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Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 2 November 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Ministerial Appointment: Mrs Pengelly

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I have an announcement to make. I have to advise the House that I was notified by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on Wednesday 28 October that they had appointed Mrs Emma Pengelly as a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

It is appropriate to acknowledge that that brings representation of women on the Executive Committee up to 40%, which is at least a step in the right direction. Mrs Pengelly affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive and has now taken up office as a junior Minister.

Public Petition: Larne Line Timetable

Mr Speaker: Mr Stewart Dickson has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mr Dickson: It gives me pleasure to present this petition to you today, Mr Speaker. Before I begin, I place on record my thanks to the Larne Line Passenger Group for its hard work in collecting signatures and in holding Translink to account. I also thank Members from the East Antrim constituency, who have supported the petition.

As you will be aware, we had a debate on the matter in the Chamber last month, albeit a brief and rather poorly attended one. I thank the Members who attended that debate. It is perhaps a sign of slow progress in the area that we now have a Regional Development Minister in place, and hopefully a permanent one. I trust that she will work with us and the Larne Line Passenger Group to resolve the issues.

Since the beginning of September, the people of east Antrim have been dealing with a downgraded railway service as the result of timetable changes. Trains run less frequently and service fewer stations, which, ultimately, makes it downright awkward to use the train in east Antrim. In recent weeks, in an attempt to assess the scale of the impact on my constituents, I have been running a survey on my website. The results make for sobering reading. Of those who responded, 75% said that the changes have impacted on them negatively, making their journeys less convenient. Of those, 62% have had to seek alternative means of transport. Unsurprisingly, the chief alternative means is that of a car. Therefore, we have the ludicrous situation in which Translink is pushing more traffic on to the roads, clogging Belfast city centre in the mornings and in the evening rush hour, because, ultimately, travelling by car is faster, cheaper and more convenient than using Translink.

It is far from surprising that, in my survey, only 16% rated the service as good, but, further to that, a massive 75% believe that the service is getting worse. As may be expected, 82% identified frequency as an issue, 44% identified crowding and 41% cost, with others expressing concerns about punctuality, station amenities and park-and-ride facilities.

It is impossible to reach Belfast city centre from Larne or Carrickfergus before 7.00 am via public transport. That is simply unacceptable. However, residents on the other side of the lough on the Bangor line, a town two miles further from Belfast Central than Carrickfergus, can reach the centre of Belfast by 6.37 am. Larne harbour is in a similar situation and is served by a two-hourly service after 7.20 pm. We need a sensible approach to connections rather than salami-slicing services. Translink should be looking for areas of development, not dragging the timetable backwards. I hope that the petition presented to you today will enable us to move things forward. The Larne Line Passenger Group looks forward to meeting the

Minister later today, and I trust that she will be listening in a constructive manner to us all.

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

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Dickson. I will forward the petition to the Minister for Regional Development and send a copy to the Committee.

Executive Committee Business

Shared Education Bill: First Stage

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I beg to introduce the Shared Education Bill [NIA 66/11-16], which is a Bill to make provision in relation to shared education.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Private Members' Business

Marriage Equality

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. As a valid petition of concern was presented on Friday 23 October in relation to this motion, the vote will be on a cross-community basis. I understand that judicial proceedings in relation to same-sex marriage are ongoing in the High Court at the moment, and I therefore caution Members to be particularly careful that they say nothing in their contributions to today's debate that might prejudice those proceedings.

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to table legislation to allow for same-sex marriage.

We are back again. It is unfortunate that we have to keep putting a motion like this to the House, but it is important to point out that we will keep doing it and keep trying to persuade people of what I think is the proper position.

The motion itself is a very simple one. I know that there has been some criticism that it is quite a simple motion that just calls on the Executive to table legislation to enable same-sex marriage. I think that that is as simple as it needs to be; it does not need to be much more complicated than that. We have a very strong position that there should be protections for Churches and that this is about civil marriage, not religious marriage. We assume that the Executive would take that into account when producing any legislation.

It is unfortunate that, once again, we are faced with a petition of concern on this issue. The petition of concern was originally created and put into statute as a way of protecting minorities. It was not to give the largest party in this House a veto, and it was not to give the largest party in this House a veto to the detriment of minorities. I think that that is what has been happening with the abuse of the petition of concern.

