

Official Report (Hansard)

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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 March 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. What are the arrangements for the vetting and oversight of events that take place within the precincts of this Building? I refer to the incident of indecent exhibitionism that took place on Saturday night within the confines of the Building, which I think does nothing for its standing. I want to know who has responsibility for vetting and overseeing that an acceptable standard pertains to all events held in this House when events are organised: is it your responsibility, is it the Assembly Commission's responsibility, or is it the responsibility of the sponsoring Members of the event?

Mr Speaker: First, I thank the Member for his point of order. It is not a matter for the House, and it is certainly not the responsibility of the Speaker as to the events that happen in Parliament Buildings. Let me say to the whole House and to Members that it is the responsibility of Members who sponsor events in the House. They need to be held to account. The Member will know the process as to how events are sponsored in Parliament Buildings. So, that is where it rests: with the Members who sponsored these particular events. I say to the whole House that Members need to take responsibility for events that they sponsor in the House now and in the future.

Ms Ruane: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Go raibh maith agat. Can the Speaker inform us whether papers with page 3 pictures are allowed in the House, papers in which there are nude pictures of women that enable their objectification? I wonder whether the person who made the previous point of order is concerned about those pages.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am trying to make sure that this does not turn into a full-blooded debate on events in Parliament Buildings. I would say to the Member on that further point of order that the newspapers that Members read in the House is not the responsibility of the House or the Speaker.

Matter of the Day

Kelly Gallagher: Paralympic Skiing Gold

Mr Speaker: Mr Seán Rogers has been given leave to make a statement on Kelly Gallagher's gold medal success, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I remind Members that, if they wish to be called, they should continually rise in their place. All other Members will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter. Members know by now that I will take no points of order on any particular issue or on any other matter that needs to be discussed. If that is clear, I call Seán Rogers, who has three minutes to present the subject matter.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to praise the new golden girl from Northern Ireland. I raise this Matter of the Day to officially mark the news that Kelly Gallagher has won a Paralympic gold medal in the winter games in Sochi with her victory in the visually impaired super-G class.

The 28-year-old from Bangor in County Down and her guide, Charlotte Evans, were first on the Rosa Khutor course in Sochi and clocked 1 minute 28.72 seconds. Kelly has achieved great results on the international stage: she was a silver medallist in the super-G at the 2013 world championships in La Molina and fourth in the giant slalom in the Vancouver Paralympics in 2010.

As someone who has tried the ski slopes many times, I know what a challenge it is when you have all your faculties. Kelly, who has a form of albinism, a condition that affects the pigments of her hair, skin and eyes, only started skiing on the spur of the moment whilst holidaying in Europe with her family when she was 17 years of age. Kelly has been working with her guide, Charlotte, since 2010, and we must congratulate them both on their hard work, which led to Kelly getting her Paralympic gold.

There is a strong message here for us all. This is a great day for everyone, but especially for people who live with a disability. The message is simply that whatever the adversity, keep working through it and you will achieve your goals. On behalf of the SDLP, I congratulate Kelly, her guide, Charlotte, and all the team that put together this great success. I wish her every success in her remaining competitions in Sochi. I am sure that I will have the support of all Members, and I look forward to welcoming the County Down girl home with her gold medal.

Mr Weir: Sometimes, critics of the House accuse us of going downhill, but today we can celebrate the achievement of somebody going downhill. As someone who also submitted a Matter of the Day, I am possibly in the slightly unfortunate position of being the silver medallist in this race, but it is a subject on which the whole House can unite.

Eighteen months ago, during the London Olympics, we watched with pride as our local rowers in particular, Mr Campbell and the Chambers brothers, won medals. It was great to see Kelly Gallagher go one better and achieve not just a gold medal but the first ever British Winter Paralympic Games gold medal. I was particularly proud to see that it was not only a Northern Ireland woman but someone from my home town of Bangor. Tribute should also be paid, as Mr Rogers did, to Charlotte Evans, her guide, who had to combine the exertion and skill of going downhill in the slalom with guiding partially sighted Kelly.

There is no doubt that the winning of a sporting medal, particularly in the Olympics, does not happen overnight but is the result of many years of hard work, dedication and, to use a sporting term, "bouncebackability" when there are setbacks. At the weekend, Kelly was probably disappointed to finish sixth in the downhill, but she showed that she was able to put that behind her and had the strength of resolve to achieve the gold medal. It is especially significant that she faced not just the pressures and difficulties of competing in sport but had the courage, as someone partially sighted, to compete in the quite dangerous sport of skiing.

Unlike Mr Rogers, I have never had the guts, or maybe the stupidity, to try to ski down a hill. I have done it metaphorically, possibly, but not from a practical point of view. Given the inherent dangers, that level of courage is to be celebrated. Mention was made of other events at the weekend, and it is appropriate that, in the week of International Women's Day, people

who are disabled have a positive role model and, indeed, all of us in Northern Ireland have a positive female role model who can act as an inspiration. So, I hope that a united voice goes out from the Assembly today saying, "Well done Kelly, you have done us all proud".

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an deis an moladh seo a phlé inniu. I thank the Member for bringing the topic to the Chamber today. Indeed, I associate myself with the comments of the two Members who spoke previously in paying tribute to Kelly Gallagher.

Downhill skiing and winter sports in the round are incredibly dangerous and require great courage. How much more courage must be needed when you cannot see where you are going and have to be guided? Kelly Gallagher represents two of the groups that are least represented in sport, namely the disabled and, of course, women. I hope that she will be a role model to encourage others to take part in sport. She had a disappointing start on Saturday, and it was great this morning to see her coming down in 1 minute 28.72 seconds. It is wonderful that she has won the first gold medal, and, although she was representing Britain, she was very much representing all of us as well. So, I offer my congratulations and those of my party to Kelly and to Charlotte Evans as well.

Mr McGimpsey: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I join with colleagues in congratulating Kelly Gallagher on what is a tremendous achievement for an individual from Northern Ireland in winning a gold medal at the winter Paralympics in Sochi. Considering that it is a discipline in which very high speeds are involved and, therefore, a high element of personal risk and personal danger for competitors, the fact that she is visually impaired speaks volumes for her courage as well as her training. It also speaks volumes for her confidence in her trainer, who supports her, and for the sort of support that must have come from her family. All that has come together to create a tremendous achievement that every one of us in Northern Ireland can take great pride in, namely a gold medal for Britain coming from County Down. I congratulate her.

Mr McCarthy: It gives me great pleasure, like all my colleagues, to congratulate Kelly Gallagher, Charlotte and the team for bringing gold back to Northern Ireland. She comes from our neighbouring council area in Bangor, County Down, which is soon to be taken over by Ards Borough Council. It is good to see

someone from the locality being successful. I was on Ards Borough Council for 20-odd years and served as the sports development chairman. We put a lot of finance and encouragement into sport in particular. It is a real pleasure to see her collect gold, along with Martyn Irvine, who also recently collected gold. We congratulate Kelly and her team for bringing gold back to Northern Ireland.

Mr Poots: This is a great success story following on from the success story of the Paralympics, where Northern Ireland again excelled. It is absolutely fantastic that a young woman from Northern Ireland with a disability is out there flying the flag. I spoke this morning to Dr Janet Gray, who was an official mentor for her, and she is very hopeful that there are more medals to come our way through Kelly. I offer my congratulations to her and her team for a wonderful effort. We are very proud of what she has achieved.

12.15 pm

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a thabhairt do Kelly Gallagher agus Charlotte Evans. I join everybody else in congratulating Kelly and Charlotte. We are very proud of Kelly; she has done this island proud.

As many Members said, she has a disability but did not let that get in her way. She is a professional sportsperson, and what she has done is tremendous. In a previous life, I was a professional tennis player and was very proud to wear the tracksuit of Ireland. I know how hard it is to achieve the limited achievements that I had as a sportsperson without a disability. I can only imagine what it must have been like for Kelly and Charlotte.

Maith thú. Is iontach an rud a rinne tú. What she has done is absolutely fantastic, and I wish her all the best in the coming days.

Mr Easton: I would like to echo the congratulations of the House and those of the DUP for the achievements of Kelly Gallagher. I understand that she has won other medals that Mr Rogers may not be aware of. She won the gold medal in the slalom in the Europa Cup and the IPC World Championships. So, she has a vast pedigree of competition.

This is the first gold medal that Team GB has won in a winter Paralympics, in the many years since 1992. That puts the achievements of Kelly Gallagher into perspective. I understand

that she is funded by Sport NI and gets support from Sports Institute Northern Ireland and Disability Sports NI. We would like to thank them for their support of Kelly Gallagher.

I am very proud, not just because she comes from Northern Ireland but more so because she comes from Bangor. I certainly hope that North Down Borough Council will take that into consideration and, perhaps, a civic reception will be coming her way.

Assembly Business

Public Petition: Crumlin Supports Shared Education

Mr Speaker: Mr Danny Kinahan has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

Mr Kinahan: I am here to present a petition that calls on the Minister of Education to create a shared management post-primary school in Crumlin, with a seamless transition from Crumlin Integrated College to the new type of school in August/September 2015. I welcome some members of the pupils' council and teachers who are in the Public Gallery.

Many Members may appreciate that there were problems a while ago in the school and that it was losing pupils. We then had the ill-conceived area-planning initiative and the ill-thought-out development plan that led to a further loss of pupils. However, the school set its heart on staying alive and when it was set on the path for closure, despite an agreed way forward, which was not followed up, but which included parents, teachers, churches, governors and the North Eastern Education and Library Board all doing their work, they decided to close the school.

Some 1,100 pupils leave Crumlin every morning to go to schools in Belfast and Lisburn at a cost of £795,000. The community in Crumlin is some 5,500 and is mixed, so it is the ideal location for a shared school. The school is now outperforming most of its rivals and is not just flourishing academically but is used by many community groups in the evening. It is the heart of the community.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has set up a working party to find a shared solution and is in the middle of that at the moment. The parents, pupils, teachers and governors all believe that the school should

survive and want that to be the case. Today, you have a petition of just over 1,000 names, all of whom believe in and want to see that future. We have President Obama, the UK, Ireland and everyone else watching us and wanting shared education. Let us make sure that we deliver it.

There is a meeting next Wednesday in Room 277 at 1.00 pm for any MLAs who want to listen to the school. I present the petition. Thank you.

Mr Kinahan moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for the petition. I will send it to the Minister of Education, and I will send a copy to the Chair of the Education Committee. Before we proceed to the next item of business, I wish to advise the House that there appears to be a technical problem with the amplifying system in the Chamber. Members might wish to check the progress of business in the Chamber in some other way until it is operating properly in the House. We are working on it.

Executive Committee Business

Carrier Bags Bill: Final Stage

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

That the Carrier Bags Bill [NIA 20/11-15] do now pass.

Members will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to rehearse the provisions of the legislation in detail. I will, however, remind Members that the main purpose of this important Bill is to extend the carrier bag levy to low-cost reusable bags.

As I have noted previously, the levy on single-use bags has been embraced by retailers and consumers alike and has generated significant reductions in bag usage. In the first five years of its operation, the levy could avoid the unnecessary use of up to one billion single-use bags in Northern Ireland. I am also delighted that significant amounts of money are being raised by the levy for environmental projects at community level across the North. However, the job is only half done. The Department had always anticipated that the levy on single-use bags would generate an increase in the sales of low-cost reusable bags. Indeed, such an increase would be welcome news if those bags were being actively reused to their full potential. However, early estimates suggest that the rate of increase is much, much higher than anticipated. I do not want to see frequent purchases of any type of bag; rather, I want to see all bags being reused as much as possible.

It is with that in mind that, from 19 January 2015, the Bill will extend the levy to reusable carrier bags with a retail price of less than 20p. That is intended to prevent them from being discarded prematurely and becoming the new throwaway bag. The extension of the levy should discourage new bag purchases and instead encourage their reuse, maximising the benefit to the environment.

I want to mention one other aspect of the Bill. I have consistently emphasised my commitment to keeping charging arrangements under review. The Bill as introduced, therefore, contained a provision requiring the Department to review charging arrangements after a three-year period and to lay a report before the Assembly. I subsequently brought forward an amendment to the Bill at Consideration Stage, which allows the Department, at any time, to

review whether any description of carrier bag should attract the requirement to charge. Finally, at Further Consideration Stage, an amendment was passed that requires a report to be prepared on whether any type of biodegradable bags should be exempt from the levy. I hope that the inclusion of those provisions will reassure Members that the Department is committed to ensuring that the levy remains fit for purpose and can be altered to reflect changing circumstances.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the role of the Environment Committee in getting us to where we are today. The Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 3 June 2013 and completed its Committee Stage on 26 November with the production of the Committee's report. I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to thank the Chair of the Environment Committee and the other members of the Committee for their detailed scrutiny of the Bill and for the recommendations in their report. I am glad to say that I was able to take those recommendations forward as amendments at Consideration Stage. In addition, I will take this opportunity to thank Members for their very helpful contributions to the debate on the Bill throughout its passage through the Assembly.

Finally, I will confirm that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton, has recommended the Bill under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That means that a cross-community vote will be required. I urge Members to support the legislation.

I remind Members that the Bill does not introduce charging for paper bags; indeed, it has no significance for such bags. Paper bags are already subject to the levy under existing legislation and have been since April last year.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, the Bill is sound and effective legislation, which, I believe, will help to achieve even more significant reductions in the number of carrier bags in circulation. I commend the Carrier Bags Bill to the House.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): On behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome the Final Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill. Once again, I thank the departmental officials and the Minister for the close working relationship that we maintained throughout the passage of the Bill. That helped to ensure that the Committee scrutinised the Bill thoroughly and was able to come to agreement with the Department on proposed amendments. I also take this opportunity to thank the Committee staff who

have worked hard on facilitating our scrutiny of the legislation.

I will not go into too much detail today as I have outlined the Committee's views at previous stages, but I will briefly outline a few of the issues we discussed.

Members' main concern related to the Department's original implementation date for the second phase of charging to be introduced by the Bill, which was planned for April 2014. The Committee believed that that was too soon after the initial charging for bags, which began only in April 2013. Members felt that it did not give the Department enough time to assess the impact of the first phase and to instigate a widespread communication campaign so that consumers were aware of the introduction of the new charging arrangements.

I therefore welcome the fact that further charges will not come into effect until 19 January 2015 and hope that that will give the Department time to deliver a clear communications strategy to the public that will be vital to the effective implementation of the Bill. The Department needs to make best use of the additional time now available to it before the extension of the levy to ensure that its communication campaign is timely and appropriately focused. The campaign must build on existing support from consumers, and it should be underpinned by an understanding that bags for life must be reused as long as possible and that they will be replaced by retailers free of charge.

I also take this opportunity to urge the Department to give further consideration in the future to options such as the introduction of an outright ban under certain conditions or a move towards biodegradable bags and the use of a grading system.

As we know, a significant portion of the proceeds from the carrier bags levy is being allocated to the challenge fund to enable communities and organisations to deliver new local environmental projects across Northern Ireland. It is vital that the proceeds from carrier bag charging continue to be used to support local environmental projects.

On behalf of the Committee, I am pleased to support the Bill.

Mrs Cameron: As Deputy Chair of the Environment Committee, I am pleased to support the Bill at its Final Stage. I believe that the Bill allows us to reaffirm our intention to promote and embrace environmentally friendly

policies whilst encompassing a common-sense and practical approach to the issue.

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

In general terms, the Bill is an example of good devolved government. It has enjoyed broad public support and has, in fact, changed behaviours. To my mind, that has to be regarded and desired as an outcome of good policy. Ten years ago, not many of us would have forecast that we would have a range of coloured bins at home as well as individual recycling baskets for other domestic materials. Now, that is the norm and is accepted as good practice by most householders — even if I and, I am sure, others here need constant reminders of what to put out on what day. Equally, the practice of having cupboards and cars full of plastic bags is seemingly changing to the more environmentally friendly approach of using reusable bags.

12.30 pm

Although there may be differing views on the production methods of some types of bags used, not many will disagree that the overall impact of the policy is to be welcomed. It is welcome not just for its practical and economic benefits but, just as importantly, for the continued removal of plastic waste from our rivers and hedges and an improving habitat for our wildlife. That is vital as we seek to fulfil our environmental responsibilities.

I look forward to the Committee and the Assembly continuing to develop further improvements and policies along the lines of those contained in the Bill. When it is easy to find things that divide us, we must be mindful of the growing number of people across all our communities who want us to do more practical things to support the environment and the economy. I believe that the Carrier Bags Bill is one such measure that we can all support.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an Bhille agus ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I speak in favour of the Bill and have a couple of points to make. I hope that the community will embrace this legislation in the same way in which it embraced the first piece of legislation. Perhaps the Minister will touch on this, but we need a good communications strategy that properly gets the message out to consumers to ensure that they carry on this practice. It is a good Bill. The Bill will bring us some way forward with our

environmental targets, good practice and good housekeeping.

I welcome the introduction of a review, which was agreed at the previous legislative stage. I hope that the Committee will be kept informed. I hope that the review of bag usage is brought forward and that the target is met.

Another key point made at the previous stage concerned the effect on companies. I would like the Minister to commit to a procedure whereby, if the legislation's introduction will have a major impact on companies, we are mindful of that. We do not want to introduce legislation that will impact on companies and cause job losses. I know that there will be an element of that, but we need to ensure that, in bringing forward any legislation, we recognise that there may be the impact. In his winding-up speech, the Minister may touch on what he intends to do.

Finally, I thank the Committee staff who worked on the Bill with us and the departmental officials and the Minister for bringing the Bill forward.

Mr Elliott: When you get to this stage of a Bill, there is little more to be said. I look forward to the report on biodegradable bags, which was proposed and agreed at the previous legislative stage. It will be interesting to establish whether we can relax the levy on paper bags or other types of biodegradable bags, especially in the light of the fact that the only research that we have been working with is the 2011 research paper that indicated that paper bags are very environmentally unfriendly. I hope that we will see detailed research in the report that is produced.

We had a good discussion in Committee throughout the process. I was pleased that the Department, after its early indications that it would have a baseline of 40p for a reusable bag, has reduced that to 20p, which is much more practical and realistic.

So, I commend the Minister and the Department for taking on board those views and moving with what was, I believe, a much more realistic view from the wider community. Again, I look forward to the development of this overall proposal around not only plastic bags but reusable bags and carrier bags, because I do not think that it will stop here. I think that, in another year or two, you will see us back here maybe trying to change some of the legislation again around this. I do not think that this is a final proposal, and I foresee much more coming this way.

Mr Weir: I support the Bill at Third Reading. In many ways, this Bill is on the previous legislation and regulations regarding the charging for carrier bags, and I suppose, if we are being honest, we know that we are leaping into the unknown to a slight degree, as was the case a few years ago with the original charging regime. I think that there is a good intuitive logic that this will improve things. Indeed, when we took that step three or four years ago, there was not a particularly strong or clear-cut evidential basis, but, undoubtedly, it was taken with a desire to remove as many carrier bags, particularly single-use plastic bags, as possible.

There have been some unforeseen circumstances that, in part, have led to this legislation. A switch towards the use of low-cost reusable bags was the gap in the market that has had to be plugged. There is no doubt that the overall impact of the carrier bags levy has been very positive, particularly from an environmental point of view, from the point of view of generating income and also from the point of view of ensuring that we remove large numbers of those bags from circulation. I think that we can all welcome that.

Similarly, as we look ahead to the impact of this legislation, part of the slight degree of concern is that, inevitably, there will not be an absolutely clear-cut evidence path regarding how precisely this will impact. To be fair, there is no way around that, however, intuitively, we can see this potentially bringing very positive advantages.

From what we are left with in the finished draft of the legislation, I commend the Department and the Committee, both of which worked fairly well with the industry to ensure that practical arrangements were being put in place that would then leave something that was workable. Mr Elliott mentioned the movement from the initial proposal of a 40p threshold to it now being effectively 19 pence and under. I think that that is a much more sensible approach, and I welcome the position of the Department and the Minister in doing that. Similarly, there was flexibility over the initial proposals that talked about a 10p charge rather than a 5p charge. When genuine concerns were raised, particularly by supermarkets and shops, that a lead-in time would be required to implement this, to be fair to the Department, it showed a high level of flexibility in providing a practical timescale.

As others mentioned, there is a greater challenge here. The initial message with the first carrier bag levy was that it was specifically and purely targeted at single-use bags. This

has obviously been extended, and for sensible reasons, to cheap reusable bags. Obviously, there is a much greater message of education that needs to be put across on this because, as Members said throughout the debate and, indeed, at earlier stages, there is a bit more of a counter-intuitive quality to that. Therefore, there is a strong need to educate the public about why this is being done. I think that the Assembly showed flexibility in agreeing to the amendment looking at the issue of producing a report on biodegradability and its impact. I think that that will be useful.

As we move ahead, it is important that we are taking the right steps with this legislation. Also, we have put in place two key measures to ensure that there is a degree of monitoring of this to ensure that what we are putting in place is fit for purpose. First, as I mentioned, there is the report on the specific issue of biodegradability. Secondly, there is a separate review looking at the wider issues of implementation. From a logical and intuitive point of view, I think that all of us in this House believe that this is the right direction of travel, but we need to ensure that what happens in practice matches the intentions behind this legislation. The report and the review will give us that opportunity to ensure that we can look back on this from an evidence base and see whether there are any adjustments that we will need to make, perhaps in two or three years, to this scheme to ensure that it is fit for purpose. In general, I think it is a positive step forward, and I welcome the Bill at Third Reading.

Mr Durkan: I thank Members for the useful comments they have made during today's debate. I will very briefly respond to the main points that have been raised. First of all, I reiterate my thanks to the Chair of the Environment Committee, Ms Anna Lo, but also to Committee members and, indeed, Committee staff. Ms Lo outlined the concerns that had been voiced in Committee about when the charges and changes were to be introduced. I was responsive to those concerns, agreeing with the Committee to delay the date until next January to facilitate retailers' preparation.

Mrs Cameron hailed the legislation as a success of devolved government and pointed to other undoubted environmental advances that we have made in recent years. I look forward to working with the Committee to continue making progress in that field.

