concern to the Members present today and to the Assembly and that Minister Poots is committed to responding to that painful and difficult issue. It is clear that there can be no more painful consequence of mental ill health for any family than suicide. In mentioning that, I pay tribute to the work of the Survivors of Suicide organisation, under Bobby Cosgrove and Bobby Duffin, for the work that it does to highlight the need for assistance.

4.45 pm

There are approximately 1,000 patients with a mental illness on the GP register in east Belfast. Unfortunately, however, there appears to be a lack of available resources to cope with the situation at present. Mr Douglas mentioned the contact that we have had with New Life Counselling in the run-up to this debate. It is a charity that supports the emotional health and well-being needs of people through the provision of counselling and therapeutic services across Northern Ireland. It is quite worrying that, between April 2011 and March 2012, despite that organisation being based in north Belfast, it received a total of 120 referrals from east Belfast from 16 separate east Belfast GPs, along with self-referrals from people in the constituency. It is also worrying that people who availed themselves of New Life Counselling's services did so without there having been any proactive promotion of the charity's work in the constituency. I know that there are many other organisations that can bear testimony to the increasing demand.

There is, therefore, a serious need for high-quality psychological therapy services — Mr Copeland mentioned spoken therapies in counselling services — to be well organised, resourced and co-ordinated across east Belfast. The Bamford review identified the need for

improved access to services and for a more co-ordinated framework for provision to be developed. A good strategy was launched in 2010, but the budgetary reductions to its implementation have caused a lot of problems.

Early intervention, prevention and treatment across all ages have been referred to today, and it is important that we help everyone: mothers; children; young people; workers; older people; carers; and, indeed, people in the criminal justice system who have experienced unique challenges in life. Provision must be multi-agency, and the health service and the voluntary and community sector must have an opportunity to work together, as has been mentioned.

I definitely want to pay tribute to the many voluntary and community-based counselling organisations in east Belfast that are working in the most difficult of circumstances, with limited resources to improve the health and well-being of members of our community. Adequate support for that work would not only alleviate the pain and distress of mental ill health for individuals, families and communities but would prevent more major crises from occurring further down the line.

My party and I support the provision of community-based services that the Compton review has proposed, but those services have to be adequately resourced and organised. Support should be given to enable the health service and community and voluntary groups to work together, for example, to provide good communication so that people are aware of the range of services that is available — there is some doubt about the co-ordination of that communication at the moment — and to provide appropriate referral mechanisms and supervision pathways.

As Mr Copeland and Mr Douglas said, we know at first hand through the work in our offices that the economic downturn, welfare reform and other unique challenges in our constituency are having a negative impact on the health and well-being of our constituents. It is incumbent on us to lobby for those additional resources that we need. That, combined with the recent history of the Troubles and deep division, means that there is a clear need to increase the availability of high-quality counselling and psychotherapy services in east Belfast and across Northern Ireland. I sincerely hope that the Minister can respond positively to the work that is being done.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Mental health services should be of significant importance to us. Historically, investment in community mental health services in Northern Ireland has not kept pace with the rest of the UK, in spite of the fact that we have greater problems with mental health. It is estimated that one in four people will suffer from a medically identified mental illness during his or her lifetime. Mental ill health costs an estimated 3% to 4% of our gross domestic product, mainly through loss of productivity but also through the cost of healthcare and social security benefits. In 2010-11 in Northern Ireland, we spent £228 million on mental health services. That represents around 8% of the total budget spend on health and social care.

We had a number of key messages from Bamford on the prevention of mental ill health: the requirement for new mental incapacity legislation; a shift from hospitals to community-based services; the development of specialist services for children and young people, older people, those with addiction problems and those in the criminal justice system; and the need for an adequately trained workforce. Bamford envisaged that doing all of those things would require a 10- to 15-year programme of reform and a doubling of the healthcare budget to approximately £400 million per annum.

A ministerial group was set up to drive that forward and to monitor the broad strategic changes. That group is chaired by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Bamford task force in the health and social care sector was set up in late 2009, and it is jointly chaired by the HSC board and the PHA. The Bamford monitoring group was established in September 2009 and is led by the Patient and Client Council (PCC).