So, as an aside, given the example that we have today, I think that we need to deal with the issue of petitions of concern, because they have been abused. They were there to protect minorities, but they are now there to stop minorities gaining protections in law that they have in other parts of this island and across these islands.

We are very clear in our position on this. We have been clear in this House and in other Houses, and we have put down amendments to legislation going through Westminster. I want to go back to the point that we very much see the need for protections for Churches. We do not want to impose our view of the world on anybody else. I recognise that this country is on a journey, and many Members in the House are on journeys, which, I think, we will find out as this debate progresses today. The SDLP's position is that this is about civil marriage. It is about two people being allowed the opportunity to take part in an institution that I and many other people are allowed to take part in. It should not be the case that we have a barrier to civil marriage just because of people's sexual orientation. If we really want to promote marriage as a positive thing for people to be involved in, we should open it up to all people who wish to make that commitment because of the love that they have for their partner.

The motion is a simple one, but we are very clear in our position that there needs to be protections for Churches. I will never be heard criticising people for having a different point of view from the one that I have. What I want to do is to try to persuade people of the particular

point of view that I hold. If we look at what happened just across the border in the South, we see that an enormous campaign was undertaken to persuade the people of the South — and that is what they did. They understood very clearly that you will not be able to browbeat people into supporting civil marriage. They also understood very clearly that the country is on a journey. I think that we were all — many of us, anyway — delighted to see that that journey culminated in the legislation passing through the Houses of the Oireachtas very recently. Think of the positive image that that sent around the world to people about Ireland being an open, all-embracing, positive, progressive country that embraces all its citizens, no matter where they come from and no matter what their political persuasion or sexual orientation is. That sent a message across the world that Ireland had moved on and moved forward, and I think that we should all be very proud of that.

The difficulty that we have, as Irish citizens on this side of the border, is that we do not have the same rights as people across the island. Equally, people who see themselves as British subjects or citizens do not have the same rights as people in Britain, because, of course, they have taken that step not through a referendum but through the parliamentary process. This is not about being unionist or nationalist, Catholic or Protestant. It is about people understanding that, whatever our political or religious background, we should embrace all the people in our society who want to be embraced and to play their full part in civic life in this part of the world.

So, I am coming at this from a pro-marriage perspective — I am married myself — and not as somebody who wants to undermine anybody else's marriage. I think that we enhance all the marriages that we are involved in in this part of the world by allowing others to take part. Why do we put up barriers to people who want to embrace the idea and the institution of marriage? Surely we should be much more open than that. Surely we should break down the barriers to that.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: Yes.

Mr Allister: I just want to test whether the Member puts up any barriers to what he calls admission to the institution of marriage. He said earlier in his speech that, if two people love each other, why should they not be admitted to the institution of marriage. How far does he

take that? If some man says, "I love two women. Therefore, I want to marry two women.", does the Member's embracing of equality and their rights cause him to say, "Well, then, let's have polygamy"? That is the same logic that involves this redefinition of marriage. Why not have a further redefinition of marriage? Is that not the road that the Member is taking us down? If it is not, is that because he is drawing some moral line somewhere? If he is drawing a moral line somewhere, why not draw it here?

12.15 pm

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for his intervention, I think. You always know that you are winning an argument when points like that are brought into the debate. He has done this a number of times. The idea that we are saying that two people who are in love and who want to make a commitment to each other through the institution of marriage is the same as polygamy is ridiculous and is offensive to all those people — *[Interruption.]* It is offensive to all the people in the Public Gallery, outside the Chamber and in this country — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Through the Chair.

Mr Eastwood: — who believe that they should be entitled to the equal rights that everybody else in this country is entitled to. The idea that you can equate polygamy to two people loving each other in a same-sex marriage is absolutely ridiculous and is offensive to say the least.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: I will, yes.

Ms Ruane: Do you agree with me that polygamy is illegal and that nobody is calling for polygamy?

Mr Eastwood: The Member is absolutely right. Thank God that homosexuality is no longer illegal, and thank God that this society has moved on and moved forward and that the communities that we come from have moved on and moved forward through experience in people's families and in people's communities. People have been able to move forward. I come from a different generation from many of the people in the House. I recognise that people are on a journey, and I am prepared to accept that. I am prepared to try to persuade and convince people of the rights of this argument. I wish that the Member would have the same openness and have the ability —

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: Go ahead.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way, even if he did it in a rather resigned fashion. He has used the term "on a journey" twice in his contribution. Normally, when most people set out on a journey, they know their ultimate destination. Can he explain the ultimate destination of the journey that he and, he says, we are on?