Mr Boylan emphasised the necessity of a good communications strategy for the implementation of this phase of the legislation, and I agree

entirely. Indeed, that is part of the rationale for delaying the implementation until next January. We do have a communications campaign planned and will work with other parties on that communications strategy to maximise its reach and ensure best value for money. He pointed out — I suppose it is fairly obvious — that we do not want to introduce legislation that is going to result in jobs being lost. That should be factored into, or at least considered in, all legislation through economic impact assessments, but, as Environment Minister, I have to prioritise the protection of the environment.

Mr Elliott said — I do not know if it was out of hope or fear — that he suspects that this is not the end of it and that we may well be back here in a year or two years on similar grounds. I hope that we are and I am currently exploring other options around items such as bottles and, as you may have heard, election posters. I also thank Mr Weir for his positive contribution.

From the contributions of all Members today, it is evident that, thus far, the levy has been a success, and I believe that it will continue to be. It has had its knockers, but so does everything that happens up here, much to Mr Allister's chagrin. The success of the levy to date is evident to everyone in the reduction in the number of bags that we see tangled in our hedgerows or floating around our streets. Passing the legislation today will enable us to build on its success, to make our streets cleaner and our society greener. I thank the House for its support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members once more that section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 applies and cross-community support is required.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Carrier Bags Bill [NIA 20/11-15] do now pass.

Private Members' Business

Women in Politics

Ms Fearon: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the lack of female representation in politics and public life; further recognises the positive outcomes that result in tackling this inequality, when support and training programmes are put in place to encourage more female candidates to stand in elections; and calls for the introduction of a training and support programme to encourage more female candidates to stand for election.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss what is a very important issue. Although 52% of the population is female, women hold only 18% of elected positions on this island. Of 108 MLAs, only 21 are female; that is 19%, and it is not good enough. The Assembly Chamber is in no way representative of the society that we live in. If it were the other way round, there is no way that it would be tolerated. Women have been failed by the political system. In 2014, we are still under-represented in politics, public life and business. Politics remains an unfriendly environment for women, a reality that benefits no one.

12.45 pm

For centuries, women have been assigned roles in society by a dominant patriarchy. We can source the wrongful presumptions of what a woman should do and be in 21st-century Ireland to several influential institutions, from the unchallenged and unparalleled control that the Churches exerted on Irish women to the perpetually demeaning portrayal of women drummed into society by the media.

The media provide society with what is supposed to be an unbiased representation of the facts. How can we pursue true gender equality when women are consistently objectified and stereotyped in very dangerous ways? The media circulate such limiting portrayals of women and female interests. You can open any publication that is geared towards a female audience and be sure to find its pages filled with idle celebrity gossip, fashion tips and weight loss advice; all that before you even look through the plethora of good household guides that sit on shop shelves. The same can be said for the unnecessary women's sections that are found in a lot of mainstream newspapers; 'The Irish News' is particularly bad for that. Quite

frankly, it is demeaning to women that we have been reduced to this. We should be angry that our intelligence has been belittled and our interests characterised as though we were Stepford wives.

Very early on, girls get the message that their image is what is most important and that their value and worth depend on how they look. Equally, men get the message that that is what is important about women. That message is now inescapable, with the Internet, social media and TV. Is it any wonder that teenage girls feel more powerless than ever?

The number one concern among young women is body image. In the past 25 years, depression and eating disorders have increased by 70%. A recent study showed that over 25% of girls do not raise their hand in class because of unhappiness about their appearance. That is a tragically sad reflection of the society that we live in.

Girls are told that being strong, smart and accomplished is not enough, and women around the world are striving for an unattainable ideal of beauty, which is a direct consequence of institutionalised patriarchy. When society views women in such a way, it has huge impacts on the gender make-up of public life.

We cannot ignore the political economy of the media. Sex sells, and we are told to just accept that; women are objectified and girls are seen as objects and conditioned to see themselves as objects. Women are portrayed as things, and turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step in justifying violence against that person, which has resulted in a huge rape culture. We see that clearly in how sex crimes are treated by the police and how rape prevention strategies are directed at women and girls but not at men. Victim blaming and victim shaming are all too common. That would not be the case if women had their role in decision-making.

Given the role that the media play in shaping public opinion and how society views women, it is crucial that women have a key role in decision-making to effect change. We need to create the conditions in society to allow women in leadership positions to be seen as the social norm. The lack of women at the top cements the age-old image of what leadership looks like. This has resulted in the perception that the Assembly is too male, too pale and too stale. It only adds to the list of deterrents that already exist and could potentially stifle the aspirations of future generations of women.

Is it any wonder that women get turned off by politics or this place? I could spend the whole debate detailing the ins and outs of every sexist comment and joke that has been made to me, and that is just to me, never mind the other women. It is just as well that people do not hear what happens in other parts of the Building. It is not OK to comment on our clothes. It is not OK to call someone a silly little girl — and that was not directed at me. It is not OK to talk about your power over young women in the Chamber. It is not OK to talk about our appearance, whether it is body shape, legs or otherwise. It is not OK to make sexist jokes across Committee tables because — news flash — they are not funny anyway; I often wonder whether people realise that Hansard is reporting everything. Most of all, it is really not OK that it seems to be tolerated. The majority of people here do not bat an eyelid. If you were to replace the word "sexist" with "racist" in all this, there would be sheer uproar. Sexism has to be taken more seriously by this institution and by political parties.

Political parties must do more to encourage women. Very few people break into politics without party support. All too often, women who are considering standing as a candidate come up against old-fashioned and sexist attitudes to the role of women in public life.

The media need to change, because women often find themselves subject to the kind of media attention that men never receive, with their views given little attention compared with their appearance. A perfect example of that was the coverage given to Meghan O'Sullivan's recent visit here, when her shoes and outfits were given more media attention than her PhD.

Failing to involve women in shaping our economy is a huge waste of potential talent, not to mention unjust, given that austere economic decisions disproportionately affect women. Economic inequality between the sexes is a major problem. Women are more likely to be employed in low-paid, part-time work and head a single-parent household. They are more likely to have fewer financial assets and live in poverty, especially in older age. At the same time, women's unpaid labour is worth billions of pounds to the economy every year. Unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, contribute billions every year. Women in work and business also contribute massively to the economy and its growth and are critical to its success. The recession has made life difficult for all of us, but a growing body of evidence shows that it has had a disproportionate effect on women. Therefore, it is only right and proper that women should have their place in

decision-making. Underutilising the skills and talents of any section of society makes little common sense, let alone economic sense. Time and time again, equal societies have been proven to work and perform better for everyone.

The most effective way to make that a reality is to introduce quotas. There are, I know, a lot of different opinions on this. Some say that they are unnecessary; others that they are offensive to women. Another popularly held misconception is that we should just continue to elect the best person for the job — I am trying not to laugh as I say "continue to". However, those criticisms would be true only if we were already on a level playing field, which we clearly are not. The North has a population of around 1.5 million. Are we expected to believe that, in that population, there are not 54 intelligent, capable and articulate women who are right for the role of MLA? That is complete nonsense. Quotas are the quickest and most effective way to ensure an equal number of men and women, and they force the break-up of elite circles of power. Allowing women in power to act as positive role models would encourage more women to take the leap. Quotas do not, as I have often heard said, discriminate against men; they are simply a way to correct existing discrimination.

Not all parties agree on gender quotas, which is why the motion calls for the introduction of training and support programmes to encourage women. For the reasons already outlined, confidence is a major issue. Coming into a very male-dominated environment can be daunting. It is important to say that there are women who can do this and there are women who want to get involved in politics. Parties often say that they cannot get women to come forward. They have to go and try to find them, because they are out there. Such excuses will not wash any more. The time for talking has been and gone. We need parties to commit to actions so that we can see the changes that we need in society. Today's empty Chamber reflects the fact that we really need to drum up interest, and people need to take the issue more seriously.

We need to ensure that women have their voice heard and that issues important to women and girls are given focus. We know that, when that happens, there will be better decision-making and positive outcomes for all. I commend the motion.

Mrs Cameron: Although pleased to be able to speak in the debate, I am saddened that, in the 21st century, we have to debate the matter at all. However, if the debate is to be taken seriously and is not merely to be a token

gesture, it may well serve a useful purpose for women who would like to enter political and public life.

According to Northern Ireland neighbourhood information service statistics, on 27 March 2011, females accounted for 51% of the typically resident population in Northern Ireland. However, in the May election that same year, only 20 women were elected to serve in the Assembly. Therefore, although females are the majority gender in Northern Ireland, they constitute less than one fifth of the Chamber. In this day and age of balanced workplaces, that is simply not acceptable. I know that statistics are open to interpretation, but, in this instance, it is fairly clear that the statistics do not lie; they highlight the need for significant change. Of course, I am aware that it is entirely a matter for the electorate which candidate they vote for — male or female — but no other workplace would be allowed to operate with this level of gender imbalance.

From a party perspective, I am pleased that more is being done to encourage women into politics. We are supporting a range of events, including training and conferences, aimed at doing just that, and I welcome those initiatives. However, in my opinion, it is as much a problem at root-and-branch level as at the Assembly. I noted with dismay that recent minutes of a meeting of my branch concluded with the point that, at the end of the meeting, "the women served the tea".

So, clearly, although we have made a start, there is much more to be done. Political parties here have, for generations, been run by men for men. That, in itself, is one reason why so few women choose to get involved or become involved but stay in the background. That is because, from the outset, the support just is not there. I hope that, as more women get involved, we can make a difference. However, I feel that political life still faces an upward challenge to overturn historical stereotypes. No doubt, others will make the point, which I agree with, that, whether you are a man or a woman, politics and public life are not necessarily conducive to a balanced family life. Politics involves sacrifice for all those who enter it. That is a matter of fact.

However, and I think that this is the main point, historically Northern Ireland has been a patriarchal society where, in the majority of cases, women are seen as the primary caregiver for their children and family members who need care. I know from experience that, when a child is sick at school, often the mother is the first point of contact. Often, the

assumption is made that the mother can leave her place of employment more easily than the father. We are, however, a society in transition, and, if we are serious about the motion, I urge ministerial colleagues to focus on policies that will help women to achieve more. Those might be on childcare costs or support for carers. Practical policies would go a long way in helping women to play a greater role in political life.

In drawing to a close, I will make the observation that, wherever I go as an elected representative, I meet an abundance of incredibly talented women who are devoting their time and skills to making a difference in the community and voluntary sectors. I refer to women such as Rosemary Magill of Women's Aid, who has helped to transform the lives of thousands of victims of domestic violence throughout Northern Ireland. There are hundreds of women across a range of careers and sectors who make a difference. So, how can we attract them into politics? This debate is a start, but we must work harder to provide an answer to that question, because there is no doubt that the Assembly will be a better place when it truly reflects the society that it represents.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the proposer of the motion, particularly in the week that it is and in the aftermath of a very successful day at the weekend, which recognised International Women's Day.

The SDLP grew out of the civil rights campaign, and throughout our history, we have consistently spoken out against discrimination of any kind. Women played a very special role in the peace process, and we owe a great deal to the many who spoke up and out during the difficult days of the Troubles. I am sure that many of you, like me, took great pride in watching Pat Hume accompany President Clinton alongside her husband, John. Not only did John give up a huge amount to achieve the price of peace but Pat was constantly by his side and was so again at the weekend. I pay particular tribute to her steadfast loyalty to John, the party and the peace process. I do not think that anyone will ever know just how much the Hume family gave up and sacrificed during some of the worst days of the Troubles and in chasing the prize of peace.

International Women's Day, which was on Saturday 8 March, provided a welcome opportunity to celebrate the social, political and economic achievements of women while recognising that there is still room for improvement. Unfortunately, the world is still

an unequal place, and much more needs to be done if we are to inspire real change in our often male-dominated political institutions. As we prepare to celebrate and remember the suffragette movement and all those who fought for the right of women to vote, that valuable history lesson needs to be repeated in our classrooms and communities. Far too many people fail to appreciate the sacrifices that others made, whether they were the worker in the workplace, the Chartist and the trade union movements down through the last century and a bit, or women.

Many people do not bother to use their vote. There are Members in the Chamber who represent a community in which less than 50% came out to vote. I think that that is a sad reflection of the level of disconnection that there is between those who have that particular franchise, that is, the electorate, and politics in general. People just do not seem to make the connection. I think that today serves as a reminder to all that, at one stage, women did not even have the right to vote, never mind to be in such august Chambers.

1.00 pm

If we look at some of the memorabilia — we are great ones to talk about the memorabilia in public places — we see that the photographs from down through the years and decades represent mostly men in powerful positions. That is still the case, not just in the Assembly Chamber and council chambers but in any decision-making boardrooms right across society. I believe that the Executive — I welcome now our female Minister Arlene Foster — have a particular role and can actually make a difference through political appointments onto some of the public boards. Although I do not think that any of us would argue that people should be there just because they are women, I would argue that greater cognisance should be given to the level of representation that should reflect better the society that we all represent.

We have heard other Members refer in their contributions to the difficulties that are faced by women who want to enter public life. We all know that, although communities are often held together by women and, in fact, many of their leaders are women, those women cannot make the jump into political life. Many Members have set out some of the reasons why that is the case, whether it is a lack of confidence, a lack of help with childcare or other care arrangements, or indeed just not having the opportunities that come through political parties. I congratulate the Southern Government for their brave move in bringing forward quotas for

the level and number of female candidates that parties will have to adhere to. It is unfortunate that, almost 100 years since women won the right to vote, there is still too little representation by women in public and political life. It seems that we may well have to introduce mandatory quotas in order to actually have any realistic expectation of improving the number of female representatives coming through.

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

Mrs D Kelly: I want to commend the Politics Plus programme. It might be a vehicle that the Assembly and Commission could use more wisely to promote women and their representational roles.

Mrs Overend: I am very pleased to be able to participate in the debate. It is timely, following International Women's Day on Saturday, highlighting the fact that women should aspire to lead not only in politics but in so many career choices that are available to us. We know that we also need to encourage more women to move into science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) careers.

The statistics for women in politics have been stated already this afternoon, so I do not need to go into them again. However, the most recent statistics that are available for public appointments state that only 34% of them and only 8% of chairs and deputy chairs were women. That is very disappointing. It is welcoming to see that our Regional Development Minister took some measures on that last week. He wanted to improve the diversity of boards and associated bodies, including making all reappointments subject to public competition. He is doing that by making the recruitment process as accessible and attractive as possible in order to secure as wide a pool of candidates as possible for future appointments, thus achieving a mix of skills and experience on boards. We very much welcome that move by the Ulster Unionist Minister for Regional Development.

It is important for all of us to play our part and do what we can. In fact, recently, just before Christmas, my party's MEP, Jim Nicholson, and I hosted an event targeted at young women of between 18 and 24 years of age to inspire them to think about political life. We debated the issue of quotas. It is not something that people would maybe relate to the Ulster Unionist Party. However, at that debate, we were told by Professor Yvonne Galligan from Queen's University that we were the first political party to

debate the issue in the public domain. It was very useful. We all learned a lot from listening to each other's ideas.

In the Ulster Unionist Party we have been very active in trying to promote further development among female members in our party and to encourage more women to become members of the party so that they can aspire to lead and to put themselves forward for election. In fact, I am the result of a so-called women's development programme that backfired on me. Back in 2008, I was elected as a party officer with responsibility for women's development. I had a free hand to create my own women's development programme for the Ulster Unionist Party. We had meetings and training sessions, and I worked with women in the party to give them the encouragement and help that they needed to go forward for selection and then on to election. As I said, I did not expect to be in this role. The Ulster Unionist Party actually increased its female representation at that time. Another key success of that was that it challenged the ideas of male members. I feel that we have much more encouragement and support from male members in our party, and that is equally important. It is very important that we all play our part and do what we can to inspire women.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. I wonder whether she agrees with me that, during the Troubles, women played a very strong role in keeping families and communities together and that, today, it is important to encourage them to play a more overt role by getting in touch with and participating openly in politics. Will she commend the work of the all-party group on United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which works in that area and of which I am proud to be a member?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Overend: Absolutely. Thank you very much for that timely intervention. I totally agree. Throughout the Troubles, women were very involved in groups at a community level where they saw that they could make a difference and saw the results of their hard work. That is a key point. Only when we are seen to bring results to people in Northern Ireland, as politics moves and develops, will more women want to get involved, because they will see that politics works and politics matters. It is incumbent on all of us in this place — men and women — to show that a career in politics is something that they should aspire to.

I recently met Jessica Grounds, who runs the Running Start programme in America. She works to bring young women into politics and to get them to think about politics. She said that girls and young people were very ambitious in their desire to change their communities, the country and the world, but young women were 50% more likely than men to say that working for a charity was the best way to bring about change.

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

Mrs Overend: Certainly. As I said before, I am delighted to speak on this. It is important that each one of us does our part to inspire more women to lead.

Ms Lo: I have been invited to speak on this subject on many occasions in different settings since my election to the Assembly in 2007. I am glad to have the opportunity today to speak in this debate in the House, where it matters most.

We know the poor statistics for female public representation: 23% of MLAs and local councillors and 22% of Westminster MPs are female. Mrs Overend also mentioned the poor statistics for public appointments. Why are women not getting into politics here? I would not be the first to mention that this is often a macho and, at times, petty and adversarial environment. Tribal politics and a lack of delivery on many bread-and-butter issues turn many women off politics. They see this place as a hothouse of trivial party politics and bickering. The general frustration with politics is a significant factor. It is not only women who are not getting involved but people with moderate views, young people, ethnic minorities and members of the LGBT community. We need to ask ourselves what we are doing to rectify the general apathy in politics.

Gender imbalance is a serious matter. The Assembly should be representative of society. To have integrated and effective governance, we need to bring different qualities and perspectives to the debate. Let us face it: we make important decisions here that affect the daily life of our population. We need both sexes to make informed and balanced decisions. We want to bring more female politicians in here, not for them just to highlight women's or family issues but to give a comprehensive, all-round basis for the decision-making process.

How do we do that? Suggestions that we change the electoral system, introduce quotas, party practices and training and support provisions for women are sound, but it is important to recognise that we have an institutional and societal problem. This is still very much a male-dominated society in which many women, through socialisation, feel that they should be in the background and have a supportive role instead of leading from the front. Girls do well in schools and universities but often pull back in their career progression because of caring responsibilities for children, parents or elderly relatives. Women need access to affordable childcare. Where is the long-awaited OFMDFM childcare strategy? Men need to share half the domestic and childcare responsibilities so that it is not only the mothers who take the children to school, collect them and make dinners at night.

Parliaments need more family-friendly hours so that parents of both sexes can go home in the evening before their children go to bed. Why do we not have a crèche here for our MLAs' or employees' children? Many large companies have such a facility in situ. I firmly believe that, as long as we fail to have balanced representation, we will fail to have comprehensive debates. I hope that we will see the time when we can discuss issues such as tax-varying powers or female reproductive rights in a thoughtful and constructive manner with equal numbers of male and female MLAs. I support the motion.

Ms P Bradley: I also thank the Members who tabled the motion. We know that women are not the minority gender in Northern Ireland; the last census made that point clear. When it comes to public life, an outsider would be forgiven for thinking that we were the minority in Northern Ireland. Politics is meant to be representative of everyday life, yet women in the Assembly account for only 18% of its Members. The situation is not much better in councils, especially when we look at the number of councils on which women hold the position of chair or mayor. I guess that I have been an exception to the rule, having served terms as Deputy Mayor and Mayor of Newtownabbey Borough Council and by sitting in the Assembly. However, the road to this point has not been easy. I believe that women who have already travelled it have an obligation to work hard to ease the path of the women who will follow. In meeting various women's groups, we often hear about women who get to the top and pull the ladder up after them. I do not believe that any of us in the Assembly would adopt that practice, and I never want to see it here.

The story of how I got into politics is more to do with fate than design, because it was not something that I ever wanted to do. It was not a place that I ever wanted to be. I was perfectly happy with my life pre-politics. Not that I am saying that I am unhappy with my life now, Mr Speaker, but that is part and parcel of the problem. There are so many women out there, and I meet them regularly. Mr Nesbitt brought up UNSCR 1325, and I chair the UNSCR 1325 all-party group in the Assembly. We have many battles in it, but one of our biggest battles is getting people to attend. On paper, it looks good that we have lots of women signed up to be part of the all-party group, but in reality not many people, including women, attend it. It is an all-party group that fills us full of enthusiasm and motivation to do what we can for women and to empower them, not just women in politics but across the board — women in business, the public sector and the private sector. Therefore, it is a very worthwhile group to be on. I took over as chair, with Anna Lo having chaired it before me. She did an excellent job, and I have taken on the mantle to see where UNSCR 1325 will take us here in Northern Ireland.

1.15 pm

How we look and and how we present ourselves has been raised in the debate already, especially by Ms Fearon. It is an absolute disgrace, in my opinion. Men get it also, of course — how they look and and how they present themselves — but women suffer more criticism than men. It does not really matter what my hair or make-up looks like: as long as I am well presented and well turned out, that is good enough for me. What is more important is our ability. Ability is the main thing.

Ms Fearon mentioned quotas and her party's opinion on them. Many people have that opinion, but it will be no surprise to anybody that, as a member of the DUP, I do not share that opinion on how we advance women in politics. My opinion is that it should be based on ability. Sometimes when I say that, people go, "Yeah, OK. Here we go: ability", but I mean ability across the board. I mean men and women with ability.

Another problem that I have come across when I speak to women is a lack of role models in politics. We do not have that many female role models in politics, but every female in the Chamber is a role model in promoting politics and promoting politics for women. I say a big "Thank you" to my colleague Arlene Foster, who is sitting beside me, and Diane Dodds,

because, without them, I would not be where I am today. It is because of their encouragement and support, and I saw them as my role models. I hope that people are looking at me today and saying —

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that we have role models even at council level in the DUP? Ballymena Borough Council has had a female DUP deputy mayor, and another female is currently mayor of Ballymena. They are role models for the population of Ballymena.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank my colleague for the intervention. Yes, I agree with him, but are we going far enough? We need to roll that out across all councils so that we have female role models showing the way, promoting politics and saying, "It may not be the best job in the world at times, but, hey, it is not actually that bad".

In my party, as I said, the support that I got from those role models went a heck of a way to bringing me to where I am now. Our MEP, Diane Dodds, is engaged with Ballybeen Women's Centre, supported by European funding, to encourage women to become involved and participate in politics.