I thank Mr Douglas for bringing this Adjournment debate to the House. There have been three very valuable contributions, and I hope to respond to the points that Members raised. First, I confirm that I recognise the need for and the value of counselling to overcome a number of difficulties that people face here, such as support with family relationships, dealing with bereavement and helping individuals cope with mental health problems, trauma or overcoming addictions. Part of the Bamford vision was to improve access to talking therapies, and a strategy for the development of psychological

therapies in Northern Ireland was published in June 2010 and is underpinned by an additional £4.4 million a year. The Health and Social Care (HSC) Board chairs a multidisciplinary group that is taking forward the implementation of the strategy.

The main funding streams for counselling services are: the HSC Board for those organisations that provide the services regionally; the Public Health Agency for those organisations that provide services in relation to public health, such as suicide prevention, trauma, drug or alcohol abuse and teenage pregnancy; and the trusts for organisations that provide local services in areas such as bereavement, pregnancy, self-esteem, sexuality, relationships, suicide and other mental health issues. It is for the Health and Social Care Board and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to —

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister give way, please?

Mr Poots: Yes, certainly.

Mr Copeland: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your graciousness in this matter. Will you agree, sir, that post-traumatic stress disorder is particularly prevalent in certain sections of the Northern Irish community, given the Troubles and the continued service in the military? Do you share the slight concern that appropriate treatment for soldiers tends to be given at Hollybush on the mainland? As yet, we have not developed a suitable resource in Northern Ireland to tackle that problem satisfactorily.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for raising that point. I agree that there has been a strong association with the military in Northern Ireland. The problems that we have currently are not yet, to a great extent, directly related to Afghanistan. A lot of the problems relate to Iraq, and a lot of the problems relate to the Troubles. Post-traumatic stress does not normally materialise within months or a few short years. Generally, it is considerably further down the line, and we have a considerable problem in that respect. I acknowledge that that is an issue that we need to communicate about to identify the best solutions.

Just yesterday, we had a fairly lengthy discussion about the use of drugs in dealing with mental health. That meeting included the Chief Medical Officer, and the general conclusion was that drugs help but do not cure. It is the talking therapies that make

the difference. Do we simply want to shelve the problem, or do we wish to deal with the problem? If we wish to deal with the problem, there is a requirement to invest further in talking therapies. How we do that is a very significant challenge, but I recognise from the conversations that I have been having that that is where the best opportunities lie. You need to stack that up against what I referred to: the loss to our gross domestic product through lack of productivity, people not working, people receiving income support and all of that. That also happens in a range of other areas across the health sector.

It is for the Health and Social Care Board and trusts to consider the needs of local populations when commissioning counselling services. Counselling can have many benefits and can help to minimise the negative impact that the issues that I described earlier have on individuals, families and children. Practitioners in counselling organisations should be qualified in the therapies that they provide. Many people take on the mantle of being counsellors without having had training to support that, and we believe that they should be registered with a recognised body such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and be appropriately supervised. Those key indicators offer commissioners the confidence that the services that they acquire are safe and are delivered by qualified practitioners to recognised standards.

I will mention adult mental health services. The Northern Ireland Community Addiction Service, the Forum Against Substance Abuse and New Life Counselling all provide counselling services in east Belfast, and the trust currently expends around £198,000 on adult counselling in east Belfast. The Victims' Commission also funds counselling services for those affected by the Troubles and for those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and I encourage Members to send people in that direction at this point. My Department also provides funding for a number of regional organisations such as Relate NI, Accord NI and Lighthouse Ltd, which provide counselling services across Northern Ireland.

I will turn to Members' contributions. Sammy Douglas talked about prevention. We recognise the value of counselling services and acknowledge the benefits of locally based counselling services. It is for the Belfast Trust

to assess the value of the services provided and to fund those services accordingly. In our opinion, psychological therapy services are a cost-effective alternative to prescription medicines for some mental health problems, and a strategy of development of counselling services is being implemented by the Health and Social Care Board. That encompasses the statutory and voluntary services.

Mr Copeland spoke of the strategy for the development of psychological therapy services and recognised the benefits of counselling for people with psychological conditions or mental health problems as well as for carers and people who are socially isolated, including older people. He also raised the issue of ex-service personnel, members of the forces and veterans, and there is much more evidence around today, including National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance, on the benefits of talking therapies.

Mr Lyttle raised a number of issues, including that of the voluntary sector. Once again, we want to say that it is very active in removing the stigma that is associated with mental illness. That is important.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Poots: Certainly. The aim of psychological therapy services is to provide a range of services on a multi-agency and multi-sectoral basis. Once again, I thank Mr Douglas for bringing the debate today. We will take the matter seriously.

Adjourned at 4.59 pm.



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