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not sure that some people in this House are always sure of where their journey will take them, but, in my view, the journey is about ensuring that all citizens on these islands who love each other and want to get married can get married and can feel that they are properly and fully embraced by society and by government. That is the journey. That is the destination. I think that we will get there. We might not get there today, because a petition of concern has been put down to try to stop equality. That is not what it was supposed to be about.

Look at the people across the border and the way that people from same-sex relationships have been embraced by the community. That was the change that was made. People were embraced by the community, the society and their country. That has changed the image of Ireland. That has changed the prospects of attracting investment to Ireland. That has changed how we look at young people who are homosexual, who have been faced with bullying that was, over the years, supported and enabled by a society and a Government that allowed it and turned their head away when it was happening.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Eastwood: OK. I will leave it at that. Thanks.

Lord Morrow: The slogan "equal marriage" is a great piece of sloganeering. We hear it relentlessly repeated on the TV and radio and in other media outlets. However, it is ultimately completely vacuous. It does not actually say what marriage is. Only once a decision is made about what marriage is can you debate whether or not our policy on marriage violates marriage equality. In truth, the reasoning behind the appeal to equal marriage is faulty. We all know that every law makes distinctions. Equality before the law protects people from irrational distinctions from laws that treat them differently

without reason. However, to know whether or not a law makes the right distinctions, you have to know what the public purpose of the law is. We as an Assembly and our society as a whole have to decide what marriage is.

Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, in his dissenting opinion in the 2013 Windsor case, articulated very well the decision that we have to make. He pointed to two contrasting views of marriage: one that he called the consent-based view and one that he called the conjugal view. The consent-based view is the one put forward by proponents and supporters of this motion. It views marriage as being primarily an intense emotional union between consenting adults. Marriage sets out who the most important person is in your life. The core of this vision is emotional commitment. This view was only given legal standing for the first time in the Netherlands in 2001 and has been adopted by around 20 countries worldwide since then.

The comprehensive or traditional view, on the other hand, sees marriage as being, as Justice Alito put it, the:

"comprehensive, exclusive, permanent union that is intrinsically ordered to producing new life".

That vision of marriage has been held for millennia by virtually every human culture. It continues to be the vision of marriage affirmed by the vast majority of countries around the world. It would be a mistake to walk away from the traditional comprehensive view of marriage. Introducing in policy the consent-based view of marriage would not be a positive thing for our society. The consent-based view put forward by proponents of this motion sees marriage collapse into companionship in general. It does not see marriage as being a different kind of relationship. If the consent-based notion of marriage is primarily about deep emotional attachments, why should it be permanent? Love can wax and wane. If it dies, should it not just end, and why should it be exclusive? Having extramarital affairs may actually, for some people, be viewed as enhancing their marriage and increasing their emotional attachment to one another.

It is apparent to many of us who believe in the traditional view of marriage that maintaining it has many benefits for our society. I will not labour that point, due to lack of time, but maintaining the current definition of marriage is good for children by helping to ensure that both parents stay together to raise the child. In particular, marriage helps to ensure that fathers stay involved in the lives of their children.

Ideally, children should be raised both by mothers and fathers, who bring different skills and attributes to the parenting enterprise. I appreciate that many heterosexual parents can be terrible parents and that adoption and fostering are necessary in every society, but I remain of the view that our public policy should, as far as possible, promote children being raised by their two biological parents.

Finally, there is considerable evidence to show that marriage benefits men and women who are part of it, and wider families and communities as a whole. We all know that marital breakdown can have serious consequences. I do not believe that adopting the consent-based view of marriage will help in seeking to prevent such breakdown.

In closing, I would like to make a comment about whether opponents of this motion are on the wrong side of history. In November last year, on an edition of 'University Challenge' — a show that, I have no doubt, many in the House watch with interest — this question was asked: who said, in 1956, that history is on our side and we will bury you? The answer was, of course, Nikita Khrushchev. As we all know, he could not have been more wrong in his assertion. Of course, in reality, history does not have a side. It depends on your perspective as to whether or not you are on the right side. Stating that you are on the wrong side of history is merely a rhetorical smokescreen. Rather than lazy sloganeering, it would be better if this debate focused on the core question of having to decide what marriage is.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I stand up to speak in favour of the motion and will continue to stand up and bring these motions to the Floor until this unjust situation is dealt with. It is absolutely absurd, given the fact that public opinion is quite firmly, in my view, in favour of marriage equality here in the North. I am sure that all Members received many emails over recent days, not only from members of the gay community but from the community as a whole, saying that this needs to be corrected. The latest opinion poll on this matter showed that 68% of the public were in favour of marriage equality. Look at the part of Ulster that has already voted for marriage equality: those three counties — Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan — said yes to marriage equality.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that a public opinion poll showed that about 68% were in favour. Does he agree that that is just a little bit lower than the figure that traditional opinion polls throughout the UK