I am so glad that you have brought this to the Floor today. As someone said earlier, it is a shame that it had to come to the Floor and such a shame that the room is not filled with people saying, "Yes, we agree with you". If we ignore the issue and let it slip away, we are certainly not being democratic and not living in a democracy. I support the motion.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank my colleague Megan Fearon for bringing this important debate to the Assembly. The Member who spoke previously talked about role models. Given the week that it is, with International Women's Day, on which women all over the world celebrated the achievements of women, it is important to say that everyone in society, especially women, have women as role models. We all have great women in our lives, be they our mothers or grandmothers, whom we looked up to and who had an impact on the way that we live and the experiences that we had.

As other Members have pointed out, just 19% of our MLAs are women and 15% of our TDs

are women. Only 23% of our councillors and 34% of our public appointees are women, despite us making up over 50% of the population. Those figures clearly show that, in Ireland today, women are still seriously under-represented at all levels of the decision-making process in political and public life. Such under-representation is caused by a number of factors, primarily the inequality of power and other factors such as poverty, educational disadvantage, violence against women and young girls, and social exclusion.

The primary benchmark for women's engagement with and representation in politics is the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in 1995. The conference identified two strategic objectives: ensuring women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making and increasing women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. It then proposed a series of actions for Governments, political parties and all other concerned parties to facilitate those objectives.

We need to change things. It will take a lot of political vision and political will to do that, but it is achievable. Others have pointed out that parties in this Chamber have different views on how those changes might be achieved. Our party believes in positive action to address under-representation of women and the legacy of female exclusion, particularly in leadership positions in political and public life.

All political parties have a responsibility to ensure that more women are elected to the Assembly and to other political institutions. Therefore, they should adopt strategies to increase the number of successful women candidates by using positive action in the recruitment and selection processes to ensure that we are all working towards achieving that 50:50 parity. They can also be proactive by engaging with women's groups and organisations on the ground that work day and daily at encouraging and supporting women to enable them to become more involved in political life. It is worth noting that many of our leaders in the community and voluntary sector are women, and we should encourage them to become elected representatives.

Government has a key role to play by ensuring that women have access to supported training and mentoring programmes to encourage more of them into politics. Bearing in mind the great contribution that women bring to the development of society as a whole, it is necessary for all those agencies to ensure that

all possible mechanisms for advancing gender equality are used.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for giving way. Women in sport is a crucial area, and we are joined in the Public Gallery by very many young women from St Ciaran's College, Ballygawley, who have excelled in their sport.

Ms J McCann: The Member makes a very valid point. Congratulations to you all.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that many women across society have faced many challenges and have given up roles, in particular family and caring roles, to do as these young women have done and as the Armagh ladies did.

Ms J McCann: Both Members make a valid point: young women and older women who are carers for elderly parents or children play a key role in society.

None of us will be surprised by the extent of the obstacles that can be placed in the way as women seek to take on more active political and public roles. Part of what we have to do is change the way in which society has been taught to view and understand how politics works. Late sittings of decision-making institutions such as this have an impact on family roles. Sometimes, that is not very conducive to people — not just women but men also — who want an active part in their children's and family's lives. So, we have to look at changing how we organise our political institutions so that women and men who want to play that active role have time to do so.

Women political leaders can be positive role models for other women to become involved in politics, but that is not just the responsibility of women. This is very important: men also have a responsibility to challenge those inequalities and bring more women into political and public life.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms J McCann: Gender discrimination and equality are issues of concern to us all and should not primarily be issues just for women.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today, coming as it does after Saturday's International Women's Day.

We all know that women make extraordinary and indeed unique contributions to our political

and public life, and, as we look at the make-up of the Assembly, with 20 females or 18%, it is clear that the political representation is imbalanced. The motion speaks about encouraging more female candidates to stand for election. When I first stood for selection for my party in 2010 for Craigavon Borough Council, there were three of us standing, all of whom were women. When I was selected, with my name on the ballot paper, all the other candidates were men. I was humbled to win that election with 64% of the vote, so, for those of you who feel that there is a need for a quota and, indeed, all-women selection lists, that came about without any quotas or restrictions placed on selection.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way, but does she also acknowledge that the make-up of this Assembly came without any quotas? That is not to say that individuals cannot beat the barriers, but the fact is that the barriers are still there, and we need positive action to change that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is important to note that we need to inspire change and not to force it.

I wonder whether, if quotas were to be introduced, this would trivialise a woman's right to enter politics on her own merits rather than through men's obligation to appear inclusive. I do not want it to appear that women are demanding more important roles without having the skills to carry them out: women do have the necessary skills. However, a quick look at the statistics shows that those skills are not being utilised to the full in the workplace, not least in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, where a significant gender imbalance exists and persists.

Thanks to the questioning of my colleague Michael McGimpsey, we have found that, out of 12 permanent secretary-level staff, one is female, which is 8%; out of 39 grade 3 civil servants, nine are female, which is 3.5%; and out of 163 grade 5 civil servants, 63 are female, which represents 38%. Those statistics show a clear gender imbalance, one that surely only Sir Humphrey Appleby could manage to find justification for.

For far too long there has been an ingrained attitude of "Tea room, not board room", which has to change. Gender should never be an impediment to the recruitment, promotion and

retention of personnel into senior grades. There is a real job of work here for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to identify the reasons why there are so few women in the top roles of the Civil Service. Indeed, of the 19 internal and external promotions at grade 3 alone since 2009, eight have been to females. I believe that women can do exactly the same jobs as men, but we need to encourage more women to enter politics, give them the right training and remove any stigmas that exist. Speaking of women taking on roles traditionally seen as the preserve of men, I joined 50 women on Saturday at Foymore Lodge outside Portadown. We were with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and other country sports organisations at an event called Women Call the Shots. I was delighted to be asked to lead this event alongside the BASC who, with others, are the driving force behind the all-party group on country sports, of which I am a member. I would like to pay tribute to my party colleague and chair of the group, Danny Kinahan.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much for giving way. One Sunday, I was discussing how somebody else wrote all her speeches and got everything done on a Sunday, as did I. I was then told that I was getting the lunch ready and that I was getting the school uniforms ready, so I would like to salute all women in politics, because the time it takes is huge. I salute everyone else in the Chamber, but particularly women — and the husbands who help them do it and, at the same time, my wife.

Amber Hill was here a week ago, having won a Sports Personality of the Year award for her shooting skills in a male-dominated sport. Do you think that we should have some committee that forces every grouping, whether it is a committee or a body, to look at how we can get more women into whatever the event is?

1.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his intervention, which was such a ringing endorsement of women in politics. I agree that we need to look at that to see whether we can have more Amber Hills for Northern Ireland.

I have no doubt that, on Saturday, we whetted the appetite of many of those who were taking up country sports. That is what International Women's Day is all about. It helps to encourage and advance women everywhere

and in every way. If women are to have equality with men, they need to inspire change, not force it.

In closing, I encourage the Finance Minister to take head-on the gender imbalance in the Civil Service. As we proved at Foymore Lodge on Saturday, women can compete with men on an even playing field, so watch out, boys.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this important topic.

There is no doubt that female political empowerment continues to pose challenges locally, nationally and globally. Despite much progress in anti-discrimination and equality legislation and various international treaties aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of women, a global gender gap remains in many areas of society. In politics, fewer than 20% of parliamentarians worldwide are women, while, economically, women currently hold only 4.6% of the Fortune 500 CEO positions. From a regional perspective, not only do we have only 21 female MLAs but a mere 34% of public appointments are held by women and there are only 19 female chairpersons in our 126 public bodies. This is an imbalance that we need to address. However, let me be clear: I do not believe that any individual should be appointed or elected solely on the basis of their gender. Such an approach would do a disservice to women whose outstanding leadership and political acumen, historically and currently, shine as an example for all.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that you should not have to be an outstanding woman to achieve these feats and that, actually, a woman who is simply good enough or as good as the next man should be able to get those appointments? A woman should not always have to be an outstanding woman.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Cochrane: I agree that you do not always have to be outstanding. There are plenty of men here already who are not outstanding. *[Laughter.]* That was not a personal comment, Mr Agnew, just to be clear. *[Laughter.]* The motion specifically mentions training and support programmes aimed at the political empowerment of women. I agree that these are a positive step forward towards encouraging more females to consider a role in politics. This concept is also supported by the

founder and executive chair of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, who said:

"The key for the future of any country and any institution is the capability to develop, retain and attract the best talent. Women make up one half of the world's human capital. Empowering and educating girls and women and leveraging their talent and leadership fully in the global economy, politics and society are thus fundamental elements of succeeding and prospering in an ever more competitive world."

Although it is important that we recognise the under-representation of women in our political institutions, this cannot simply be a case of cosmetics, tokenism or number crunching. Instead, it should be an opportunity to wisely grasp and harness the skills, talents and capabilities and potential of half of our population. From my own working life in the public and private sectors, before the Alliance Party approached me to get me involved in politics, I saw plenty of examples where it was more difficult for women to get ahead. If we are to successfully engage and empower women to fulfil their potential, we need to consider and address the various factors that hold them back.

Some of those barriers can include, for example, a lack of confidence or the masculine model of politics with its structures, cultures and ways of working. Furthermore, the inflated egos of some of our male politicians and the culture of political point scoring do little to attract women, who are often seen as the ones who just want to get in there and get things done.

Like others who described their route into politics, I was coaxed into it by a formidable woman, Naomi Long MP. I firmly believe that, if we are to change things going forward, there are a number of things that we need to do, not least ourselves, as the women who have spoken here already have said, to encourage and enable other women to contribute and participate in Northern Ireland's often spirited and challenging political environment which, I believe, would be all the more enriched by such input. I support the motion.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the motion. I apologise to the proposer and to the House for missing the start of the debate. I was caught up in a Committee meeting that overran.

Today has been great, and, since I arrived, we have heard from strong, powerful female speakers, but we know too well that the make-

up of the House is male-dominated and that only 19% of MLAs are female. The facts are clear: without positive action, we will not change this. It has not changed organically, and, as a member of the Green Party, I support organic growth. In this case, we need to make interventions. I support the motion and everything in it. If anything, it does not go far enough, although I believe that it will be unanimously supported.

Because we have done little or nothing, the trend of representation in the Assembly is going backwards, with fewer female MLAs elected in 2011 than in 2007. It is clear that what we are doing is not working. Ultimately, we need to achieve a culture change in the Assembly, in wider public appointments and in the private sector, where women do not occupy enough of the top positions.

How do we encourage women on the outside to get into politics through our parties? My party is proud of having set a quota that one third of candidates in any multi-candidate election will be female. I do not accept the charge that this is tokenism or whatever else, because I know that, in my party, the strong women are there. However, they are not putting themselves forward or are not being encouraged to put themselves forward, and we have sought to change the culture in our party to encourage them to do so. Where male candidates who would do are available but there are better female candidates, we can seek them out and put them forward.

Ms Fearon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Yes.

Ms Fearon: I agree with your point about positive action, which is the only way we will implement change quickly and effectively. I have heard Members talk about tokenism and the merit principle, but does the Member agree that we never discuss the merit principle when it comes to the position of a man in power?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: I completely agree with the point. The default position is for men to be put forward. Mrs Cochrane made the point that plenty of men, arguably some of them are in the Chamber, are not outstanding.

Mr McNarry: Speak for yourself.

Mr Agnew: I want women to be equally represented, and that should be on the basis of ability. Female candidates should not have to be outstanding, which is what is required now. Credit to the females who are here because so many barriers have to be overcome. I want it to be as easy for a woman to get elected as it is for a man.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. He and others mentioned the barriers to women getting involved in politics. How do we get rid of those barriers and make this an acceptable place for everybody?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for her intervention. We need to provide encouragement, and all the things that other Members talked about need to happen. We need a culture change outside politics to get women thinking in those terms. We also need a culture change within politics. When my colleague in the English Greens, Caroline Lucas, proposed job sharing for MPs, it was lambasted as a ludicrous idea. Why is it a ludicrous idea? It has been necessary in other workplaces to ensure that people, whether male or female, with childcare responsibilities can pursue a career and have appropriate childcare. We need to look at alternatives. We cannot simply say, "That is not how you do things in politics". We put up too many barriers to women getting into politics, and, if we are to change the level of female representation, we need to change the culture of our politics from how we treat one another to the pressures that we put on our political representatives.

I am proud to say that approximately 50% of the candidates that the Green Party will field across Europe in the forthcoming European elections will be women. That shows that it can be done. I defy anyone to say that any of those women is a token candidate. There will be a strong slate of male and female candidates in Green parties across Europe.

I want to mention quickly that on Saturday night we had hundreds of strong, independent women in the Great Hall. We had 25 powerful speakers who spoke about domestic and sexual violence, discrimination in the workplace and inequality in our society. In some cases, we heard from people who come from countries where women are oppressed, who said how delighted they were to have freedoms in Northern Ireland. I am disappointed that some have chosen to lambaste a female for using her freedom of expression in a way that she saw fit

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

Mr Agnew: — and have even brought the matter to the House to condemn her for it. Yet again, it is males putting down females when they seek to express themselves.

Mr McNarry: I could be on a hiding to nothing with this, but here goes. It is a rare opportunity, and I am glad to have the opportunity as a member of UKIP to dispel any opinions that people may have about comments that some former colleagues in my party sadly and very poorly made. I emphasise the word "former", and I am personally glad that they are former members.

I wanted to participate in the debate, because I commend the motion. I heard it said during the debate that it was a pity that the motion had to come before the House. I understand that remark. It is not as though women are not recognised in here and in all walks of life, where they play a key role and are informing men daily — certainly me — that we do not know it all and do not know better. Some may think that people of that opinion — I am not of that opinion — speak for so few. I would like to say that to the House and for the House to appreciate that such opinions are the opinions of so few. Thankfully, they are not the opinions of the majority — by far the greater majority — of people in our community.

UKIP is very comfortable with the motion. In fact, I am all for being considered equal to women in politics. I am all for being able to treat people in politics as equals, which is what we all are.

I will focus momentarily on women in leadership. Without risking capitulation or sounding patronising, the saying goes — we have all heard it; we certainly did as we were growing up — that behind every great man there is a great woman. It is not that I am great, but I see how that works at home, and I pay tribute to the information that I get there. If she has not been mentioned — perhaps she has — we should mention Margaret Thatcher. She showed remarkable and tremendous leadership qualities. I admired and respected her and did not see her or think of her as a woman; I saw her only as a formidable leader. Where role models are perhaps being sought, you would go far to find one that is better as a leader. She is certainly one that I think worthy of following.

Women have played and do play a major role in my political life. My wife, who is from a deep-rooted political family, has taught me much; my

two daughters, who keep me alert to their opinions, also teach me much; and my female — majority female — support staff show me aspects that I do not immediately see.

They all keep my feet on the ground and give me a perspective. I think that men should be allowed to say and to appreciate that it is a perspective. We cannot be expected to think exactly alike on all issues.

1.45 pm

I still give up my seat on public transport, still open the door and still encourage women to push forward. I apologise for being late, but the reason I was late was that I was spending some time encouraging a young woman to come forward in politics to stand for election. I saw her only as a candidate. I did not see her as anything else. I think that is what we are looking for. I wish the motion well. Let us see how far it takes us forward after today.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas le Megan Fearon as an rún seo. I thank Megan Fearon, who is the youngest Member and the youngest woman in the House, for bringing forward the motion. It is very timely. It is interesting that, earlier this morning, one of our people from the back there — Mr Allister — was jumping up and down about media reports, but he is not here for a very important debate. It is a pity because he could learn a lot from it. We have a lot of gatekeepers who do not want change and who want to make sure that women are kept in particular roles, but that ain't going to happen.

I thank everyone who spoke in the debate and thank the men who attended. The tone of it was very good. There is a lot of commonality among all us women. I know that we have differences on issues such as quotas, and we will continue to debate those differences, but I, personally, am delighted that women on the opposite Benches spoke about how they got into politics, and I can tell you that I am glad that you are in politics. You make this place a better place.

I was glad to hear David McNarry and Steven saying that they are out looking for women because, of the four parties down there, they do not have one woman among them — UKIP, NI21 and all the rest. I welcome what they are doing. I also welcome Steven Agnew's defence of women this morning on the media, and I would like to put that on record.

I want to quote very briefly some statistics, which I find shocking, but, sometimes, we have to shock ourselves. In the South of Ireland, 25 out of 166 Dáil seats are held by women. That is 15%, which is an all-time record. Some 91 women have been elected to Dáil Éireann since the foundation of the state. Since 1918, out of 4,744 Dáil seats, 260 have been held by women. That is 5.48%. There were five more women elected to the Dáil in 2011 than there were in 1992. In case the North or anyone gets cocky about what is happening here, there is nothing to be cocky about. In 1998, we had 14% women. In 2003, we had 18%. In 2007, we had 18%, and, in 2011, we had 19.5% — not even 20%. We are a new institution, so there is no excuse for us.

Looking at Ireland — the South of Ireland — on the international stage, UN statistics show that we are 106th out of 184. We are twenty-fourth out of 27 in the European Union. Eight out of 10 men are in the boardroom. We are twenty-sixth out of 34 in the OECD. We are between India and Egypt.

So, what are the barriers? We have heard them from the women in the room. Sometimes, I think that people are not listening enough. We will tell you what they are. Candidate selection and putting women into winnable seats is the single biggest barrier. Another is childcare. Look at how expensive it is, look at how inaccessible it is, look at this place. This place is better than others, but it is still not family-friendly enough. One of our Members, Sandra or maybe Jo-Anne — sorry — mentioned the lack of a crèche. Anna mentioned it, too.

Anna also mentioned the macho culture. That is what we have, lads. There is no other word for it; we have a macho, adversarial culture. If only I had a pound for every time a woman said, "I don't know how you put up with that up there". We need to listen to that. Do not just dismiss it. I see Edwin raising his eyes to the ceiling. Listen. Listen to what women are saying. It is not a culture that is conducive to good politics.

I move now to confidence. If women are constantly being put down, they will not have the confidence to stand up again and again and again, and we should not have to defend ourselves again and again and again.

How do we overcome those barriers? This is where I part company with some of the women who spoke. We need quotas, for without them we will not make the changes that are necessary. Most of the countries that have the highest number of women in their national

Parliaments have quotas: 17 out of 20. We need a critical mass of women in the Assembly and, equally, in our political parties because, if there is not a critical mass, women will not be selected and will not speak up. They will not speak up unless there is a certain percentage.

I cannot deal with all the comments that Members made. Megan sent a message to which people need to listen: sexist jokes are not funny. We are sick of them. It is not that we do not have a sense of humour. We do, but we do not have a sense of humour about sexist, racist, anti-gay or lesbian jokes. They are just not funny.

Pam Brown talked about Women's Aid. Violence against women and children is the biggest barrier for us in society. What women are going through is awful. Every one of us women understands the impact of violence against us and our children. The rape of women is unacceptable, and we need all voices, male and female, arguing and fighting against that.

Dolores Kelly talked about quotas. I support her. Section 42 of the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 in the South states that 30% of candidates have to be women, with the number rising to 40% in the next seven years and going to 50%. If there is not 50%, parties are financially punished. That is when parties start to listen.

Sandra talked about STEM careers, and she is absolutely right. Paula talked about the women who pull the ladder up behind them.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Ms Ruane: Paula Bradley. Gabh mo leithscéal.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I assume that the lady, when she refers to "Sandra", means the honourable Member for Mid Ulster Mrs Overend. If that is the case, I think that it is proper that the lady is properly addressed rather than simply addressed by her Christian name.

Ms Ruane: My apologies to the women to whom I did not give their full name.

Paula Bradley talked about the ladder being pulled up behind them. This is where I part company with David: Margaret Thatcher was one of those women, unfortunately. That is why she was not a good promoter of women.

Steven Agnew talked about challenging the system. I welcome the fact that he spoke about bringing forward female candidates.

Sinn Féin is a party in which women with power is a party norm. We have 10 women MLAs; three of our five Ministers are women; our party vice-president is a woman; our Chief Whip is a woman; our youngest woman MLA is Megan, who is here today. However, that is not enough. I am not going to defend the inadequate representation of women in my party. It is not enough, and Sinn Féin has the best record in the House on gender. I challenge my party. I am sure that all the women and men here will join me when we have 50:50 representation, when we have women managers and strategists at every level and when we have women leading election teams, as well as being candidates. I do not think that any woman in Sinn Féin believes that there is real power sharing among women and men in Sinn Féin. That has to change. I believe that it will change, but it will take time. Men need to work with us in bringing about that change.

I spoke earlier about violence against women and children. We must have zero tolerance to violence against women and children. There is a lack of convictions. There is ambiguity around the issue. It is a crime. If one message goes out from the House today, it should be this: let us stop criminal behaviour against women and children. Those who carry out criminal behaviour should be behind bars. Another young woman was killed last week. How many more have to die before violence against women and children is treated as the crime that it is?

I thank everybody. Gabhaim buíochas maidir leis an díospóireacht seo. Bhí sé an-mhaith. We now need action not talk.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the lack of female representation in politics and public life; further recognises the positive outcomes that result in tackling this inequality, when support and training programmes are put in place to encourage more female candidates to stand in elections; and calls for the introduction of a training and support programme to encourage more female candidates to stand for election.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Teacher Training Review

2. Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what efforts have been made to consult staff in teacher training institutions regarding the initial teacher training review. (AQO 5714/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Members are aware that I have initiated a review into the teacher training infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The review panel invited each of the initial teacher education institutions to submit their views on the structures necessary to create a world-class system of initial teacher education in Northern Ireland. The panel also invited submissions from other interested stakeholders. That provided an opportunity for staff, if they so wished, to make their views known to the panel. The closing date for submissions was 18 December, and over 100 responses were received. All have been passed to the panel. My officials have prepared a summary report of the responses, and that will be published on my Department's website shortly. The review panel recently met the initial teacher education providers and a number of interested stakeholders. It will draw the information from those meetings together with all other relevant information to inform its final report. Once the assignment has been completed, it will form the basis for further dialogue with the various institutions, with the intention of finding an agreed way forward.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has his Department undertaken any estimates of how current staffing levels at the existing colleges will be affected by the review?