have given for those in favour of the return of capital punishment? Would he go there?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKay: We are getting some very silly arguments today. That is the second one that we have had on the Floor. It goes to show that the Members opposite are losing the argument. There is no rational debate coming from across the Floor. The fact is that this has already been introduced in the South, across the water and the United States of America. You can hold back the tide only for so long.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: No, I will not give way for any more ridiculous assertions from the Member for North Antrim.

Marriage equality is already the law in Donegal and Dundalk, 50 miles from this Building. Gay couples can get married in a hotel in Dundalk but not in Newry. This is being introduced throughout the rest of the island on 16 November 2015, yet we still have not seen any legislation or legislative proposals for the North. We had an interesting debate the week before last about the hospitality sector and rates for sports clubs. Here is an opportunity for the hospitality sector in the North to avail itself of gay marriages. A lot of gay couples will go to Dundalk or Donegal instead of Ballycastle or Belfast, which is trade lost to the North, so there is also an economic argument that we should not forget.

The marriage equality that we seek protects religious freedom. As the proposer said, the proposal is for civil marriage. If a gay couple wants a civil marriage and sees that as being aligned with their religious beliefs, what about their religious freedom? This goes both ways. The Members opposite have their religious views, and they are absolutely entitled to them. However, members of the gay community have their religious views, and being married may be part of their belief system as well. That argument should not be forgotten either.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: No, I will not.

I hope that history will be made today. I hope that Members will be on the right side of history. I genuinely welcome any moves from any of the parties that will help to secure a majority in favour of equal marriage for the first time.

When the South voted for marriage equality, a huge weight was lifted off the shoulders of men and women from the LGBT community. For many people who grew up with stigma, bullying, discrimination and fear of physical and verbal attack, here was a message that they were as equal as anybody else and as entitled to their rights as anybody else. That was a great moment. This affects not just members of the gay community but their mothers, fathers, sons and daughters and everybody in the community. The reason why the vote was carried so convincingly in the South was that the entire community and families of these people rallied around them to say that it was not good enough to have this sort of prejudice in our society in this day and age. I believe that the people in the North will say, and are saying, exactly the same.

We can send out a very clear message here today that, regardless of the petition of concern, a simple majority of MLAs, representing the majority of our constituents and the public in the North, support the LGBT community having the same rights and entitlements as everybody else.

Mr Allen: I am proud that the Ulster Unionist Party has made this issue a matter of conscience for Members, allowing all Members to vote in line with their religious belief, conscience and values. Let me say from the outset that I do not wish or intend to tread on anyone's religious beliefs, values or traditions. I will simply speak for myself.

12.30 pm

I recall vividly, whilst growing up, the all-too-common passive acceptance of taunting and poking fun at gay and lesbian issues. If I am being honest, I really had not given my position on the matter much thought until relatively recently. In the past few years, I have watched, listened to and heard many different viewpoints on the topic. On hearing that the issue was coming before the Assembly again, I made a point of speaking to many people on both sides of the issue to better understand their positions, viewpoints and experience. I fully respect that people have a range of views on the issue. In particular, I understand and respect that many people, including members of my party, have deeply held religious views. I have spoken to many pro-LGBT individuals and campaigners over the past number of weeks as well, and my conversations with them have caused me to question the motivation of placing this motion before the Assembly at this point in time. What results do people really expect this time? It is a

fact that the make-up of the Assembly has not dramatically changed since the previous four debates, so I cannot help but wonder whether the issue is being used as electoral opportunism. We, as public representatives, have a duty of care to our constituents, many of whom will be concerned that this emotive issue is being used as a political football. The famous quote from Albert Einstein —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allen: No, I will not.

The famous quote from Albert Einstein unfortunately comes to mind about the definition of insanity being when you do the same thing over and over again and expect different results.

I fully respect people's right to oppose equal marriage, but we really need to take the time to understand the effect that this — the fifth time that the Assembly has debated such a motion — will have on the LGBT community, who have been getting all the wrong kinds of messages from elements of the Assembly. I certainly will not stand in moral judgement of anyone; my belief is live and let live. I want to see a society where no one is discriminated against and everyone is allowed to practise their religious and cultural beliefs freely and without fear. I want to see a society in Northern Ireland where no one is made to feel like a second-class citizen to any extent. I believe in fairness and natural justice.

Growing up, I always believed that marriage should be between one man and one woman, but now, as someone who is married and lives happily with my wife and two children, I would not feel comfortable — it would not be right — with denying lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people the opportunity to live happily with the person they love and whom they wish to marry if they choose. I believe in equality and that love is love, whether between a man and a woman, two men or two women. In life, I have always tried to do what I believe to be right. In the case of same-sex marriage, the LGBT community deserves equal recognition under the law, provided, of course, that religious independence is assured and that Churches are not compelled to conduct ceremonies with which they cannot agree. That is the position in the rest of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. It is about fairness and natural justice.

Mr Lunn: The first thing I want to do is congratulate Mr Allen on that speech. It was excellent.

I welcome the motion. It is not because I want to see the same thing being brought back to the Assembly time after time. It is a simple and very straightforward motion that calls on the Assembly to bring forward legislation. If you think about it, the only time that we will effectively decide this matter is when legislation is brought forward. Anything prior to that, while important, is shadow boxing. Today, we have a short motion that will provide at least a test of opinion as to what the House feels about this matter. My feeling is that, this time, the House will vote in favour of the motion.

I heard Mr Campbell on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' recently complaining that the motion suffered from a lack of detail. That made me laugh. You could almost infer from that that, had there been sufficient detail, the DUP might have considered it, but that, clearly, is ridiculous. The time to scrutinise this would be when legislation is brought forward. The fact that we have a petition of concern today is equally ridiculous. A petition of concern on a private Members' motion does not change a single vote in what the outcome will be today.

I wish that we could get to the point at which parties rely on a three-line whip and forget about petitions of concern.

This is an equality issue for the Alliance Party —

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. Given that this is a motion and therefore does not carry any weight, why do the Members who tabled it not bring forward a private Member's Bill? They are asking the Executive to bring forward legislation, and, for as long as our party has the ability to control things on the Executive, there will not be legislation. Why do Members not bring forward a Bill with detail rather than constantly use a motion to debate the issue?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. He makes a fair point. He is perhaps asking the wrong Member, because, as everybody knows, I am a fairly recent convert to this point of view. It may well be that somebody, following today's vote — if it is in favour — will think it worthwhile to bring forward a Bill, and I hope that that is done.

As I was about to say, this is an equality issue for the Alliance Party, and it is an equality issue for me. However, in fairness to those who I know oppose this, I can hardly criticise them too roundly, because they are in the position that I was in at four previous votes. Therefore, I have a lot of respect for their view. I do not agree with it any more, but I have to respect the fact that, in Mr Campbell's terms, a journey is a journey and that some people take longer to get there than others. I do not agree that a journey has to have a final destination. We are all on a journey through life.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: I am a wee bit pressed here.

As I said, it is an equality issue, but you cannot divorce it from conscience. It is clearly also a matter of personal conscience. We all come under pressure from our instincts, our upbringing and our Church, if you belong to one, and all those pressures come to bear. Some of the pressure that has been applied on this occasion, through Twitter and other websites, on a particular Member from my party — not me — has been absolutely disgraceful and out of order. That is all that I want to say about that.

Mr Nesbitt has been often quoted for his wrong side of history point and his comment that the younger generation will not understand what the Assembly is about. The Assembly has the opportunity today to get on the right side of history and recognise the strength of feeling out there among the population.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No.

Lord Morrow: I did not think that you would.

Mr Lunn: Then you are not disappointed.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Lunn: As I said, I am under pressure with time.

I believe in equality and in equality under the law. For me, that equality extends to everybody in our society, including the minority groups that we all know about under section 75. In this particular context, it extends to gay people — the LGBT community.

I took a while to come to terms with civil partnerships away back when. The journey has been long for me, but I now am where I am, and I am satisfied and comfortable with the position that I am taking. I believe in civil partnerships, I believe that gay couples should be able to adopt and I have no problem whatsoever with blood donations from anybody. I cannot see how I can continue to hold a position against civil marriage for gay people if I believe in equality under civil law. That is where I stand.