Dr Farry: We have not explored that issue to date. The Member will appreciate that we are at the second stage of a process, which

involves looking at the options for the potential reconfiguration of the current structures. We are expecting a number of options. The Member can take reassurance, as can others, that we have always sought to engage with all relevant stakeholders at each stage of the process. If and when we get to the point of having concrete proposals for change, we will, of course, be seeking to engage with the institutions, which, in turn, will seek to engage with their staff over the potential ways forward.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I put on record my continuing support for the retention of St Mary's University College. Was each of the representative bodies of the various school sectors in the North — the controlled, Catholic maintained, integrated and Irish-medium sectors — consulted by the review team in the form of face-to-face meetings?

Dr Farry: The panel invited submissions from right across the community, and a number of those organisations did not respond in writing. A number were subject to direct meetings, so there has been a detailed engagement with all the relevant stakeholders, and the types of organisations that the Member mentioned were very much part of the process.

Mr Allister: Has the Minister any concerns about how the matter was handled at Stranmillis College, where an academic leadership team prepared a draft, which was changed by the Minister's appointee as chairman of the board of governors without reference back to the team? The changed draft was then submitted without the team knowing its contents, and then —

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

Mr Allister: — the panel visited the university on 24 February without the staff being told. Furthermore, there has been no feedback to the staff. Does that strike the Minister as the level of consultation that he would expect with staff?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must insist that a question be put.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his rather elongated question. The issues that he outlines are matters for Stranmillis as an institution. It is the board of governors that has the responsibility for running the college, and it is with the board of governors that the Department has direct liaison on such matters. Stranmillis has been fully engaged in the

process to date. We have received a detailed submission from it, and it has been awarded a more detailed face-to-face meeting with the panel. It will be a key delivery partner on the way forward.

Students: Housing Support

3. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the housing support available for students of regional colleges who are not entitled to housing benefit due to being in full-time education. (AQO 5715/11-15)

Dr Farry: Entitlement to housing benefit is a matter for the Department for Social Development. Some students in full-time education may be eligible for housing benefit, depending on their individual circumstances. Although my Department does not provide specific housing benefit, it provides a range of other financial assistance to students undertaking vocational courses at further education colleges. There are two main sources of support: further education awards, which are administered by Student Finance Northern Ireland; and hardship funds, which are administered by each further education college.

FE awards provide a maintenance grant to assist with living costs for full-time and part-time students over 19 who are undertaking an approved vocational FE course up to level 3. Hardship funds are administered by each FE college. They provide support to learners over 18 years of age who are experiencing exceptional financial difficulty with meeting costs associated with learning while enrolled in an FE college. The funds are aimed specifically at providing assistance with fees, books, equipment, travel costs and associated living costs. Students can apply for assistance from both sources, with the maximum amount payable capped at £3,500 a year.

Students attending full-time higher education level 4 or level 5 courses at a college may be entitled to a maintenance loan and means-tested maintenance grant to help with living costs. Funding for childcare costs is also available to eligible students who have dependant children. Eligibility for assistance from further education awards and/or college hardship funds is not based on the receipt of prescribed benefits but on a number of criteria such as means-testing based on household income.

Over the three academic years, the financial support provided through FE awards was just

over £4.5 million, £4.6 million and £5.5 million respectively and, through the hardship fund, around £2 million, £1.8 million and £1.7 million in each year.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answers and for outlining the support available for students who find themselves in hardship. I am aware of a case in our mutual constituency of a young person who is facing such hardship. They are, unfortunately, estranged from their parents and are struggling to meet costs and find housing. The Minister mentioned that the further education award was for those over 19. Will he tell me the rationale for setting the level at that age?

Dr Farry: The rationale predates my term in office, but it is something that we are happy to take a look at. If the Member has a specific case in mind and wants to get directly in touch — given that I am from the same constituency, I may have an idea of what that case is — we would be happy to take a more detailed look at that at a departmental level to ensure that any individual is fully aware of the potential sources of support available to them. It is important that someone considers all the potential sources that are out there.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister accept that there is a serious problem for students at the moment with accessing affordable housing while at college? Can the Minister give us an update on what he is trying to do to address that problem?

Dr Farry: The Member will be aware that issues relating to housing are primarily for my colleague the Minister for Social Development. However, I do have responsibilities to ensure that we are able to have accessibility to higher education and further education. As such, we have a widening participation strategy. I am happy to have more detailed discussions with Nelson McCausland around such matters. Depending on the particular course, maintenance support can be available. The Member will also be interested to note that we are conducting a review of higher education finance issues — not the issues of tuition fees, I hasten to stress, but some of the other issues relating to, for example, part-time study and, indeed, some of the anomalies that have occurred in our system as we move to different systems across the UK.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister gave a very detailed answer to the initial question, but will he maybe expand a bit further on the right of appeal to the

hardship fund and on whether he has any plans to link the education maintenance allowance (EMA) to housing status?

Dr Farry: If someone wishes to take forward an appeal, they are entitled to do so. EMA has been subject to its own review and, indeed, we had a public consultation on that matter. It is something for which responsibility is shared between my Department and the Department of Education. It has been taken to the Executive, and we have an agreed policy outcome. It is worth stressing that Northern Ireland has a more generous form of EMA support than any other region or nation in the UK. That is a clear example of the importance of devolution in delivering for local people.

Shankill Job Assist Centre

4. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his Department will continue to support the Shankill Job Assist Centre. (AQO 5716/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Shankill Job Assist Centre has delivered the local employment intermediary service (LEMIS) on behalf of my Department in the greater Shankill area since April 2007, when the contract was awarded following a competitive tendering exercise. Following from the success of LEMIS, LEMIS 2 has been operational since April 2011. Since November 2012, LEMIS providers have been encouraged to caseload young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, training or employment as an early intervention measure in support of the Executive's Pathways to Success strategy. The current LEMIS contracts will come to an end early in 2015, at which point there will be a review of policy options to determine the way forward. All LEMIS providers will be evaluated as part of the Pathways to Success strategy evaluation, and a full modular evaluation report should be completed by June 2014.

The Shankill Job Assist Centre is also involved in delivering the contract for the community family support programme, partly funded through the Delivering Social Change initiative, following a competitive tendering exercise in September 2013. Five lead organisations and a range of partners have been awarded contracts to deliver the programme to at least 720 families across Northern Ireland between October 2013 and March 2015. In addition, the Department offered funding for the Promoting Employability in the Greater Shankill project, amounting to £101,000 from the European social fund, which is 40% of the project costs, and a £63,000 contribution by the Department

to meet 25% of the project costs. The remaining 35% match funding is provided by a combination of the Department's LEMIS programme and Impact Training (NI) Limited. The funding is offered over a two-year period, from 1 April 2013 to the end of March 2015. The Shankill Job Assist Centre has demonstrated its ability and experience to secure contracts to deliver services for those most in need. I look forward to maintaining that partnership in this context.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive answer. Only a few weeks ago, the Minister visited the Spectrum Centre with me and party colleagues for the 10-year anniversary of the job assist centre. He will know the valuable work that the centre is doing in the areas that he mentioned today, along with Impact Training. I pay tribute to both organisations. He mentioned the word "local" in his reply. However, does the Minister agree that the Shankill Job Assist Centre is not working with people just in the greater Shankill area, but in north and west Belfast and across the city? Does he agree that its work is invaluable?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and the comments that he made. I endorse what he said. It is important that we look to local delivery, particularly at community level, for a number of our employment programmes. I pay tribute to the success of the Shankill Job Assist Centre in that regard. The Member will know that some of the success rate performance figures are actually quite dramatic, which is a real tribute to all who have been involved. I stress that, as we look to the future, my Department will roll out a number of other programmes. We will be looking for bids from the community and voluntary sector to take those forward, because, particularly when developing new policy, it is always good to have a pilot and to experiment with innovative approaches. I fully encourage and expect applications to come in from the Shankill Job Assist Centre.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Trevor Lunn is not in his place. I call Mr Thomas Buchanan.

Sick Absence: DEL

6. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to help reduce the days lost through sickness absence within his Department. (AQO 5718/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department addresses sickness absence through a robust application of the Northern Ireland Civil Service inefficiency sickness absence policy and procedures and by providing a range of support services and interventions to assist all its employees to improve their general health and well-being. The Department has developed a managing attendance action plan aimed at reducing absence levels through a range of mechanisms that focus on governance, well-being strategies and stakeholder responsibilities. The plan includes divisional absence targets; early interventions in stress cases; a partnership approach to case management between human resources branch and line managers; and delivering a range of health and well-being initiatives in partnership with the Northern Ireland Civil Service Well programme.

In addition, the Department has sought to change its attendance culture. It issues regular communications to line managers and staff to reinforce their roles and responsibilities to ensure that there is a commitment to collaborative working on the issue. Managers are encouraged to attend training to develop the knowledge and skills required to deal with absence management. An e-learning package on managing sickness absence is scheduled to be delivered to all staff in the Department in the coming weeks.

2.15 pm

The staffing profiles of individual Departments are a contributory factor to their differing levels of absence. This is particularly relevant to my Department, which has high numbers of female staff, front line services and administrative grades, all of which have traditionally contributed to high absence levels. When the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) adjusted the data in the 2011-12 year for a comparison based on these factors, it would have improved the Department's position from 11.4 days to 9 days. The absence rate in the Department has been reduced from 17.7 days in 2003-04 to 11.5 days in 2012-13, and the expected out-turn for 2013-14 is estimated at 10.2 days. I congratulate the staff on their efforts to date. The Department is committed to building on the progress made so far.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response and the work that has been done. Given that the Department for Employment and Learning has one of the highest rates of sickness absence days, will the Minister advise whether he or the Department has any intention

of carrying out an internal audit of that to try to reduce it further?

Dr Farry: With regard to audit, the Member will be conscious that the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) takes a keen interest in the matter, which is entirely appropriate given that there is a significant financial cost to the Northern Ireland Budget from sickness absence. It will never be entirely driven out of any organisation, but there is recognition that our levels are too high, judged in comparison with other organisations in different sectors in other parts of these islands and elsewhere in the world. Although we have some historical patterns of sickness, it is something that we have to be very proactive in trying to combat, as it is important for taxpayers and customer service.

Mr McKinney: Will what you have outlined, Minister, be sufficient to future-proof the Department for mental health-related illness?

Dr Farry: Looking to the future, I am pleased that we are making progress in the right areas. The Member is also right to draw attention to mental health. Often, we view sickness purely in physical terms, and it is appropriate to extend the same consideration to mental health issues. Of course, mental health issues can cover a broad spectrum of conditions. Therefore, it is important that we offer support to people with varying mental health conditions to remain in the workplace. Through cooperation with a number of organisations in the community and voluntary sector, we are becoming more sophisticated in that regard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Sammy Wilson is not in his place.

Students: Entrepreneurial Spirit

8. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how further and higher education institutions strive to create an entrepreneurial spirit among their students. (AQO 5720/11-15)

Dr Farry: Our further and higher education institutions have developed programmes and ways of teaching that give students an insight into entrepreneurship and embed the skills of enterprise.

There is some confusion about the meaning of the terms "entrepreneurship" and "enterprise", and I would like to clarify how my Department uses them. In the educational sense, I believe that enterprise is about developing enterprising

individuals who have personal attributes to enable them to make unique, innovative and creative contributions to the world of work, whether in employment or self-employment. On the other hand, entrepreneurship is supporting those who wish to establish a business. Our further and higher education institutions address both areas in providing for their students. For example, Belfast Metropolitan College offers students an exciting and award-winning creativity programme named FRESH, which is designed to inspire and motivate them to problem solve through a creative process and embed enterprising behaviours as an outcome. Other colleges have similarly innovative ways of encouraging students to acquire an enterprising spirit, which, for some, can develop into a desire to become an entrepreneur.

The business and education through skills and strategy (BEST) awards, which were introduced in May 2011 by Colleges NI, were designed to celebrate the creativity and innovation of the sector and, in particular, to recognise the excellent project-based learning taking place across the colleges. In an increasingly competitive labour market, higher education institutions must provide graduates with opportunities to develop a portfolio of skills, attributes and experiences that will set them apart in the world of employment, and that very much includes entrepreneurship.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he know whether there is much of a difference between the number of students in further and higher education who start their own business?

Dr Farry: It is fair to say that we do not yet have enough people across the board in Northern Ireland who establish their own business. In so far as we are successful in providing people with the right skills for employers, we do not yet have enough people who are prepared to go out and start their own business. It is not as much a part of our culture as it is in some other societies, so it is important that we try to engender such a culture in everything from careers advice to the further education colleges and higher education institutions that offer that support. I draw attention to some of the very innovative work happening in further education, where more and more students are being supported in creating a business. Indeed, we encourage businesses to come to further education to find gaps in research to be addressed. Through

that type of collaboration, we will encourage more students to go into business directly.

Mr Ross: One of the best ways to inspire and encourage young people is through the use of role models. Is any thought being given to, perhaps, working with Invest Northern Ireland to establish local role models who could help to inspire young people to start up their own business or get involved in some innovative ideas?

Dr Farry: We would be happy to take forward such discussions with Invest Northern Ireland. Of course, it has the lead on entrepreneurship, and there are a number of mentoring programmes at present, although they tend to concentrate on those who are slightly beyond the stage of being in a college or university setting. I agree with the Member that, potentially, we can do a bit more work to bring in business more directly to encourage individuals who show a flair for entrepreneurship.

Mrs Overend: Connections between businesses and the further and higher education institutions are really important. Could the institutions do more? Could they be more welcoming and listen more to businesses to improve those connections and inspire young people in business?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. If we broaden this slightly beyond direct support for entrepreneurship and talk about the role and relevance of universities and colleges to the economy, we can then look, for example, to the higher education strategy, which places at its centre what universities can do to support the economy. Businesses should be interacting with universities and colleges in a range of ways, from providing advice on curriculum content to providing placements for students to gain invaluable work experience. One of the most critical areas in which we need to improve is employability skills. Our colleges and universities can provide the knowledge and/or technical skills required, but employability skills cannot be taught in a vacuum, so it is important that businesses collaborate with our institutions to provide work placements in particular.

Energy Sector: Opportunities for the Unemployed

9. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department aims to maximise the opportunities for unemployed people in the sustainable energy and energy efficiency sectors of the economy. (AQO 5721/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department offers a wide range of provision to help the unemployed and employers in all sectors, including the sustainable energy and energy efficiency sectors, to equip their workforce with the right skills to help to drive their business. The further education colleges, for example, provide a range of courses specific to the needs of the sustainable energy sector that may assist those who are unemployed to gain qualifications or develop skills in areas such as renewable energy production or technologies. They include foundation degrees specialising in wind technology and renewable energies. Colleges also offer a variety of professional and technical courses at different levels that are relevant to the renewable energy sector. Courses cover topics such as solar energy, sustainable business practices, responsible sourcing of materials, biomass heating systems and wind turbine specification and installation.

I recognise the importance of high-grade welding skills to not just the sustainable energy and energy efficiency sectors but the wider engineering industry in Northern Ireland. A range of training to level-3 standard is available through the further education college network to provide the accredited qualifications that the sector needs. In addition, the Assured Skills programme provided £140,000 to upskill two Belfast Metropolitan College lecturers and to train four NVQ assessors in wind turbine maintenance, to upskill a further five lecturers in hydraulics training relevant to the renewables sector and to develop level-3 hydraulics qualifications with City and Guilds.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that a community employment scheme in the sector would be an effective way to address not only energy inefficiency but unemployment?

Dr Farry: At present, we have schemes that are trying to address unemployment. In particular, we have the youth employment scheme. We also want to work in collaboration with employers on their training needs. In particular, we have the skills solution service, which is a one-stop shop for employers to talk through and find the most appropriate scheme for attracting and training their required staff. Bridge to Employment also offers a means by which unemployed people can be attracted into businesses and provided with the relevant skills to be taken forward.

As we look to the future, particularly with the review of public administration, at a more

localised level and through the future community planning powers that councils will have, the opportunity will be there to better scope skill levels and to engage with the relevant FE colleges that serve the very particular aspects of the economy in different parts of Northern Ireland.

Area-planning Steering Group

10. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what input his Department has had in the area planning steering group since attending the first meeting on 6 November 2013. (AQO 5722/11-15)

Dr Farry: The area planning steering group's role is to coordinate and oversee the continuing development of the education and library boards' area plans to embed a single approach to area planning for schools. The Department has been represented at the last three meetings of the area planning steering group to ensure that the planning process takes account of the provision at further education colleges. Area planning should make full use of the effective partnership working that exists already between schools and further education colleges. That will help to ensure that the education system can respond to the needs of pupils and the skills required in growing the economy. For example, in considering accommodation and innovative approaches to curriculum delivery, consideration should be taken of further education colleges' state-of-the-art buildings, equipment, expertise and local employer knowledge. Those are all available for use by schools to make the curriculum provided through the entitlement framework stimulating for pupils and relevant to the world of work. I believe that the policy for 14-to-19-year-old school pupils should seek to address the core issues of access to a full, relevant and motivating curriculum that has an appropriate balance between high-quality academic and vocational provision. My Department's input to the work of the area planning steering group can help to ensure that the important contribution that the further education sector can make is recognised and utilised to the full.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer. In working out the policy implications of his Department's involvement on the steering group, can he expand somewhat on how those working relationships will translate into capital projects? I am well aware that he currently has money that he has to spend, and I am aware of capital money that is proposed to be spent in the Department of Education. Is there any meeting of minds so that the maximum benefit

is gained from a substantial amount of capital provision in the two Departments?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief, please.

Dr Farry: I am happy to have those conversations. The Member is right to stress the importance of trying to coordinate what we do. I want to ensure that we make a rounded offer to young people that includes academic and vocational alternatives. In many respects, the FE system has the economies of scale to provide a more effective vocational offer than could be offered in the school system.

2.30 pm

As we look to the future in area planning, it is important that full recognition is given to the opportunities that exist in the FE sector, rather than diverting resources into trying to replicate what happens in the FE sector and duplicating the provision that we already have at the expense of doing something more effective with those resources. I am confident that, through effective engagement within the structures, we can have a solution that works for the best interests of young people right across the board.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Salisbury Report: Further Education

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his reaction to a report published by Robert Salisbury that indicated that industrial relations in the six further education colleges are not fit for purpose. (AQT 841/11-15)

Dr Farry: I very much welcome Sir Robert Salisbury's report, which will hopefully provide a new beginning for human resources relations in the FE sector. It is important to stress that Colleges NI commissioned the report, and it was reported to them. This was not imposed on the sector; indeed, the sector was quite proactive in taking it forward. The Member will recall that such a process was one of the recommendations arising from the McConnell report on the industrial relations situation in North West Regional College.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the report, the current system is described as "largely ineffective and dysfunctional", and a complete overhaul has

been recommended. Will the Minister seek to implement that?

Dr Farry: The Member will be aware that 17 recommendations are contained in the Salisbury report. I believe that, holistically, those recommendations will create a new beginning for industrial relations. Indeed, Colleges NI is happy to endorse the recommendations that it has received and is now engaging with various stakeholders to implement them. I am happy with the report's content and the commitment to deliver upon its recommendations.

STEM Subjects

2. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what he is doing to encourage more people to stay in the North to benefit the economy here, given that, in 2012-13, 46% of Northern Ireland-domiciled students at UK higher education institutions were engaged in a broad STEM subject, while 23% were engaged in a narrow STEM subject. (AQT 842/11-15)

Dr Farry: First of all, the Member is right to put emphasis on STEM subjects. Tomorrow, I head to the United States to talk with the US State Department and a number of organisations about how we can further explore opportunities for the United States Government and businesses to support our STEM agenda locally.

We have taken forward initiatives to create the space and opportunity for more training and education in STEM. First, we have expanded the number of university places by 1,350 through to 2015-16. All those are in STEM subjects. We have also doubled the number of publicly supported PhDs in Northern Ireland. Again, all those are in areas of economic relevance.

The Member will also be aware that we are concluding a major review of apprenticeships. The idea there is to make sure that we provide a form of advanced vocational training that is highly relevant to the world of work. As our economy moves more and more into STEM-related areas, I expect that that form of apprenticeship training will reflect that change.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister. Will he give his assessment of schemes such as the free graduate boot camp that the University of Ulster is running? What impact could they have in encouraging students to stay or to compete in the labour market here?

Dr Farry: A lot of good initiatives are being taken forward, whether it is by the University of Ulster, Queen's University, the Open University or, indeed, our schools and further education colleges. When representatives of the US Government visited us at the end of January, they were very impressed by the commitment here and by some of the initiatives being taken forward. Where the challenge lies locally is in scaling up and expanding those to ensure that more and more young people go through those experiences and get a real love of science, technology and engineering. It will be through that approach that we will increase the number of locally based people able to provide jobs in the new economy.

Stranmillis University College

3. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, alluding to the question asked by Mr Allister earlier, when the review of the future of Stranmillis University College is concluded, to give us a cast-iron guarantee that the ethos of Stranmillis, which is so important to many people in the Province, is retained. (AQT 843/11-15)

I hope that before he jets off to the United States, the Minister will find time to congratulate Kelly Gallagher on her outstanding success at the Paralympics, particularly as he is a Member for North Down.

Dr Farry: I am not sure that I will be doing a detour from the flight plan to the United States to go to Sochi. However, I certainly join the Member in passing on my congratulations on an outstanding achievement for Bangor and for Northern Ireland as a whole.

We are looking at a way forward for teacher education that provides a rounded solution that meets the needs of Northern Ireland society as a whole. I firmly believe that we have to have a system of teacher training in which any individual can be trained to work in any type of school and in any sector of our education system. I believe that there are a number of different formats in which that can be achieved.

The Member refers to the ethos of Stranmillis, but I would stress that Stranmillis is not and should not be viewed as an exclusive training college for the controlled sector. Although its enrolment figures may contain a majority of Protestants, they are much more diverse than people might at first recognise. Indeed, its ethos is one of sharing and of providing teachers for across the spectrum of provision.

Mr Wells: I know from personal experience that the Minister is absolutely right: Stranmillis is extremely mixed. The difference is, of course, that it is not a Catholic teacher training college like St Mary's, and there is a concern that this merger could lead to a diminution of the tradition of Stranmillis, which is so important —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to the question, please?