Lord Morrow asked what a marriage is, and Mr Allister made silly points about polygamy. Marriage is the union of two people who love each other. That is it. The only question is whether we extend that beyond it being between a man and a woman to include two people of the same sex. It is time that we take that challenge in hand and deal with it. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: There is much too much background noise. This is a very important debate, and we should all be given the opportunity to hear the contributions.

I call Mr Peter Weir.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for silencing the Chamber for my benefit.

Mr Speaker: Most of the noise was behind you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: I appreciate that.

Mr Speaker, you are correct to say that this is a very serious debate. I hope that the serious tone of the debate can be maintained, because it is a very serious issue for people on both sides of the argument. I stand against the motion. Obviously, we have had this debate in different forms on four previous occasions. In many ways, the fundamental reasons why I oppose this motion have not changed. There are three main reasons for that.

I will pick up where Mr Lunn left off. He talked about the definition of marriage. I do not make any judgement about any other form of relationship, but my belief is that marriage should be between one man and one woman. That is by nature. If people want to say that that is an exclusive definition or that it is not inclusive, they are completely correct. Marriage, by definition, excludes on a range of grounds, including gender and the number of people involved. That is not just an academic debating point; a couple of countries are already looking at the issue of polygamy.

Marriage is also defined by the age of the people taking part and by the blood links between those getting married. The reality is that, once you move away from those fundamentals, as opposed to simply tinkering at the edges, you actually destroy the definition of marriage; you render the idea of marriage meaningless.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for his comments. Does he agree with me, just for the record, that it is perfectly possible for two people of the same sex to love each other and want to commit to each other in a way that no form other than marriage can possibly be contemplated?

Mr Weir: And that is why we have civil partnerships, which very neatly brings me to my second point. If this issue is about substantive rights, I believe that provision has already been made for those in terms of civil partnerships, inheritance, taxation and all proprietary rights. Those were part of a wide range of things that were brought in by the Labour Government some time ago. So, if the issue is about substantive rights, that is already sorted out. I stand to be corrected, but I think that we may well have been unique in the world in having that form of civil partnership. There may be others —

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I have a limited amount of time. I know that, later on, the Member will give the winding-up speech.

From that point of view, I believe that that issue is already covered. That leaves one key —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No. I am sure that I will be able to listen to the wise words of Mr McCrea at a later stage in the debate, but I have a limited amount of time.

That, then, leaves the real issue of equality. The motion and speeches have been peppered with mention of equality. If you are a true believer in equality and if that, above substantive rights, is the driver, the motion proposed does not render equality either. It is neither equal, nor is it the endgame.

A number of years ago, the Labour Government brought in civil partnerships, which were meant to sort out the problem of how we recognise relationships between people of the same sex. That was supposed to be the endgame of the proposal. Now, a number of years down the line, we see that the issue has been pushed into a position where it is recognition of civil marriage. The reality is that that will simply be a stepping stone to the next demand, which will clearly be that religious ceremonies are recognised and that there is total equality. If you are part of a gay or lesbian couple and you have the offer on the table of civil marriage but are denied any opportunity of religious ceremony or the opportunity for a Church to conduct that wedding, or, indeed, of a particular faith, you are not, according to your own definition, being treated equally. So, it will only be a matter of time before that is the case.

Although there is no direct reference to it in this motion, we are told that the proposers of the motion are very much in favour of protections for Churches. Is that the same as the protection of conscience in the provision of goods, as we saw, for instance, in the Ashers case? In that case, on a matter of conscience, the bakery said, "No, we are not going to produce a particular item. We want the right to dissent." Yet, the bakery was taken to court. If civil marriage is brought into place, how long will it be, either directly or indirectly, before the Churches —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I have only a minute or so to go. How long will it be before the Churches are pressurised and, if not compelled by way of law, put into a situation where, for example, requirements for funding or other forms of assistance, will require that? I think it is naive to believe otherwise. I am sure that many of the people who have put this forward are well intended, but it is naive to believe that what is proposed today is going to be the endgame solution. This is, inevitably, part of a process in which the Churches and their rights will be put under threat. For all those reasons, I urge this House to do as it has done before and reject this motion.