Mr Wells: — and has educated so many good teachers.

Dr Farry: In some ways, the Member is right, first of all, that we should not draw or seek to draw a parallel between Stranmillis and St Mary's. That often happens, but they are not established in the same manner. They have different histories and different traditions that have built up over time, and they have different forms of governance.

Stranmillis should be there for the entire spectrum of schools. There are anomalies in the system about which there is a sense of injustice in terms of equal opportunities. Those are things that I want to see addressed on the back of the current review of teacher training infrastructure. It is important that we look towards a shared future and ensure that we have a teacher training system in Northern Ireland that is very much in keeping with that ethos.

A&E Doctors: Training and Retention

4. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what discussions he has had with the Health Minister on the training and retention of emergency doctors in the North, given the ongoing crisis in our A&E departments. (AQT 844/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have not had any direct conversations with my counterpart, the Health Minister, in regard to that. However, the Member should be aware that the setting of those numbers is a matter for the Department of Health. Indeed, it part-funds the training of doctors in our system. I encourage the Member to direct those comments to the Minister of Health, but I fully understand his point.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. I take on board the points that he has made. In light of those comments, what can your Department do to increase the

number of emergency doctors that we train and, most important, maintain their numbers and possibly recruit them back from places such as Australia, to where we see a large number of emergency doctors fleeing?

Dr Farry: In the event of greater funding from the Department of Health — it is for the Health Minister to judge whether that is appropriate — we can commit to responding to the institutional setting for that. As the Member will know, we have a new vice-chancellor of Queen's University who comes from a medical background, so those issues will be to the forefront.

From my knowledge beyond my remit as Minister for Employment and Learning, I do not think that the issue is purely to do with the number of doctors being trained. It is about ensuring that the doctors who are trained are attracted to working in the field of accident and emergency as opposed to other specialties.

University Admissions: North and South

5. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the South and what discussions have taken place between UCAS and CAO about the perceived CAO inequality that prevents students from the North accessing third-level courses in the South. (AQT 845/11-15)

Dr Farry: This is an ongoing issue and is, indeed, of deep concern to me and John O'Dowd, the Minister of Education. Trinity College Dublin and Dublin City University recently relaxed their entry requirements to facilitate applications from Northern Ireland more readily. University College Galway is considering making similar moves. However, we are not yet at a stage at which the Central Applications Office and university policy across the board will be uniform to facilitate ease of access.

Looking at the issue from a more strategic level, it is of deep concern that many more students from the South of the island come to the North to study than flow in a North to South direction. There are a number of barriers, and recognition of our qualifications is only one of a number of issues. Others include careers advice and universities in the South of Ireland actively encouraging applications from Northern Ireland.

The Member should also be aware that there are different demographic pressures in the two

parts of the island, which, in the short run, may exacerbate the current inequity in student flows. Our university age population is falling whereas numbers are growing in the South of Ireland. That creates a pressure in its own right.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answer. You are right: the National University of Ireland (NUI) is proactive in addressing the issue. Have you any plans to meet NUI representatives to discuss the issue further?

Dr Farry: Our direct channel of communication is with our counterparts in the Department of Education and Skills in the South. I am due to have a meeting with my counterpart Ruairi Quinn within the next couple of weeks, and I know that John O'Dowd will be having a similar meeting. Officials from both Departments are also meeting regularly at a senior level. It is for us to encourage our colleagues in the South to encourage a change of policy through their arm's-length bodies. That has been a source of ongoing discussion.

Over the past number of years, it has been a source of great frustration, and a number of Members have joined in that frustration at the very slow pace of change. I dare say that a partitionist approach is taken to higher education on the island of Ireland, and I would not necessarily broaden it out into that sort of politics. However, there is much more scope for progress, and not enough has happened over the past months and years.

Stranmillis University College: Board of Governors

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what guarantee he can give that those who will be appointed to the board of governors at Stranmillis will be those people who have an interest in and a defined protection of the ethos and identity of Stranmillis University College, given that, following previous questions about Stranmillis, he will be well aware that his Department is seeking to reconstitute the board of governors, and, given the key role that boards of governors play in other sectors, a board of governors is the gatekeeper of ethos and identity. (AQT 846/11-15)

Dr Farry: I probably need to make two points in response to that question. First, I urge caution in trying to construct a Stranmillis ethos that may be part of the past and does not reflect the reality of where the college stands today. Secondly, the appointment of governors to Stranmillis will, like all such public bodies, be

fully in line with the code on public appointments. There is no political test for those appointments, whether that is to do with what the Member said about potential appointees being signed up to the ethos of Stranmillis or, indeed, for potential governors to be signed up to anything that I have said over the past number of months about the future of teacher training.

2.45 pm

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Rates Revaluation

1. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the non-domestic rates revaluation process. (AQO 5727/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The last revaluation of business properties in Northern Ireland was done in 2003 and based on 2001 rental values. The current revaluation process for the 73,000 non-domestic properties is based on 2013 values and will come into effect in April 2015.

The exercise is about restoring fairness in how the business rates burden is shared. It is essentially about rebalancing the same amount of business rates but using current values to share out the liability.

Land and Property Services (LPS) was engaged, in the second half of 2013, in collecting and analysing rental information, building cost data and other business information. Detailed work on the valuation phase of the revaluation by LPS professional valuation staff is well advanced and on target to produce draft valuations for all offices, shops, warehouses and factories by the end of March.

Other property types will follow over the next four months. All draft values, when completed, will be extensively reviewed and quality-assured until late September, when they will be released in bulk form to councils and my Department to assist with district rate and regional rate projections for 2015-16.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Gregory Campbell. Sorry, I call Michael McGimpsey for his supplementary question.

Mr McGimpsey: That is quite all right, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been called many things in my life but never "Mr Gregory Campbell".

I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. We have 50% rebates for the owners of empty buildings and similar rebates for owners of rented properties above and below a certain valuation. Where does he expect those rebates to sit once his revaluation is completed?

Mr Hamilton: Perhaps the Deputy Speaker thought my answer so comprehensive that it answered the Member's supplementary question.

The revaluation will not have any effect per se on the reliefs and allowances in place, and I have no intention of touching, for example, the relief on vacant properties, which is at 50% and is far more generous than the relief in place across the water. From time to time, I hear some business organisations, and even some Members, say that we should increase that relief to 100%. However, compare us with what happens across the water. In Scotland, there is only 10% relief, and the relief is being done away with completely in England and Wales. The revaluation is, as I said, an attempt to rebalance the rating system so that it is fairer but still raises the same amount of money. The sorts of reliefs and allowances that the Member asked about will not be touched or affected by the revaluation.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister give us his assessment of what the revaluation will do for empty shops in town centres, which, based on the stats that we see, are competing with edge-of-centre and out-of-centre developments?

On the subject of stats, will he join me in congratulating Kelly Gallagher, who is an employee of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), a body for which he is the Minister responsible?

Mr Hamilton: I will deal with the latter point first. I join others in congratulating Kelly on her fantastic success in Sochi this morning. Mr Campbell is right: she is an employee of NISRA, which is part of the Department of Finance and Personnel. She is on a career break, and if members of the Civil Service wish to take career breaks that result in winning Paralympic or Olympic gold medals, they will be very much encouraged in that endeavour.

The issue of empty properties is one that I am well aware of. There is not a town in Northern Ireland that I have visited in my capacity as Finance Minister that has not been affected by empty properties. I visited Coleraine very early on in my tenure, and it was one of the issues raised by traders as something blighting their town centre.

The revaluation cannot and will not deal with empty shops directly. Part of the problem with empty shops in Northern Ireland comes from the fact that there are myriad reasons for their existence, such as advances in technology and people doing their shopping online. Obviously, the growth in large retailers and supermarkets has had a negative impact on many of our town centres. In some ways, there has traditionally been an oversupply of shops in Northern Ireland, and there is little that any change in the rating system can do about that. What I can ensure is that, until the end of 2015, empty property relief, which was introduced by my predecessor and gives 50% relief for empty and vacant properties, will continue into the first year of operation. To date, I am pleased to report that some 229 businesses in Northern Ireland have opened since April 2012 as a result of that policy and are employing hundreds of people across Northern Ireland. That has seen some £791,000 in rates relief go to shops that were previously vacant but are now thriving businesses.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire faoi ghnólaictaí a bhfuil dúil acu go bhfuigheadh siad laghdú sna rátaí a íocann siad. The Minister is probably aware that many businesses are holding out the hope that this revaluation process will bring a reduction in their rates bills. What is the likelihood that those hopes will be fulfilled?

Mr Hamilton: I am not in the business of dashing anyone's hopes, but one has to be realistic in this case. As the Member will know, certainly from his work on the Finance and Personnel Committee, there will be some winners with revaluation as some people will see their rates bill go down. However, some people will see their rates bills go up. The vast majority of people will probably see their rates bill remain more or less the same.

The last time the revaluation was done over a decade ago, the vast majority of people saw their rates change by plus or minus about 20%. I appreciate that there is some hope, having all asked for this revaluation to happen and wanting it to go ahead when it did and not delay it further as it had been already delayed. I

notice that England has delayed theirs for a further two years and the Government there are under heavy criticism because of that. I think that it is right that we proceed, albeit within a challenging environment.

It is incumbent on us all not to raise hopes too high without justification and suggest to everybody that, because of the revaluation, their bills will automatically go down. Some will see their bills go down, but that depends on changes in trends of shopping in particular localities. Perhaps, where large retailers have had a bigger impact on some towns, we might expect to see rates in town centres go down, but that is by no means guaranteed. It is important that we get the message across to people that this is being done in order to try to restore some fairness and balance to the rating system, but that does not necessarily mean that everybody will be a beneficiary.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Revaluation has obviously long been overdue, but there are genuine concerns about the impact that it may have on business overheads. Has the Department carried out an assessment on the extent of the possible impact that this will have on jobs and businesses or does it intend to?

Mr Hamilton: As I mentioned in reply to Mr McGimpsey's question, the work is ongoing and we do not have all the data in place yet to say what the new NAVs for properties will be after the revaluation. We do not know what the rate poundage is for that first year in 2015 when these new valuations become valid, so it is kind of hard to work that out. However, I re-emphasise that the overall rate take will remain the same.

Although some people will see their rates go up a little and some will see their rates go down a little, overall cost to business through non-domestic rating in Northern Ireland will not change at all as a result of this valuation. As I said, I expect that there will be some people who will win and some who will lose, but, for the bulk of people, it will remain more or less the same.

Public Sector Reform

2. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any public sector reform proposals he has discussed with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Mr Brendan Howlin TD. (AQO 5728/11-15)

7. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the work carried out by the public sector reform division. (AQO 5733/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will take questions 2 and 7 together.

I met the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Brendan Howlin TD — I am glad that the Member changed his original question, otherwise he would have had a very short answer — to discuss the approach to reform being taken forward in Republic of Ireland in order to understand how best practice has been applied and how this could be adapted and implemented in Northern Ireland. I have also met John Swinney and his officials, who are responsible for public sector reform in Scotland. I have also accepted an offer to meet Francis Maude, the Cabinet Office Minister. My officials will meet their respective counterparts in Dublin this week to further the discussions on potential areas for collaboration and learning in the area of reform going forward.

The public sector reform division (PSRD) is engaged in building informed and skilled capacity to facilitate the progress of public sector reform and improvement in Northern Ireland and encourage innovation in future service delivery and policy development. The team, which comprises staff from several Departments, has been engaging with a wide number of stakeholders to develop a programme of work and a future action plan, which will incorporate input from other Departments, the community and voluntary sectors, the private sector and other arm's-length bodies to inform methodologies and develop strategic plans.

PSRD staff have also been testing out some of the proposed innovative approaches through collaboration with cross-departmental representatives to garner views and suggestions on how best to support and encourage staff in creating a culture of continuous improvement.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and welcome the fact that he is looking to a number of different places, close to home and further afield in Europe, to inform his public service reform proposals.

Public service reform by the Dublin Government is very much synonymous with proposals to cut public sector jobs, which is something that we should all be concerned about. What guarantee can he give to public sector workers

here in particular that public service reform in the North does not equal job cuts?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am very keen to learn from any jurisdiction; we do not have any monopoly on wisdom in Northern Ireland, no matter what some of us may think. I am prepared to learn from anywhere and everywhere, and I hope that my answer outlined that I am not averse to learning from counterparts in the Irish Republic, Scotland or elsewhere within the United Kingdom or, indeed, across Europe and further afield.

I am not prepared to think about us in isolation because all those states I mentioned — I could quote from a fairly extensive list — are grappling with the same problems that we are, such as decreasing public expenditure, lower growth in the economy and rising public expectations. We all grapple with the same problems, and some of the answers, whilst not directly applicable from one jurisdiction to another, will have some positive learning contained within them.

In some ways, actually, other jurisdictions have things to learn from Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland is, in some areas of reform, a little further behind than Northern Ireland. I know that one of Mr Howlin's ministerial colleagues, Brian Hayes, the Minister responsible for the Office of Public Works, visited Northern Ireland to look at our shared service provision about a year or so ago. There are areas in which they can learn from us, just as there are areas in which we can learn from them.

On the Member's particular point about job losses, the quantity of problems that the Irish Government face in public spending puts them in a slightly different position to us; they are at a slightly different starting point. Our pressures are similar in that we have less public spending but, obviously, they have had to go incredibly fast in cutting the cost of government. We are not coming at that from exactly the same position and, therefore, I can give some assurance that reform is not code for gutting public services and sacking people; in fact, it is quite the opposite. It is about getting the most from what we have and the expenditure that we are putting into public services in Northern Ireland so that our citizens — the people who elect us to serve them here in Stormont — are getting the best possible outcomes.

Mr Ross: I hope that all of us support increased effectiveness and efficiency in the public sector. On that note, will the Minister indicate to the

House what direct engagement he has had with his ministerial colleagues in Northern Ireland and whether they are positively embracing his vision for reform in the public sector?

Mr Hamilton: I have begun a series of engagements with ministerial colleagues on a one-to-one basis, in the initial stages, to outline why I think reform is required and to promote what the public sector reform division in DFP is doing and the areas of work it is developing. I want to get people to see it for what it is, which is a central resource located in DFP for other Departments to use as and when they think it necessary. Of course, reform might be something that I want to positively push and promote, but, ultimately, reforms will remain the responsibility of individual Ministers. I have commenced that direct one-to-one engagement with ministerial colleagues; I have met the Minister of Justice, the Minister for Employment and Learning, the Minister for Social Development, the Enterprise Minister and the Health Minister. I am due to meet the First Minister and deputy First Minister next week, on their return from the United States, and I have meetings lined up with other ministerial colleagues. So far, the reaction has been positive. All Ministers identify that, moving forward, there is a challenge in public spending, but that we will have to continue to improve the services we deliver on behalf of our people. I have had positive responses to the areas of work that we have assigned to the PSRD, and I can see many Ministers seeing the opportunities that the PSRD presents to them. I look forward to developing that initial interest and coming forward with concrete initiatives.

3.00 pm

European Investment Bank

3. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his engagement with the European Investment Bank. (AQO 5729/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I recently attended the official announcement of the University of Ulster's greater Belfast development scheme along with senior officials from the European Investment Bank (EIB). The project, which will provide a significant boost to Belfast city centre and, indeed, the Member's North Belfast constituency, has benefited from £150 million of European Investment Bank financing. Of course, the Executive also recently provided £35 million of financial transactions capital funding to the project.

As the University of Ulster project demonstrates, there may be significant opportunities for Northern Ireland to benefit from the competitive lending rates that the EIB can offer, including, within the new local government structure, the regulated asset base such as our electricity, gas and telecoms infrastructure or, indeed, other private sector projects. I am very keen to see the European Investment Bank fund more projects in Northern Ireland and I intend to engage further with senior officials from the bank in the very near future.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his reply and welcome the £150 million investment in the University of Ulster campus in north Belfast. How will the Minister explore further opportunities for European Investment Bank funding in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: The £150 million loan from the European Investment Bank to the University of Ulster is a real vote of confidence in the university, in Belfast and in Northern Ireland as a whole, and I look forward, over the next number of years as the project rolls out, to seeing that corner of our capital city redeveloped and regenerated for the benefit of not just Belfast but the whole Province.

There are opportunities beyond the University of Ulster project, which was the first direct investment by the EIB in Northern Ireland for over a decade and certainly since the return of devolution in 2007. There are opportunities elsewhere in the university sector, and, in our reformed and reorganised local government, there are opportunities for those new councils, with the new powers that they will get, to perhaps avail themselves of EIB funding.

I will be meeting officials from the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg later this month to hollow out how we might be able to produce and patch together some of the large-scale deals that they are interested in and that would benefit Northern Ireland's infrastructure development.

I also intend to follow it up with a seminar later this month with guests, including local government chief executives and others in the university sector and elsewhere, to look at not just the potential for EIB funding — we should not look at EIB funding as the sole answer to developing infrastructure in Northern Ireland — but other opportunities, including financial transactions capital or other financial instruments such as tax increment financing. I am keen to scope out with local government and other partners the extent of their ambitions

to invest in infrastructure in their areas and see whether the EIB or some of those other options are available.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Will he advise whether the EIB's investment schemes are significantly different from the loans available under the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI)?

Mr Hamilton: There is a technical but nonetheless significant difference in how I and my Department would deal with loans from EIB versus those from RRI. With RRI, we are allowed to borrow from £200 million a year up to a total of £3 billion in Northern Ireland, and we are very close to that at the minute. It is repayable but, significantly, does not score against our balance sheet as a loan coming in and does not come away from the capital departmental expenditure limit that we receive from the Treasury on an annual basis. There is a significant difference with EIB funding. If the Executive were to borrow money from the EIB for a hospital project, education project or even a transport project, the problem is that the Treasury would take what we borrow from the EIB directly from our capital departmental expenditure limit and we would still have interest to repay on the loan.

Instead of being in a better position through taking an EIB loan, we would be in a far worse position because, ultimately, we would be down money. Clearly, we do not want to get into that position, but that does not mean that the option of EIB funding is completely closed down. That is why I am keen to explore opportunities with the likes of local government, those who are in ownership of our regulated asset base, like the energy sector, and elsewhere in the university sector to see whether they, because they do not fall foul of the same Treasury rules, would be keen to look at EIB or, indeed, some of the other financial instruments that are out there.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has just answered my question.

Public Sector Energy Campaign

4. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the operations of the public sector energy campaign. (AQO 5730/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The campaign has two main strands. The first involves the collation, analysis and presentation of data on the energy

use and performance of buildings occupied by the Northern Ireland Departments and other public sector bodies. Officials in my Department are drafting the 2011-12 report. The second strand is the central energy efficiency fund, used to support energy efficiency projects in buildings occupied by public sector bodies in Northern Ireland. Over its lifetime, the fund supported 2,598 projects. My Department has also hosted a series of seminars to raise the profile of energy efficiency for premises officers, departmental energy managers and energy representatives from the wider public sector, and that will continue into the future.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. I have read about a number of the campaign's best practice case studies. Does the Minister have proposals that will ensure that the scheme is rolled out further so that the benefits of reduced energy costs can be appreciated by other public sector bodies?

Mr Hamilton: The scheme was a success when it was in operation, and the Member is right to identify that there were some best practice examples that we are rightly proud of. However, the fund was closed at the end of March 2011, and there were two broad reasons for that. First, the generally short payback periods involved in investing in energy efficiency technology provided a sufficient incentive for public bodies to invest via their departmental budget and use the benefits that accrue over time or via the invest-to-save opportunities that my Department releases from time to time. The second broad reason was that there were other drivers to promote and incentivise energy efficiency, including the carbon reduction commitment energy efficiency scheme, which was formerly known as just the carbon reduction commitment.

At present, I have no plans to reintroduce a scheme like the central energy efficiency fund. One of the reasons is that the new regulations for public sector buildings — the Energy Efficiency (Eligible Buildings) Regulations 2013 — came into force in January. Regulation 5, which comes into practice in June, specifically addresses public bodies and public sector buildings and requires each public sector body to have an energy efficiency plan in place. So, instead of having a fund that Departments or public sector bodies could dip into as they came up with ideas, we have mainstreamed it as a duty on Departments to have energy efficiency plans and to invest their resources in technologies that will release energy efficiency benefits.

Mrs Dobson: There was a finding that the baseline was not sufficiently robust to measure targets. Has that been corrected? What were the main results for the past five years?

Mr Hamilton: As I mentioned in my answer to the original question, we are still finalising the most recent results, which are for 2011-12. I will be keen to reflect on what improvements have been made in that period.

This is an incredibly important area of work, although it is maybe not the most upfront piece of work by the Department. However, it is incredibly important that we look after our public sector estate, which is quite sizeable and quite old, and try not only to reduce its carbon footprint but to increase its energy efficiency. We have identified that in our departmental plans as an area in which monetary savings can be made. I am keen to make sure that that area is pursued. I am not convinced that the energy campaign that we had before, which, as I said in response to Mrs Cochrane, had a fund that Departments could bid for, was absolutely the right way to do it. Perhaps that is why some of those problems developed over time. I think that mainstreaming it, as we are, through a regulatory duty is probably a better way to get the results that we want.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Have the Minister and his colleagues conducted any assessment of the value of LED public street lighting, particularly its financing, given the potentially vast savings involved?

Mr Hamilton: Principally, it will be a responsibility for my colleague the Minister for Regional Development. Without trying to answer for him — I know that it is an occupational hazard for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to get asked questions about everybody's responsibility — I can say that I think that the Minister and Roads Service have been rolling out LED lights and street lighting right across Northern Ireland. I have seen some of them in my constituency and elsewhere, and I am convinced that it will save money. It would obviously have to be done on a case-by-case basis and the business case would need to be robust, but I will not be found wanting in trying to fund that sort of work. In fact, a lot of the money that we have given to DRD through monitoring rounds this year and in previous years has been specifically for street lighting. I imagine that, when that hits the ground and is rolled out, it will be in exactly the format that the Member is talking about.

Belfast Transport Hub

5. Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had regarding the proposed new Belfast transport hub. (AQO 5731/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Although the detail of the proposed new Belfast transport hub is a subject for the Regional Development Minister, it is something that I have discussed with a view to exploring potential funding options. My officials have been engaged with DRD regarding the potential use of financial transactions capital to fund the project. It is also one of the projects that I was referring to last week and, indeed, earlier, when I said that I want to personally follow up the possibility of further European Investment Bank investment in Northern Ireland when I have talks with bank officials in Luxembourg later this month.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his answer. The scheme has huge economic benefits for the whole of Northern Ireland, not just the city of Belfast. Does the Minister see the proposed new transport hub in Belfast as an opportunity to partner with the private sector?

Mr Hamilton: I see it as the perfect opportunity to do that. I know that Mr Spratt, in his capacity as Chair of the Committee for Regional Development, has been very supportive of the scheme since its inception. The proposed Belfast transport hub would be in his South Belfast constituency. I think that it is a perfect opportunity and a fantastic project. I want to support the project and the DRD Minister in taking it forward. That is why I have been personally engaged with him on it and have authorised officials to do likewise with his officials. It would represent an excellent modern infrastructure and a new gateway into Belfast and Northern Ireland and would be an integrated public transport hub for our capital city.

Where, I think, it has the opportunity to be a proper beneficial public/private partnership is in the obvious potential for the development of office space. I think that DRD has earmarked around 10 acres for about one million square feet of mixed-used development on the site. Although we will do the transport bit pretty well in government, mixed-use developments and office space is not something that we do in government. So, if we are to avail ourselves of the huge opportunities on the site in Great Victoria Street, it would be an ideal opportunity for us to partner with the private sector. That is

why I have spoken to the Regional Development Minister about potentially using financial transactions or capital that requires us in government to directly partner with the private sector. Given that that opportunity exists, I believe, it might mean that a scheme that might have taken several years to come to fruition might be advanced much more quickly.

Mr Cree: I am interested in the Minister's responses. The hub has the potential to create quite a lot of economic growth and to probably increase property values. Can the Minister advise whether there is a strategic plan in place that includes stakeholders to ensure that we make the maximum use of the development?

Mr Hamilton: The Minister for Regional Development and his Department are very much in the lead in taking the scheme forward. My involvement, as you might expect, is to try to find the money to make it happen. Moving forward, investment in our infrastructure — you will hear me talking about this all the time — is key to growing our economy again, particularly where it involves reviving the private sector side of the equation. As the Member will know from his membership of the Committee, the public sector has kept up its side of the balance; in fact, it has kept up an increasing side of the balance over the past number of years. We need to reinvigorate our private sector, and this is an opportunity to do that. He is absolutely right: given the strategic nature of the site, there is a huge opportunity to create new jobs and, perhaps, to answer some other issues and questions that we have, including the development of grade A office accommodation in and around the city centre. To see this as solely a transport issue would be wrong. We need to widen it out and see it as being strategically important for the whole of Northern Ireland and to develop it accordingly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions for oral answer to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. We move now to 15 minutes of topical questions.

3.15 pm

Going for Growth: Additional Funding

1. Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will support the Agriculture Minister in her bid for additional funding to support the Going for Growth strategy, in light of the reduced bids budget in

the rural development programme. (AQT 851/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Responsibility for the rural development programme remains with the Minister of Agriculture. If she believes that there is a shortfall in the programme, it is her responsibility to come forward with bids at the appropriate time when we get to the Budget next year.

Mr McAleer: I am reflecting on the irony of the Minister's response, given that it was a court challenge initiated by him that resulted in this decision in many ways. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development or any of his Executive colleagues about the possibility of Executive funding to bridge this gap?

Mr Hamilton: I would rather not have spent part of the Christmas break with lawyers in the High Court in Belfast fighting a case, which, I want to put on record and remind people, I, of course, won. I would rather that we had not had to do that. I would rather the Minister had taken a much more mature and sensible approach to the issue. If she had, a resolution could perhaps have been found. However, she left me with no option but to go to the court and, of course, to win that case, which showed that she had breached the ministerial code. I do not think that there is any irony in that regard.

I have been on record repeatedly, before the case and after it, saying that some of the schemes that are funded by the rural development programme, particularly those that diversify our rural economy, are schemes that I am supportive of. In respect of the likes of Going for Growth, I have been on record as saying that I will not be found wanting when bids come forward for funding to exploit the huge potential that there is within the agrifood sector in Northern Ireland. Of course, however, those are issues for the Minister of Agriculture, primarily, to come forward with appropriate bids for, at appropriate times, for Executive funds, which are, of course, as everyone in the House will know, scarce.

Economy: Assessment

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the current state of the Northern Ireland economy. (AQT 852/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I think that our economy is improving. There are almost daily signs that our economy is moving in the right direction and that we are well on the road to economic

recovery after five or six very difficult years in Northern Ireland. I very much welcome the publication today of the latest Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index, which has shown a further sharp rise in business activity in the private sector. It is encouraging to see new business starting to develop, employment going up and exports going up, and some firms are even reporting backlogs of work within their business. All in all, coupling that with our official statistics in respect of unemployment, our economic growth of 1.2% between quarter 3 of last year and quarter 3 of the year before, the fact that housing market activity is starting to accelerate and, as I think I saw last week, the fact that new car registrations in Northern Ireland rose by 20% last year, I think that our economy is moving slowly but surely in the right direction, albeit with the odd bump on the road to recovery.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his reply, which I have listened to very diligently. It was quite comprehensive. However, there is great concern at the lack of clarity about the scale of the Ulster Bank's future operation, which, in turn, is causing concern among staff and clients. Does the Minister agree with the latest remarks from the Institute of Chartered Accountants that banks pose a threat to recovery?

Mr Hamilton: I think that everyone in the House, no matter what we have seen in our constituencies and no matter what our experience of businesses operating in our own localities, would agree that we absolutely need our banks to do their job, even if some of them have not been doing their job over the last number of years. I absolutely understand the points that constituents are making to Lord Morrow; they make the same points to me, and I know that they make them to many Members. There are employees of Ulster Bank who are not entirely sure about what the future holds for them.

A few weeks ago, along with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, I met Ross McEwan, chief executive of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) Group. I am in regular contact with Jim Brown, chief executive of Ulster Bank, and Ellvena Graham, head of Ulster Bank in Northern Ireland. As you would expect, we have sought assurances on what the bank will look like in Northern Ireland.

We need to emphasise how important Ulster Bank is to the economy of Northern Ireland: it is by far our biggest bank, with a huge market share of business customers. However, it is clear from those conversations and from the

review that was published a couple of weeks ago that, moving forward, the Ulster Bank in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in Ireland as a whole will be a much smaller bank. When I listen to them talk about how online transactions and telephone banking are increasing exponentially, it is easy to see why the branch structure will not be as big as it is currently, albeit that it will be incredibly hard when it does impact.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty about which branches will close and how many people will be retained in employment by the bank, I am somewhat assured that the Ulster Bank brand is here to stay; that credit decisions will still be taken in Belfast; that the board of the Ulster Bank will remain in place; and that, to improve service, there will be better integration between Ulster Bank and RBS in IT and the products that they provide. I share the Member's concerns, but there is some positive news in the review that Ulster Bank will not be subsumed into RBS and therefore done away with as a local bank.

Public Sector Reform

3. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the work and progress of the public sector reform division, the establishment of which he announced last August. (AQT 853/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am tempted to refer the Member to the answer that I gave a few minutes ago. The reform division was established in the early autumn and has been busy developing a programme of work since. It is looking at a range of issues that are troubling not just our public sector but public sectors across Europe and further afield. It is working with other Departments, as I mentioned in response to Mr Ross's question. I am engaging with other Ministers to show that the public sector reform division, which is a small core staff that has drawn staff from the old performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) and from business consultancy services, is already working in partnership with some Departments, including the Department of Agriculture on a particular project, and will extend that work to other Departments to bring not just efficiencies in how we deliver services but clear improvements and better outcomes in our service delivery in Northern Ireland.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister outline whether the division will include in its consideration the

privatisation or outsourcing of work that is currently carried out in the public sector?

Mr Hamilton: That is not an issue that the division is looking at, although I am not averse to working with people from outside the public sector. As I said, I do not think that any of us has a monopoly on wisdom, and the same goes for Governments. Governments should be actively working not just with the private sector but also with the third sector. We could bring in external expertise for some of our work; for example, the task-and-finish group format or using innovation labs, which we are actively looking at.

In answering some of the big social and economic problems that we face in Northern Ireland, thinking that we have the answers solely in the public sector is wrong. We need to draw in experience. I have no ideological hang-up about who delivers public services, and I think that that is mirrored in the views of the public in Northern Ireland. In fact, many of our services are delivered by social enterprises, third-sector organisations and charities. There is huge potential for more of the work that we are doing, but not always succeeding in to achieve the right outcomes, to be done by the third sector.

I am keen to look at alternative models of service delivery such as social enterprises, charities and community and voluntary organisations. I am also keen to look at how we could develop a mutual sector in public services in Northern Ireland, again giving workers, who tend to know how such things work best, a lot more power in delivering services. We will look at a wide range of areas, but, as I said in response to Mr McKay, this is not about the wholesale privatisation of public services in Northern Ireland.

Financial Transactions Capital

4. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to advise, if possible, whether all the financial transactions capital (FTC) that has been allocated to Northern Ireland will be spent during the current year. (AQT 854/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Not all the money allocated this year will be spent this year. Along with other devolved Administrations in the United Kingdom, I was successful in negotiating a flexibility. We are allowed to move up to 20% of expenditure this year rolled into next year, which is roughly £8 million of our FTC allocation. Next year, the figure is 10% from a total of about £60 million. The Chief Secretary

allowed us to do that because he realised that this was a new device and we were developing various projects, many of which were in their infancy. He realised that some flexibility was required. We have successfully negotiated that, and some £5 million has gone unspent this year. That is allowed to be rolled into next year, which means that no money has been lost to the Northern Ireland Budget.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister indicate whether he expects the funding through the financial transactions capital to grow over the next two or three years?

Mr Hamilton: I do, and there is good evidence that that will be the case. The current year is the first year, and, as I said, we have a £40 million budget this year and £60 million next year. It then rises quite rapidly to £127 million for the following year, which, as the Member and the House will appreciate, is a large amount of money and, at 10%, a large percentage of our overall total capital budget. That poses a challenge for me and for Executive colleagues to come up with the type of project that we talked about earlier that will fit neatly into that public-private partnership approach. The figure of £127 million may not be the final level of FTC for 2015-16. I am not certain, but I expect that next week's Budget announcement may see a further switch from current expenditure to capital and that FTC will be the vehicle that will be used to increase capital expenditure moving forward. The figure may rise beyond £60 million next year and £127 million the following year, which will pose huge challenges for us as an Executive.

Housing Market

5. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his views on how the local housing market is performing. (AQT 855/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I answered Lord Morrow in positive terms about the economy in general, and I think that we can be confident about the housing market. Confidence is returning to our housing market. In quarter 4 of last year, house sales were at 4,800, which was a six-year high, and house sales in the Member's constituency were among the highest and had the best prices. Those 4,800 sales represented a 28% increase on the same quarter in 2012, so, after many years of there being little or no activity in private housing in Northern Ireland, we are at last seeing confidence return. The housing market is more buoyant and is moving forward, no

matter what the Chancellor or the governor of the Bank of England might say.

Mr McQuillan: What are the Minister's thoughts on recent reports about negative equity in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: This time last week, I read reports in the press about negative equity being a particular problem in Northern Ireland. I accept that it is a problem here, just as it is a problem elsewhere. I will attach one health warning to the figures that were widely reported in the press: it was reported that 41% of mortgages were in negative equity, but the fine print states that it is 41% of mortgages taken out since 2005 that are in negative equity, so it is a considerably lower percentage of the total number of mortgages. Mortgages taken out since 2005 account for less than 10% of our total housing stock in Northern Ireland. It is bad, and I accept that it is bad. Negative equity is bad because it obviously stops people moving, but it also saps the confidence of people who maybe want to move but do not, for fear of getting caught up in it. We want to see some positive progress. I am not sure about some of the wild ideas out there that government should somehow financially get involved in the area. Hopefully a rising, more buoyant and more confident property market will resolve many of the negative equity problems in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while we change the top Table.

3.30 pm

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Legal Highs

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 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 Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the open sale of psychoactive substances known as "legal highs", which are being sold under false pretences, by using disclaimers such as "not fit for human consumption", when, in reality, young people are becoming addicted to them; notes the damage such substances cause to the lives of young people; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals, including pursuing emergency legislation, to restrict the sale of these substances.

I thank the Business Committee for bringing this very important motion to the House today.

Anyone walking into any of the head shops in Northern Ireland today would be forgiven for thinking that drug abuse is legal in this country. New psychoactive substances, commonly called "legal highs", can be purchased across the counter with the same ease as that with which we pop into our local supermarket to do the weekly grocery shopping. In the same way as we can collect loyalty points for our groceries, drug taking is being normalised by the rewarding of loyalty points for purchasing such products in conjunction with drug-taking paraphernalia and all sorts of weird and wonderful gadgetry aimed at making your drug-taking experience more pleasurable.

The online market in legal highs is also exploding. In that lucrative market, a website that claims to be probably the number one head shop in the UK openly sells all manner of drug-taking equipment in conjunction with urine neutralisers, which have apparently saved thousands of skins in the war against drugs, with a full list of instructions on how to evade getting caught taking them. That is against a backdrop in which so-called legal highs are sold legally by sellers hiding behind thinly veiled disclaimers that the products are not fit for human consumption, when it is clearly evident that their sole use is for human consumption.

It is imperative that we tackle the issue of the unregulated availability of these drugs. Cannabis, heroin and marijuana are old news. The so-called legal highs are slick impersonations of banned illegal drugs but are more lethal and more potent than any of the outlawed products, the effects of which they are designed to mimic. Hanging around seedy street corners trying to locate a dealer is no longer the case for users. Head shops are available all over the country, and the rise in online purchases of these products is alarming.

A so-called legal high is a drug that is not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and is therefore legal to possess. However, although not regulated by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, those substances are regulated by the Medicines Act 1968, which means that it is illegal to sell, supply or advertise them for human consumption. It is that loophole in legislation that ensures that manufacturers of those products are able to package legal drugs in highly attractive packaging deliberately targeted at our young people. All they need to do is label the package with the disclaimer "not fit for human consumption". They are openly proffering their wares in towns and cities all around the UK and on the Internet. There is something badly wrong with the legislative system in this country when that loophole in the law enables such brazen practices, which are setting our young people on the path to destruction and, in tragic cases, death. Manufacturers are not held accountable for what they are doing, and the statutory agencies sit back and wring their hands in despair that nothing can be done.

Another problem with legal highs that makes them notoriously difficult to police and control is the sophistication behind the rapid development of new products. One of the most widely recognised drug monitoring groups, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), stated that 280 potentially harmful legal highs were produced in 2012 in Europe alone. It is estimated that a new product is brought to the market every week in the UK. Given the immense scale of the problem, governments, statutory agencies and community groups have hit a brick wall in trying to control, monitor or restrict the sale of those products. The rapidly evolving drug landscape seems, on the surface, to be impossible to man. The Government and the law are constantly playing catch-up with the suppliers, who have sophisticated mechanisms to produce more and more effective concoctions. Banning named brands, such as Magic Dragon, is not the answer, because as soon as one product is banned, suppliers will

go back to their manufacturers and, within days, their chemists will provide a slight tweak to the ingredients and have a new creation ready for the market the following week. What is needed is a ban on generic substances of a particular type and class that are found in many different brands.

Scientific data is scant, if available at all, due to rapid development, turnaround and manufacturing. Scientific research lags behind highly sophisticated manufacturing processes. When a young person takes some form of product, they have no guarantee of what is in the substance, the concentration of dosage or what symptoms they will experience. After admission to hospital, when something goes wrong after taking a legal high, toxicologists can be fighting a losing battle against the clock in an effort to even begin to determine what has been taken, never mind the dosage. By taking legal highs, a person is gambling with their life, and the stakes are high. In most cases, young people have no idea how lethal, potent and dangerous the product that they are taking is. Potent, dangerous and fatal products are freely available across Northern Ireland and online. Our children could potentially buy legal highs with two clicks online.

The disparity is ridiculous. How is it that, in this day and age, with the sophistication of technology and advances in legislation, it is possible for manufacturers to get around the law in such a simple manner and for such deadly products to be freely available on the market? In my constituency, there is a head shop in the centre of Omagh town. The owner does a lucrative trade in legal highs labelled as potpourri, incense or bath salts. The seemingly innocent exterior of the shop masks a lucrative trade in products that are destroying the lives of our young people.

In the absence of published data on those products, it is necessary to rely on anecdotal reports from users. One of my constituents, a 24-year-old man, is an example of a young person who got hooked on legal highs. His initial introduction was to a substance called Bumblebee. He started taking them as a social activity to fit in with others. The packages had no warnings on them, and he became heavily addicted. Looking back, he reports that he was addicted within one week of taking them. He then started smoking another product called Magic Dragon, which he described as smokable heroin. If he took it with alcohol, he became violently ill, and so he smoked it without mixing it with other substances. Initially, it gave him a high, but he described the never-ending cycle of constantly chasing for the next hit.

After coming off those drugs, and almost six months on from treatment, he still cannot work due to suffering from depression, and he still has days when he has no motivation or cannot even get out of bed. That is one example of a young man who had a good job and a good wage and who has lost everything as a result of the addiction to legal highs. The sale of those goods not only affects the young people who go there for their next fix, it has been linked to the rise in suicides in our area. The side effects of those drugs are diverse, and many report extreme lows after taking them, which could contribute to the feelings of hopelessness and depression experienced by many young people in Northern Ireland today.

It is high time that we tackled legal highs head on. I believe that legal highs must be regulated by the Misuse of Drugs Act and should not hide behind the Medicines Act 1968, as the reality is that those substances have no known medicinal use.

A new approach in the battle to control those substances is required. In recent weeks, we have seen how Belfast City Council handled a landmark case and was successful in removing substances from head shops across the city. Orders were granted against the head shop owners as safety and labelling information was deemed to be inadequate. Although I welcome that action, which paves the way for the management of enforcement of legal highs, it does not address the root problem. Although it is a step in the right direction, I feel that it does not go far enough. It is not enough to shake our heads and condemn the sale of those substances and, due to complications surrounding legislation, lament the fact that nothing can be done. We have to do something and look at the problem from an alternative angle to find a solution to rid our society in Northern Ireland of this highly sophisticated, dangerous and misleading scourge. Every delay means that our young people are being unwittingly dragged into an addiction that can have far-reaching implications —

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

Mr Buchanan: — for their health, their employment, their families and their relationships. In some cases, it can lead to death.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion, which calls for a change in the legislation. If we look at other jurisdictions — I will focus on two

that have changed their laws recently — we see that they have proved to be very successful in tackling the problem of legal highs being sold, particularly through outlets known as head shops. In the South of Ireland, the proliferation of head shops across the Twenty-six Counties caused a wave of controversy and protest from communities. The authorities responded by introducing the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010. Prior to that, the Department of Health had raised serious concerns regarding the scale of substances that were causing negative effects on young people and, in some cases, death. The new Act banned a long list of legal highs; 200 different types were deemed illegal. Beforehand, the authorities could only tackle each substance as it arrived on the market, meaning that the law was merely playing catch-up. The new Irish law was passed to prohibit the sale, in general, of any dangerous or harmful psychoactive substance. As a result, 150 head shops closed overnight.

As Mr Buchanan said, we must reflect on the dangers of those substances. They are legally defined as substances that have the capacity to stimulate or depress the central nervous system, resulting in significant changes to motor function, thinking or behaviour. Under the new law in the South, an Garda Síochána is empowered to intervene immediately by serving a prohibition notice on an offender. If the offender does not comply with that notice, the courts can issue a prohibition order. Selling, advertising and non-compliance with the prohibition order can carry a five-year prison term.

3.45 pm

In similar fashion, Poland passed a new law last year eliminating the open sale of psychoactive substances not controlled under drug laws, which resulted in the closure of 1,200 head shops. The new law had been prompted by reports from Polish hospitals of young people arriving in hospital with conditions consistent with poisoning caused by those substances. As in the South of Ireland, the new Polish law punished suppliers rather than users.

The law here is inadequate, as the previous Member who spoke said, and Belfast City Council is to be commended for recently seeking the court's permission to destroy seized substances that were believed to be legal highs. The council's argument was that the labelling and safety information on the products were inadequate. The seller no longer supplies those products. However, the key point here is that other substances may have replaced those

that were found to be unsafe. We cannot have a situation where individual councils are chasing after those suppliers. Just because a substance is legal does not mean that it is safe. These products are a risk to the user's health because production is not regulated and the buyer cannot be certain as to what is in them or what their potential effects might be.

The law needs to be changed, and I support the motion.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I support the motion. Legal highs are an ongoing and increasing problem in our society, and it is incumbent on the House to do all it can to limit the availability of psychoactive drugs and inform those who may be faced with the choice of taking them of the acute dangers that they present. This debate gives us the opportunity to do just that.

The phenomenon of "legal highs", which is a misleading term, originates in a gap in the legislation. The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 does not specifically prohibit the sale or use of legal substances, despite the harmful effects they may have. We are told that, under section 151 of, and schedule 17 to, the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 powers are now available to temporarily ban for up to a maximum of 12 months any substance that does not fall under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and that may be capable of producing harmful effects. The question is this: is that enough, and is it curbing the presence of those drugs in society? We do not believe so.

The words:

"having, or is capable of having, harmful effects"

are particularly relevant. Legal highs often make use of disclaimers such as, "not fit for human consumption", but their content is not always clearly identifiable. Disclaimers do not say why the substances are unsuitable or how they may negatively affect someone's health. Any drug that is intended for human consumption undergoes rigorous medical testing under the auspices of the Medicines Act 1968. These drugs have not been tested in that way and often have not been tested at all.

The SDLP fully recognises that the gap in the legislation on these psychoactive drugs must be addressed. It is crucial that a joined-up government approach is taken on the issue. In 2012, in the UK, 251 new psychoactive drugs were identified that were legal and being used by the population. Furthermore, we are told by

the Public Health Agency that, on average, one new drug is identified every week. That makes this a unique issue. The use of drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy and marijuana is a historical problem, but people know what they look like, what effect they will have on their lives and what legal sanctions will be imposed if they are caught using them or, indeed, selling them.

However, these psychoactive drugs are ever-changing and the landscape in which they operate is shrouded in a sort of semi-legality. For that reason, it will be extremely difficult to legislate against any psychoactive drug and it may take a long time. The market in which they operate is self-regenerating, and so it is a reasonable contention that banning one drug for 12 months may do nothing, as, in reality, another one — as we have just been hearing — will come into play almost instantly. While we search for an appropriate legislative response, the portfolios of Health and Justice must work together, not only to consider creating appropriate legislation if that is possible but to increase awareness of the dangers of such legal substances.

We have only to look at the inconsistencies that have arisen out of the lack of legislation on this issue to know how big the problem really is. Head shops are businesses that sell drug-taking paraphernalia and psychoactive drugs on the same premises. The claim is that they do not distribute legal highs for human consumption, yet these substances are on the same shelves as paraphernalia designed specifically for human consumption.

We have to take action to deal with the blatant profiteering that arises, often to young people's detriment. At this point, it is important to stress that the majority of young people are not falling victim to psychoactive drugs. Most are aware of the dangers that they present and consequently do not get involved. However, some ultimately experience great anxiety due to their use of the drugs. As the mover of the motion said, some suffer varying degrees of depression as a result and, sadly, some ultimately take their life.

There has been an imaginative attempt by Belfast City Council to proactively counteract the sale of psychoactive drugs. Its enforcement activity has led to the courts granting a forfeiture order against head shops in Belfast. However, that is one council: what are we doing regionally?

The sale of psychoactive drugs will not be dealt with by a quick fix. There will not be one statute or legal order that stops this constantly

changing but rampant market. The SDLP supports the motion but also calls on the Health Minister to work closely with his counterpart in the Department of Justice to find imaginative solutions to the problems that have resulted.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the motion. First, I declare an interest as a committee member of the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group, which means that I am aware of issues that revolve around some of these drugs. Indeed, it was as a result of a constituent's addiction to a legal high that I first got involved with the subject and subsequently with the group by arranging a meeting in Carrickfergus town hall a number of years ago.

What struck me was the power of my constituent's addiction to methedrone. She sold off her Christmas presents within a matter of days and weeks, even her mobile phone. The youngest dealer from whom she had bought methedrone was 10 years old. At that stage, legal highs were operating under the radar, with few in the adult community aware of them. I am pleased that, as a result of her talking about her situation, with support from her sister, others learned of the dangers. Mothers, schools and the police became more aware of the dangers, and, indeed, Preventing Addiction Larne subsequently emerged. A group of mothers who were concerned by recent deaths in Larne wanted to make a difference by making young people more aware of the dangers and by providing additional health and well-being support in the area.

As other Members said, legal highs have psychoactive effects that are not covered by the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Vendors use the term "legal highs", but, as others said, that is very misleading because there has been no product testing. Anyone who consumes these products takes a huge risk. One does not know what will happen. What makes it worse is that, often, they are taken in cocktails with a range of other drugs and perhaps with alcohol, which is very dangerous.

I am pleased that some policing and community safety partnerships are now active in this area. I am aware of a meeting — later this week, in fact — with Carrickfergus policing and community safety partnership to look at the misuse of drugs in the area. It is important that everyone understands that a multi-agency approach is needed to try to address the issue.

The chemists involved are, as others said, very adaptive and tweak the chemical make-up to try to get round the authorities. In 2012, some 251 new substances were discovered. Now, one

new product is discovered every week. Many are profiting from the misery of our young people or those who become addicted.

I was fascinated by a programme that I saw about how a chemist based in Holland designed his products. He sent off the instructions to China, and when the packages arrived, he distributed them and made a fortune. This question has to be asked: what is the international community doing about this? What are the Chinese Government or, indeed, other governments in the Far East, where those products tend to be manufactured, doing about it? Although they can perhaps be manufactured locally, there is a tendency for them to be manufactured in the Far East, so we certainly need more international cooperation to try to minimise the dangers.

There is a danger with all drugs, whether they are alcohol, cannabis or legal highs. Those who become addicted to them experience significant highs and lows. As I said, mixing drugs increases risks. People can also have mood swings, which I believe can have a significant effect on and reduce their well-being and increase the likelihood of suicide. So, we all need to take an interest in this.

I am pleased that Belfast City Council has taken a new approach, not through the Misuse of Drugs Act but through the General Products Safety Regulations 2005, and that it has been able to shut down several suppliers. That can only be good. I hope that other councils in Northern Ireland, particularly in my constituency, do the same, because I am aware of young people from Belfast coming to Larne to get new supplies. There are difficulties in most areas, and I urge every council to copy what Belfast has done to try to stop the supply of those products.

Mr McCarthy: Although I and my party are happy to support measures that would see the scourge of legal highs and their distribution eradicated, as I understand it, this is not a devolved matter and it is up to the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Health and, indeed, the Home Office at Westminster. Our Alliance MP at Westminster, Naomi Long, has been working, and continues to work, on the subject.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: Briefly.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member not aware that Belfast City Council used the General Product

Safety Regulations 2005 to help stop supply in Belfast?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCarthy: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am not aware of what the Member is saying.

Once again, I thank the Research and Information Service in Parliament Buildings for preparing such a vast array of information on the topic. I also pay tribute to the many organisations in Northern Ireland that offer advice services and support to those who have become involved in this activity. I welcome the Public Health Agency's efforts to educate people on the dangers to their health of becoming involved in the consumption of legal highs.

Legal highs are also known as psychoactive substances, which in itself should raise concerns among everyone, and their use is detrimental to the health and well-being of all who take them. As always, some of our young people who are exposed to drug culture may not be aware of the dangers to their health and the side effects, such as drowsiness, reduced inhibitions, paranoia, coma, seizure, stroke and even death. If that is the result of taking such substances, it is imperative that the Assembly works to find an answer as soon as possible to this latest curse on our society's well-being.

Surely the information that was pulled together in the research paper, in particular the media coverage, is or should be enough to make each and every Member sit up and take notice. Indeed, we must do more. We have to take action and ensure that the issue of legal highs is tackled and dealt with in the interests of our young people and our population in general.

The motion calls on our Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals, including pursuing emergency legislation, to restrict the sale of those substances. Our Minister of Justice acknowledges that legal highs are a major problem, but, as has been said, the legislation associated with the misuse of drugs in Northern Ireland is a reserved matter for Westminster.

At the beginning of 2014, the Home Office announced that it was to lead a review of how the legislative response can be enhanced to maximise its impact and how the enforcement response can be improved. That review, with recommendations, will be complete by spring 2014. We are almost there. We are in spring at the moment.

4.00 pm

Our Justice Minister wishes to see a consistent and uniform response to this serious issue. His Department continues to engage with key stakeholders to respond positively at an early date. If the House passes the motion, it will send a message that we are deeply concerned about this issue. It will be a start in making our concerns clear. I am happy to add my voice to those calls.

As I have said, the current review of the legislative provision, as it relates to the new psychoactive substances, is due in the Home Office shortly. I fully expect Northern Ireland to be involved. I hope that the motion will contribute to that. We must also make it clear that, although it is a matter for Westminster whether substances are legal or otherwise, some agencies here can be involved in cracking down on these substances and their uses. For example, depending on how the products are marketed, we can take action by using local agencies such as those involved in environmental health and consumer protection, and perhaps food standards rules.

As we are unable to pursue the criminal approach here, we must make sure that our health approach is as strong as possible. That includes making people aware of the health dangers that these products pose and ensuring that our health service is notified of the best way to treat cases of illnesses caused by such substances. As a result, I hope that our Health Minister will inform us on how the health service is coping with overdoses and similar conditions from legal highs.

In conclusion, it is vital that we begin to tackle this issue, because it is harming the health of some of our constituents. We must pursue a joined-up approach that involves the Government in Westminster and our Executive Departments.

Mr Wells: Although I support entirely the motion and its aims, it is worth saying that we in Northern Ireland have, for centuries, had two legal highs that many in the Chamber partake of: alcohol and cigarettes. Mr McCarthy can speak with a clear conscience because he takes neither. I think that a look at the statistics on those legal highs puts into perspective the issues that we are discussing. In 2002, 238 people in Northern Ireland died from the abuse of alcohol, including poisoning and other issues. In 2005, the figure was 246. In 2008, it was 276. In 2010, it was 284. Those are alarming statistics. The total number of drug-related deaths, including from legal highs and illegal drugs in Northern Ireland, in 2012, was 72. So,

the legal high of alcohol is killing three times more people than the drugs issue that we are discussing. Indeed, between 2002 and 2012, in Northern Ireland, 2,849 people died as a result of alcohol abuse. So, we need to get this issue into perspective. We also have the legal high of cigarettes, which, we now know, kills 2,300 people a year in Northern Ireland. So, let us get some sense of perspective.

Unfortunately, at the moment, there are things going on with our youth that would have been unimaginable when I was growing up. That was a long time ago, but there are things going on out there that are absolutely unimaginable. We are giving our children and young people all the freedom of the fox in the chicken run. Nobody is saying no; there are no barriers or constraints. We have a perfect storm as far as legal highs are concerned, and, when I say legal highs, I mean all forms of stimulants. We have the Internet, which makes many of these, which were unobtainable to past generations, available at the click of a button. Then, we combine legal highs with an abuse of alcohol, and that is a very serious concoction indeed. Therefore, our young people are under the most enormous pressure.

The difficulty faced by our Minister and other Ministers in the United Kingdom is that, as fast as we, as a legislative Assembly, ban one product, another one can be devised and concocted within days.

I have sat on the Health Committee for five years, and we regularly have subordinate legislation brought forward by the Minister to ban a certain product. That is the right thing to do, but we know that, within days, in a laboratory in China, someone will have a different chemical concoction and produce a totally new product that the Department has then to ban.

The legislation that we have was formed when there was not such speed of change. I was interested to hear about the situation in the Irish Republic and in Poland. The Irish Republic banned 200 substances that they knew about, and that was the right thing to do. Since then, I have no doubt, another 200 substances will have arrived on the scene. We need catch-all legislation that will ban any product not tested before it can be used by a member of the public and give the Minister, the Department and councils the powers that they need to ban these products.

Folks, when you go to these head shops — every constituency has them — there is this nonsense that they have labels on them that

say "Not fit for human consumption". However, they are not being sold by veterinary suppliers or pet food merchants; they are being sold on the high street with other products that clearly are for human consumption. The whole thing is one big scam, and there is a criminal element and vast amounts of money being made as a result of this dreadful trade. Therefore, we need to take action to make it extremely difficult for our young people to obtain these concoctions. It has to be a case of "The answer is no, now what's the question?". In other words, it is up to you to prove that this product has been tested and is up to the standard for a human being to take. If that is not the case, it is a ban. We need to change the legislation radically on the issue.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin.

We will speak in support of the motion. I apologise for being late. I was at another event in the Building, so to the proposer of the motion I offer that apology.

All of us, on an almost ongoing basis, are all too aware of the problems of drugs, legal highs and, as the previous Member said, alcohol, the damage that they do and how they lead to people needlessly dying. In all those instances, we always try to legislate to ensure that people's ability to do themselves harm is reduced. That is the tone and tenor of this debate.

No one can say that a recent death in Derry was down simply to legal highs. There may have been a variety of factors, but the young man's parents and family spoke in graphic and emotional terms of drug abuse. As a result, an addiction task force was set up last week. Many people, from the statutory sector and the trust, health boards or community and voluntary organisations to agencies such as HURT and the Northlands centre in Derry, came together and were in agreement that legal highs were still prevalent, were a great cause of harm and, in many instances, led young people to take their life.

Jim Wells rightly reminded us about other "highs", be it alcohol or illegal drugs. The practitioners and experts said that there was no doubt that, whereas alcohol and some drugs took a long time before doing the damage that led people to die needlessly or, in many instances, to take their own life, with legal highs the effect was immediate and sometimes because of the nature of the high, the rate of change in a person's life was swift. That is why

they said that particular work needed to be done on legal highs. Indeed, last year, representatives of the board, the trusts, the PSNI and the Justice Department had a meeting in Derry, which I attended. They spoke about the mechanisms in place and laid out the process that begins when a "high", as they are described, is identified, which leads to it being banned. In fairness to the people involved, the process is swift enough. Some may disagree about it being swift, but most of the people there accepted that the perception was that the process could take up to a year and laid aside that concern. The Health Department talked about the drug and alcohol monitoring information system (DAMIS) and how they, through public awareness campaigns and their work, point out the dangers of legal highs.

There is something very telling in all this, whether it is a reserved matter or the responsibility of Belfast City Council, the Health Department, the Justice Department or whoever. In the final part of Jim Wells's speech, he touched on the idea of putting the onus on suppliers, which was tackled in Leinster House. There is absolutely no doubt that, when a high is banned, another one takes its place. The legislation that was enacted in Leinster House put the emphasis on suppliers to ensure that people who set up what is called a "head shop" have to prove that the substances and products that they sell do not have unintended consequences and are not downright dangerous. The measure of any legislation is the outcome, and the outcome down there has been that the number of head shops has greatly reduced and a large number have closed. That is not the end of the matter, because we all know that there are other avenues, and the Internet has been talked about.

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

Mr McCartney: It is important that, whatever we do, things are not left to fate.

Mr Dunne: I too welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, and I commend my party colleagues for tabling it.

Unfortunately, drugs continue to be an ever-growing scourge in our communities. Recent tragic deaths from drug use have sadly brought home to us all the severity and scale of the problem. Given its seriousness, it is vital that we continue to do all that we can to stop the misuse of drugs that are becoming a particular problem among our young people.

Drugs are very unpredictable, and legal high drugs often contain a mix of ingredients, many of which are illegal, very dangerous and, sadly, potentially fatal. Such drugs, which can be in powder, capsule or pill form, are not regulated and are therefore not subject to verification or quality assurance procedures. The ingredients can often be very different to what is stated on a label, which leads to dangerous and potentially lethal consequences for users of such drugs.

Young people, many of whom can be vulnerable and seeking a purpose in life, often go for these drugs in their search for a thrill. Drugs and legal highs often lead to an increase in crime, antisocial behaviour, depression, paranoia, self-harm and anxiety. They can often result in young people being caught up with paramilitaries and falling into serious financial trouble. They need money for the drugs and often borrow and have to repay at excessive rates.

The fact is that drugs destroy lives, which is why we must destroy illegal drugs. I know of a young person in my constituency who, sadly, is a drug addict. His parents have been left heartbroken and looking for treatment and a safe place of rehabilitation for him. Such a facility, which gives young people a chance to reform and have rehabilitation, should be provided by the Health Department more locally. The problem is trying to get such young people to engage. In this case, the young person has been to various centres and has had counselling, but he still needs more support.

4.15 pm

The recent Belfast City Council initiative, which gives the council powers to destroy seized substances, is a positive step forward. Perhaps other councils should consider a similar scheme in their efforts to tackle the growing problem of legal highs. Legal highs, also known as psychoactive substances, are synthetic drugs that can be bought online. The fact that they are readily available for anyone to buy online is a major concern.

I am well aware, as are other Members, of the excellent work done by charities such as the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse. It does a tremendous job in helping those who are victims of drugs. I recently visited the FASA outlet in Bangor and saw at first hand the work that it does through its counselling and therapy facilities. It also has a rehab centre at Ballywalter where young people are involved in

constructive work such as gardening and running tea rooms. Many people work there as volunteers and provide excellent support. Those facilities must be supported through our Health Department and the trusts. I know that money goes towards them, but it is important that funding continue to be made available for such facilities.

As with many areas aimed at improving the health of our population, it is vital that a joined-up, interagency approach is adopted. I am sure that the Minister will elaborate on what he and his Department have done and are planning to do to tackle the real scourge of drugs. We need to see the PSNI, the Department of Justice, the trusts and the Public Health Agency, as well as others from our community and voluntary sector, working together to help tackle the terrible scourge of drugs. I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: My apologies to Mr Buchanan and Mr McQuillan for not being here at the start of the debate: I was at an event in the Senate Chamber.

This is a complex and difficult problem but one that can be solved, and there is no doubt in my mind that it can be solved. What Belfast City Council has done under existing regulations — the General Product Safety Regulations 2005 — has been a good step forward to deal tactically with head shops in Belfast. Other councils should follow suit and act in the same way to counteract this vile, despicable and immoral trade. Those involved in it may be smart and say that they are doing nothing criminal in actual fact, but their activities are criminal, mercenary and merciless in spirit. These people ought to be condemned for their vile activities.

As far as dealing with the overall problem is concerned, as Mr Beggs said, it is a global problem that requires a global response. However, in the context of the European Union, we require legislation. I am disappointed that the British Government and the Minister in charge have rejected the European Union's initiative. That is wrong. We should have gone along with the initiative, as it would help stem the tide of psychoactive substances coming into the country.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

Mr Beggs: There is a major amount of trade between the United Kingdom and China. What

would be wrong with simply requesting that China stop the production of the drugs? If it were France or Germany, Canada or the USA, there would be no difficulty getting to the bottom of the problem and stopping damaging drugs from being manufactured and shipped from there. Why can that not happen with China?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is an interesting point. I am not sure that the trade is as open as a normal trade in perfectly ordinary bona fide drugs or other substances. There is a certain black market in the production and trading of these drugs.

Leaving that aside, I go back to my original point, which is that the European Union should act. It is acting, and Britain should be part of that, together with the Republic, to deal with this problem in a united fashion.

This problem has been about for the past number of years and is becoming worse, but there has been a good deal of inaction by the British Government in dealing with it. I look south of the border and see the action that was taken by the Republic's Government, which has been a major step forward in dealing with the problem in the South.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it is unfair to depend on district councils to deal with the issue and try to have local decisions made? I applaud Belfast City Council, but there is a gap between what the Assembly is doing and what the British Government are doing.

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely with what my colleague said. Belfast City Council is dealing with it tactically, not strategically. We have to deal with it strategically, and, if we do not do that, the British Government ought to deal with it strategically at a national and European level. That is the way to go forward, and we should borrow from the example of the Southern Government. They dealt with the problem of catch-up; in other words, they reversed the process of verification and put the onus on the trader rather than on the Government. They were reversing the onus of proof, which is the important thing. We should borrow from that instead of having further investigations and reports etc. If we really want to seriously tackle the problem, that procedure should be borrowed and should become part of the law of the United Kingdom. The Government are

remiss in not using that model to tackle this problem.

Unfortunately, although you can close head shops, you cannot close down online sales of these substances. That is a serious problem that we face.

Mr D McIlveen: When an individual loses their life in particularly tragic circumstances, it is not unusual, as part of their epitaph, for it to be said that they died too young. I have that comment in mind when I state that, last year in the United Kingdom, there were 52 people who died too young as a result, indirectly or directly, of these so-called legal highs. One of those individuals was a young man from west Belfast called Sean Paul Carnahan, who was 22 years old. I am sure that none of us who listened to what his heartbroken mother had to say about her son, with his whole life in front of him but cut so short indirectly as a result of these legal high drugs, could have heard her grief and not said that something had to be done about this.

When you listen to what the medical experts say about these substances, you discover that they carry certain health warnings, as I am sure you would imagine. One such health warning is that you increase the risk to yourself if you combine alcohol with any legal or illegal substance that causes a high, including the risk of death. Your inhibitions are reduced, you have drowsiness or you can become excited or have paranoid states. You can even go into a coma or find yourself having seizures, and, ultimately, using these legal highs can result in death. Because legal highs are often new and, in many cases, the actual chemical ingredients in a branded product can be changed without you knowing, the risks are therefore unpredictable. Therefore, the medical professionals are telling those who choose to use the substances that, in effect, they are playing Russian roulette with their life. Therefore, we have to do something in the Assembly to deal with the issue and the scourge that it has become on our society.

It is disappointing to hear comments that were clearly made on behalf of the Justice Minister about his responsibility to legislate and use devolution to deal with the issue. A question has to be asked of the Justice Minister. I accept that he is not here to answer this question, but I am sure that the message will be taken back loud and clear. When will he step up to the mark and start dealing with challenging issues such as substance abuse, prostitution, illicit tobacco and all manner of admittedly difficult and challenging issues that we, as a society, have to face in Northern Ireland? Sometimes you need to invoke

legislation to provoke behavioural change. We cannot shy away from that, and I agree entirely with my colleague Mr Wells, although I think Mr Wells is perhaps more the farmer than the fox in his analogy of the fox and the chicken house — at times, anyway.

We have to accept that behaviour sometimes has to be challenged and changed by legislation. When the smoking ban was brought in in public places, which I entirely support and agree with, a choice was given to people. If they want to face the elements and go outside and smoke, they have to do that. If they want to think twice and maybe consider changing their behaviour when they would have previously lit up a cigarette in a restaurant or wherever, they were given that choice. I believe that legislation is needed to —

Mr McAleer: I thank the Member for letting me in. We all no doubt accept that, first and foremost, our concern is about people, particularly young people who get hooked on these legal highs masquerading as bath salts, incense or whatever. Does the Member also accept that so-called head shops can have an impact on bona fide traders in the areas in which they are located? It effectively gives the area a bad name, and that could have a wider impact, particularly in town centres, where traders are already under pressure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr D McIlveen: I agree entirely with the Member. Of course this type of shady activity going on in areas across our Province will have a detrimental effect and bring the whole area down.

I conclude by saying this: we have had too many incidents in the past six months with legal highs, alcohol or even drugs that are already classed as illegal, and we have to deal with the cultural problems in Northern Ireland in our obligation to our young people. We have a duty in the Assembly, and there is a responsibility on parents to make sure that our young people are kept safe and are protected from whatever manner of evil is out there. So-called legal highs are up there on that list of evils today.

Mr Elliott: I also apologise to the proposer of the motion for not being in at that time. Like others, I was attending another justice-related event.

This is an issue that affects a wide range of people. A number of individuals and people in

the community may think that it is a very narrow issue, but it is not. It affects the justice system, the Police Service, the health service and, indeed, many other agencies. Most of all, it affects individuals and families. We need a coordinated approach to it locally and globally. We cannot deal with it in isolation. No Department, single agency or individual can deal with it on their own.

4.30 pm

The term "legal high" is very misleading. Most of the substances are regulated by the Medicines Act 1968, which makes it illegal to sell, supply or advertise them for human consumption. The substances are generally bought from head shops or Internet sites. Many suppliers use descriptions such as "bath salts", "incense" or "plant food" and claim that the substances are not intended for human consumption as a way of getting around the drugs law. There is an incorrect belief that, because the items are legal, they are safe.

In July 2013, the Health Minister indicated that around 110 people had died last year as a result of drug misuse. Mr McIlveen just mentioned the figure of 52, and I am happy for the Minister to clarify this when he speaks. Whether it relates to prescription drugs or illegal drugs, about nine people die every month as a result of drug misuse. That is a truly shocking statistic, and we cannot just sit back and do nothing about it. Proactive action must be taken.

The Public Health Agency made this crucial point:

"It is often not clear what is contained within individual drugs. The quality and content of such drugs varies greatly and the name used may not bear any relation to their actual contents."

It went on to state:

"These drugs are not controlled in any way and you can never know what you are taking. The only way to avoid all the risks is to not take any drugs which haven't been prescribed for you."

Those who take drugs often mix them, either with alcohol or other drugs, including prescription drugs, illicit drugs or legal highs. Again, mixing those drugs is a major risk, with three out of four drug-related deaths in Northern Ireland involving more than one drug.

The dangers of taking drugs are now further compounded by the emergence of these so-called legal highs over the past few years. Government legislation has had an impact on preventing a number of substances being sold, but the Public Health Agency is aware that new substances continue to be promoted and sold over the Internet, through head shops or by friends and even drug dealers. These substances present a real risk to a person's health as their production is not regulated. As they are new and constantly changing, it is also difficult to know their effects. It is not only among the wider public that they are a problem but in prisons. We hear of people taking legal highs and putting themselves and, indeed, other prisoners at risk.

I want to pay tribute to a number of organisations that do sterling work in the field, particularly FASA, Opportunity Youth and other organisations that deal with individuals face to face and give very good advice and help.

The bottom line is that we need to stand together as an Assembly, a community and a society and, importantly, educate our people. It is important that we have an education system and process that explains the dangers and difficulties of legal highs. We need to ensure that we reduce the opportunity for the public to get legal highs, and, finally, we need to educate them on their real dangers.

Mr G Robinson: I congratulate my colleagues for bringing the debate to the Assembly.

Legal highs destroy and damage lives and families and are therefore among the most dangerous items that, unfortunately, some of our young people enjoy. Those who sell them are peddling harm and death and are therefore committing a heinous crime. The sooner we rid society of this scourge the better.

On 25 February 2014, the Minister described legal highs as:

"potentially more dangerous than better known drugs such as ecstasy and cannabis."

This is a stark warning that will, hopefully, be adhered to. I am sure that the Minister will condemn the use of all illegal drugs, as I do. They can, and have, led to tragic suicides. I contend that this is a health, police and justice problem.

On 28 June 2013, the Public Health Agency stated:

"These substances present a real risk to a person's health ... Light-hearted street names can mislead people into believing that they are indulging in low-risk fun when in fact these new psychoactive substances can be more dangerous than traditional drugs."

Those are two stark and clear warnings on the dangers of using these drugs. I also contend that the habit or addiction places more pressure on our already overworked health service and its staff, who all do such tremendous work throughout Northern Ireland.

The direct effect of legal high use is on one person, but the consequences can be felt by an entire family circle left grieving or dealing with someone severely disabled.

I believe it reasonable for the Minister of Justice to put forward proposals, including emergency legislation, to restrict the sale of these substances, as the motion calls for. That is the best way to minimise access to these lethal substances. The courts have access to severe penalties for those who deal in them.

I urge all Members to join me in supporting the motion, as I am sure that the problem exists in most of our constituencies.

Mr Newton: Like others, I pay tribute to my colleagues for raising the issue. I support the motion and was disappointed by Mr McCarthy's remarks. He said that it was nothing to do with his Minister and that, because this is not a devolved matter, it was really Westminster that was dragging its feet. That seemed to me a Pontius Pilate-type approach. I was looking for the dish of water in which Pontius Pilate was washing his hands of the matter.

That said, I pay tribute to Belfast City Council and will outline its process. Although the issue had been raised in the press and, as Mr McIlveen said, a young man had recently died, there was no action. My party colleague Gavin Robinson took the opportunity to bring a motion that the council approved unanimously. Every councillor who spoke referred to the dangers, just as we have done here today. The motion went to the policy and resources committee, and out of it came action by the council's legal department, which realised that there was legislation under which it could address the issue. That department did not wash its hands, Pontius Pilate-like; it took action because the council was forcing it into it. I pay tribute to the council's officers for that.

I first came across legal highs when I was with OFMDFM at a meeting in the Isle of Man. At that stage, the Isle of Man was waiting for action from Westminster, but nothing was happening. Like the Republic, it went ahead and banned legal highs. It realised that there were issues with such a ban, including that the drugs were not just sold in shops but could be bought online, so it was not perfect. However, the Isle of Man made legal highs subject to an annual rolling ban, and, every year since, has continued the ban, including just recently. The Isle of Man introduced a ban on the basis that it was in the best interests of the community that these substances were not available to young people, many of whom are impressionable.

They realised that this material was being created not just in China but the Far East in general. They realised that it was being brought into the UK not by legal or overt methods of trading but by hidden methods. I was going to say "illegal", but that is probably too strong a word. There is no regulation on this. It is constructed in, I suppose, substandard clinics, and there are no clinical tests on it.

We may not realise it, but this is part of the war on drugs. It is a part of the drugs trade. As others said, it has been described as plant food, bath crystals and pond cleaner. What type of shop, or head shop, sells those sorts of things? They have no interest in plant food or pond cleaning. They are selling it, purely and simply, to make huge profits, and that exploits young people and the deaths of young people, as has been referred to. Legal highs, particularly when mixed with alcohol, create dangers. It is difficult to see that you would not get legal highs being used at the same time as alcohol.

If you identify some components of the legal high, you will see that there is always going to be the problem of the mixture being changed. However, that should not stop us taking whatever action we can.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It is a privilege to be able to sit through and participate in this debate, and there have been some very good and informative speeches. I thank Mr Buchanan and Mr McQuillan for bringing the motion to the House. I apologise to Mr Buchanan for missing the first few minutes of his speech, but what he said was very effective and powerful, particularly his comments relating to the young man from Omagh whom he knew who was so badly

affected as a result of these so-called legal highs.

One of the most important public health challenges facing us is the need to prevent and reduce the harm that alcohol and drug misuse causes to individuals, families and communities. Episodes such as the major incident at the Odyssey, or, more tragically, the number of potentially drug-related deaths that have occurred over the past year, serve to highlight the real consequences of substance misuse. I should add, for Mr Elliott's benefit, that 110 people died from drug-related causes and that 75 of those cases involved drug misuse. So, those are the figures as they stand.

Worryingly, a new challenge has arisen through the availability of these so-called legal highs. They are substances that have a psychoactive effect but that are not covered by the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. However, the term "legal highs" is misleading, and we, therefore, refer to them as "new psychoactive substances". The key message that needs to come from the Chamber today is that these substances are not safe. They are marked "not for human consumption" for a reason, as the sellers are trying to get around our existing drug laws and medicine regulations. So, let us be clear about this: taking any substance that has not been prescribed for you comes with real risks. These new psychoactive substances have not been tested. They do not go through quality assurance, and there is no way of knowing what they contain. Therefore, they are potentially more dangerous than drugs such as Ecstasy or cannabis.

Given the nature of the issue, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of how prevalent the misuse of these substances is. However, a survey in 2010-11 indicated that between 2% and 2.4% of the population had taken the then legal mephedrone and new psychoactive substances respectively. Obviously, things may have changed since then, and, in 2014-15, that survey is being rerun to give a clearer picture about the current extent of use. Figures from our treatment services in 2012-13 also indicated that 16% of those in treatment reported the use of the now banned mephedrone.

Where tackling supply is concerned, the key legislation, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, is a reserved matter and is led by the UK Government at Westminster. This is an area that my Department — my Department — has raised through the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council. I will ensure

that it remains on the agenda of those key groups. Although there are local regulations, these stem from the Misuse of Drugs Act. Therefore, we have to work closely with our UK counterparts to address the issue.

4.45 pm

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to Minister for giving way. Given that the Minister has just admitted that it is a reserved matter and the responsibility of Westminster, will he advise his comrades that the unjustified attack on my Minister was wholly irresponsible and wrong?

Mr Poots: I think that Minister Ford is well capable of defending himself. He does not need me to help him. What I will identify today are the actions that I have taken. Perhaps, at some point, the Member's party leader will identify the actions that he has taken. I have not been furnished with material on those actions for today's debate. I do not know whether he has, or has not, taken actions because I have not been furnished with that level of material.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does the Minister agree that this matter, and how it affects the young people and families who have suffered, is another example of where two Ministers in the one Executive should be talking?

Mr Poots: I will explain to Members that I have been engaging with people who have key responsibilities. Members and the public can judge if I should be the only Minister who is doing that.

As I indicated, I have raised this matter with the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, in particular, plays an important role in assessing these substances and making recommendations. I acknowledge that it would be difficult to replicate the expertise and capacity of that group at a local level.

Enforcement of the Misuse of Drugs Act is the responsibility of the PSNI, for which Mr Ford is the Minister. My Department also helps to address the issue through the enforcement of the Human Medicines Regulations. Where the sale of new psychoactive substances breaches either of those pieces of legislation, enforcement activity can, and is, undertaken, as evidenced by the recent conviction of the proprietor of a Belfast shop for possession of a controlled drug in the guise of a legal high.

I am in the very unusual position today of being able to add to Mr McCarthy's huge volume of knowledge. He was clearly not aware of what Belfast City Council had done when Mr Beggs posed the question to him. Belfast City Council, supported by a range of key agencies, took enforcement action against head shops using the General Product Safety Regulations. That resulted in a forfeiture order and the destruction of the materials seized. I know that other councils have been watching Belfast's innovative approach. Congratulations to Belfast City Council. I hope that this will encourage other councils to take similar action in their areas.

In 2011, following approaches from various stakeholders, including my Department — my Department — the UK Government amended the Misuse of Drugs Act to incorporate a new classification for placing drugs under temporary control for up to 12 months. The temporary banning power is aimed at tackling the threat that new substances pose to public health by responding on a precautionary basis. While the temporary ban is in place, enforcement is only for trafficking offences. These carry the current class B penalties. However, the possession offence does not apply so as not to unnecessarily criminalise young people while a full investigation of the drug is under way. Some good first steps have been taken in addressing the issue. So far, temporary or permanent bans have been imposed on more than 250 substances. These bans, combined with the enforcement activity that I highlighted earlier, help us to begin to tackle the issue.

However, I believe that we have to do more. That is why I recently raised the issue with the Home Secretary to seek a more robust and consistent approach. In response, the Home Office has announced a review of how the UK's legislative response can be enhanced beyond the existing measures of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. I am pleased that the review will be informed by a range of evidence, including the various international approaches that I highlighted to the Home Secretary. That includes approaches from the Republic of Ireland, from which we have a lot to learn, the United States of America and New Zealand. It is anticipated that the review will be completed by spring 2014. In response to Mr Byrne, I think that he will see that the Department of Health and I are taking that very seriously by pressing and pressing to get more effective tools. It is essential that we take a consistent approach across the UK for any efforts to be effective. I welcome the fact that Northern Ireland is part of this review, and I will continue to work with key partners across government,

across the United Kingdom and, indeed, Ireland, to press for further action and new legislation.

So far, I have focused on the sale of these substances in shops. However, it is clear that the Internet also plays a substantial role. Although addressing sales in head shops might only be part of the solution, I believe that it would be an important step. The availability of these substances on our high streets has the potential to change our social norms. Therefore stopping these sales will send out a clear message that drug misuse is not acceptable and that it is not part of everyday life. However, I recognise that we also need to work with the UK and the EU to address this issue in a broader context and to work with agencies such as Interpol to tackle international sales.

At the local level, we have also set up an early-warning system in partnership with the PSNI, the PHA and the Department of Justice. This system, known as the drug and alcohol monitoring and information system, seeks to get information from local communities, identify new substances and provide advice to the public as soon as possible. The system has already been used to disseminate information about a range of substances, and the Chief Medical Officer has issued alerts based on information from the system. It is also used to feed into the permanent or temporary banning processes and to inform policy and practice. My Department and the Public Health Agency will continue to use this information to raise awareness of the dangers of these substances and to put treatment services in place.

This is an area that I will continue to address. The actions taken so far are positive, but they are just a beginning. I will consider all the issues raised today and ensure that they are fed into our discussions in Northern Ireland and across the UK and Ireland. However, experience to date shows that banning these substances will not make them go away. We all need to play a role in ensuring that people do not feel that they need to use drugs and to make drug misuse unacceptable in our society.

Mr McQuillan: I will wind up on the motion, but, before I summarise Members' contributions, I will offer my own. Legal highs are often created in labs in the Far East and brought to Europe. There is no doubt that, in our society today, drugs are more widely available than before, and it is sad that there is, unfortunately, a demand for them, especially among our young people. Partaking in this drug culture early can have life-changing consequences, and that was apparent in the BBC programme that was

broadcast over a number of weeks on the drugs charity Forum For Action On Substance Abuse (FASA), to which I pay tribute for its work in picking up the pieces of people's lives.

We need to see action taken to tackle the underlying drug epidemic, and one way of achieving this is to tackle the open sale of psychoactive substances, or legal highs as they have been labelled. They have no place in our society and should not be on sale in shops that are open to the general public. The very fact that it is stated on those substances that they are not fit for human consumption should indicate that such substances are harmful. However, it is clear that the harmful effects are neither here nor there when it comes to an individual purchasing them for consumption. These drugs are usually available in shops selling drugs paraphernalia, which includes items such as equipment to enable people to smoke cannabis. Although there is nothing illegal in selling the means to take drugs, I have to ask why. Surely, we are inviting drug abuse. At a time when we are looking to ban smoking in cars where children are present, why are we not focusing on banning the sale of materials and equipment that aid drug misuse?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Edwin Poots, has been proactive in tackling this epidemic, but the problem lies in the law that provides those selling these harmful chemicals with an open invitation to sell. I regard that to be immoral and unacceptable. In recent weeks, it has become clear what pressure the health service is coming under, and, although the pressures do not all concern drink and drugs-related conditions, the sheer number of individuals being treated for such a set of circumstances only goes to put more stress on accident and emergency departments. That is where individual responsibility comes into play. I know that the Westminster Government are reviewing the sale of legal highs. However, this is not an excuse for us to sit back and wait for someone else to come up with a solution.

It falls to the Minister of Justice in this region of the UK to act to save lives. I also welcome the court ruling in February in favour of Belfast City Council, which granted it permission to destroy substances that were believed to be legal highs that were seized from a shop in the city centre. I join others in the House in calling on the Minister of Justice to respond rather than sit idly by, and the sooner the better.

I will now move on to summarise Members' contributions. The proposer of the motion, Mr Buchanan, said that anyone walking into one of

these shops would think that drugs are legal in Northern Ireland, and he also said that legal highs are not fit for human consumption. He went on to say that there was a loophole in the law that had allowed the manufacturers of legal highs off the hook. He said that 280 harmful highs were introduced each year and that that would have to be stopped. He gave an example of a young person in his constituency who was off legal highs for the past six months but was still in no fit state to hold down a job. He also welcomed the Belfast City Council judgement.

Seán Lynch welcomed the motion and stated that the South of Ireland had responded to head shops, and a new law meant that 150 head shops had closed down overnight. He went on to say that Poland passed a new law in the past year that meant that 1,200 head shops closed down. He said that the law here is not good enough and that we cannot leave it to individual councils to carry on.

Fearghal McKinney supported the motion and said that the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 was not enough. He said that legal highs are not always fit for human consumption and that it is also crucial that government takes a joined-up approach. He went on to say that Health and Justice must work together to try to close down head shops and to get support for users.

Roy Beggs declared an interest in working with a group in his constituency, and he gave an example of one young person. He said that it is very dangerous for young people to take a cocktail of drugs. He also welcomed the PCSPs taking an interest in legal highs, and he wanted to know what the international community was doing about the situation.

Kieran McCarthy was somewhat unclear in his contribution. He said that he and his party supported the motion, but he then passed the buck to Westminster. He went on to say that young people were not aware of the damage that they were doing to themselves and that we need to take action, but, once again, he passed the ball over to Westminster and asked it to take up the issue rather than push his own party leader to do something about it. That is where the problem lies: we need all the Departments to work together.

Mr Wells supported the motion but said that two other legal drugs are available to all of us: alcohol and cigarettes. He went on to quote some numbers. He said that the legal high of alcohol was killing more people than any other legal high and that we are giving our children

too much freedom. It is like a fox in the chicken run.

Mr Wells also said that, with the day of banning the change at loss — I cannot read my own writing; I do not know what that was. *[Laughter.]* We need to make sure that we catch the entire issue in one bout of legislation rather than having to come back to it.

Raymond McCartney supported the motion and said that all of us were only too aware of the effects that drugs had on people's lives. He also mentioned alcohol. He talked about recent work in Londonderry and supported what we could do on it.

Gordon Dunne welcomed the motion and said that he had recently been to Bangor to see the work of FASA. He praised FASA and welcomed the Belfast City Council court case. He also said that we need a joined-up approach to tackle the problem.

Alban Maginness started off by apologising for not being here for the start of the debate. He went on to urge other councils to follow Belfast City Council's lead and condemned the owners of the head shops. He was disappointed that the British Government did not follow the European Union's lead and said that the problem is becoming worse with the British Government's inaction. He praised the Republic of Ireland Government's action —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McQuillan: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that, if the National Crime Agency operated in Northern Ireland, it might be easier to trace some of the moneys that are being transferred to the companies manufacturing these products?

5.00 pm

Mr McQuillan: I agree. As I was speaking, the thought came into my head that the National Crime Agency could do something here. Part of its remit would be to control the drugs that are coming into the country. If it were up and running here, that would certainly help.

David McIlveen said that 52 people have died too young as a result of taking legal highs. He mentioned a young man in west Belfast who died too young. He said that people increase the risks to themselves if they take alcohol along with these substances. He believes that we have to do something in the Assembly

rather than dismiss the problem and pass it to somebody else. He said that he is disappointed with comments made on behalf of the Justice Minister. He asked what the Justice Minister is going to do to step up to the mark and said that he should not shy away from taking the hard decisions. Mr McIlveen used the smoking ban as an example of how that might work.

Mr Elliott apologised for not being here at the start of the debate. He said that legal highs affect a large section of our community and that we need a coordinated approach. He said that "legal high" is a very misleading name. He went on to say that 110 people have died from drug misuse. He said that legal highs are not controllable in any way and that mixing drugs and alcohol, or any other sort of drug, is a major risk. He said that new legal highs are being sold over the Internet as well as in head shops and can be purchased at any time. He praised FASA, which does a great deal of face-to-face work with young people caught up in the cycle of drugs.

Mr Robinson said that families caught up in the cycle of drugs are destroyed. He condemned those who sell drugs, adding that solving the problem is a Health, Justice and police matter. He said that legal highs place more pressure on the health service. He said that it is the responsibility of the Minister of Justice to bring forward emergency legislation.

Robin Newton supported the motion and was disappointed with Mr McCarthy's approach to the whole thing. He paid tribute to Belfast City Council, his party colleague Councillor Gavin Robinson and the council's legal department for following up the issue and taking action, which is more than the Justice Minister is doing here. Mr Newton first came across legal highs on the Isle of Man, which went on to introduce its own legislation because it could not wait any longer for Westminster to legislate.

In responding to the debate, Minister Poots said that it was a privilege to sit through the debate, as public health is one of the most important challenges in —

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

Mr McQuillan: I will motor on.

I thank Minister Poots for what he is doing. A joined-up approach is needed on drugs. I thank everybody who took part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the open sale of psychoactive substances known as "legal highs", which are being sold under false pretences, by using disclaimers such as "not fit for human consumption", when, in reality, young people are becoming addicted to them; notes the damage such substances cause to the lives of young people; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals, including pursuing emergency legislation, to restrict the sale of these substances.

Adjourned at 5.03 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

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

Regional Development

DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS

Published at 12.00 noon on Wednesday 05 March 2014.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I believe that the boards in place operate very effectively but I am concerned that the membership of the boards of the five bodies for which I am responsible – Northern Ireland Water (NIW); Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC); Belfast Harbour Commissioners; Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners; and Warrenpoint Harbour Authority – are not as representative of wider society as I would like them to be. Partly as a result of legacy issues, there are only seven women currently on these boards, out of 42 non executive positions, and very few younger people, people with a disability or people from an ethnic minority.

The services provided by these boards are relevant to all of the people in Northern Ireland and I would like to see them reflect more closely the makeup of the society which they represent.

I have reviewed the report by the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland, published in January 2014. The report highlights the widespread nature of this problem and makes a number of recommendations for change covering policy, strategy and process. I am also aware of work carried out by Cabinet Office on diversity in public appointments.

My officials are represented on the cross-departmental public appointments forum which has been considering the range of measures highlighted by the Commissioner to attract a wider range of applicants to appointment competitions. I have asked them to take all possible measures to improve the diversity of the boards to which I make appointments by making public appointments more attractive and accessible.

I will of course continue to make public appointments based on merit and in accordance with the Commissioner for Public

Appointments Code of Practice. However, in future, the aim will be to build teams with the best mix of skills and experience rather than fill individual slots on boards. To make such teams as diverse as possible, I also intend to move away from what has become almost automatic reappointment of members for second terms. This will allow fresh candidates to apply for all appointment opportunities and it will help me to deal with historic succession planning issues arising from the timing of many appointments. Members who have completed their first terms will, of course, remain eligible to apply for a second term through public competition where they will be assessed in the same way as all other applicants.

In order to give boards notice and space to plan ahead, and to give my officials time to raise awareness of appointments through outreach measures and to make the recruitment process as accessible and attractive as possible, the policy on reappointments will take effect from 1 April 2015. First term appointments falling due in the interim will be extended as necessary for periods between two and 12 months. Future appointments to NIW will be for 4 years to bring them into line with my other bodies.

These proposals have been discussed with the Commissioner for Public Appointments who has expressed support for them.



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