12.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call Mr Phil Flanagan.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In deference to your authority, I propose that we close the debate and move to the vote now. I

do not think that the House will hear anything new, except previous well-aided arguments. This is repetitive; it is the fifth time that the issue has been debated, and, as we all know, we have a petition of concern. There is no point to the debate continuing, and I move that we take the vote now.

Mr Flanagan: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I think that the Standing Order that the Member references, and I am sure you are going to quote it, highlights that the Speaker can make such a determination if he feels that the views of all Members have been heard. I am sure that the Assembly is keen to hear the views of all representatives here and not just the views of those in the largest parties. I am particularly keen to hear the views of the naughty corner, as Mr McNarry likes to call it. Is he now saying that he does not want the people in that corner to be heard? I think that it is worthwhile to hear from all individuals in the House.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for the point of order. The Standing Order is Standing Order 25, which requires that, before a motion to close the debate is moved, the Speaker is satisfied that all parties present have had a reasonable opportunity to contribute to the debate. In fact, I have a substantial list, and I have some anxiety about the number of interventions, which are perfectly acceptable, but they eat into the time that is allocated by the Business Committee, and I am bound by the amount of time that has been set aside by the Business Committee.

I think that the debate should continue. For my part, I will endeavour to ensure that everyone who has taken the trouble to put their names down will be called to make a contribution, but it is already proving to be a challenge. The debate should continue, and I call Mr Phil Flanagan.

Mr McNarry: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Yes, and I am sure that you are not going to challenge the Chair's ruling on this matter.

Mr McNarry: I am absolutely not going to challenge it. Would you accept that I would put that proposition to you again in 15 minutes?

Mr Speaker: You can attempt to do so, and I will judge it in 15 minutes.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún seo.

I fully support the rights of all our citizens to avail themselves of all of the same rights and services as everyone in our society. Their gender, race, religion or sexual orientation should not be a factor in the determination of such a matter. I believe that that right extends to marriage.

Some in our society, and some in the House, may well have argued that mixed race or mixed religious marriages should not be legal. Those people were on the wrong side of history, to quote one of the Members of the House recently.

We all recognise that, for some in our society, marriage is often a religious sacrament. I was married in a religious ceremony in a Catholic church. In fact, my wife and I went to Rome just to make sure. *[Laughter.]* However, marriage is also a civil matter; it is not just a religious matter. When you get married in a religious institution, you get handed paperwork on behalf of the Church, but the person carrying out the ceremony also hands you a civil certificate to say that you are married. Even though there is only one ceremony, there are two key aspects to it; there is the civil aspect, and there is the aspect of the marriage where the couple believe that they are married in the eyes of God.

I would like to see civil marriage being extended to allow citizens of the same sexual orientation or from the transgender community to marry. I do not think that that is a huge risk for all of us to take. In my view, such a move does not threaten the institution of my marriage, and I certainly do not think that anybody else who is married should feel threatened by it in any way at all. It does not demean the existing marriage of any couple.

This is not a religious matter. Protections should be afforded to religious institutions to ensure that, as Members have said, they are not forced into carrying out religious ceremonies that go against their own teaching. However, there are two aspects to the celebrant's role: there is the religious aspect and the civil aspect. We want to see that those individuals who carry out marriages are allowed to carry out a civil marriage between two individuals from the LGBT community.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to follow up on the point he made in his intervention earlier to say that this part of the naughty corner would really like to have a say on the matter, and I thank the Member for bringing it to the attention of the Speaker who will, no doubt, look at that in 15 minutes' time.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I was concerned that Mr McNarry raised his point of order because I was to speak next; but I will not take it personally if he does so again in 15 minutes.

Many more couples are choosing to marry outside the Church. The number of marriages in non-religious, civil institutions, such as town halls, hotels and other facilities, is increasing. In a recent opinion poll, 68% of people indicated that they support the extension of the right to marry to people in the LGBT community. That shows widespread public support for this change. We as MLAs have a duty to listen to and represent the views of a growing number of people in our society.

People who engage in debate, whether in this House, on radio or TV talk shows, or from the audience of TV shows, should not use offensive and degrading terms to refer to people who are merely crying out for equality. Do we really want to send out the message that, in this state, the love between two citizens who happen to be in the LGBT community is a lesser love than that of any other couple? That is a very dangerous message to put out. The prejudices and the stigma behind that message are exactly why we have such poor figures for mental health problems, self-harm and suicide in the LGBT community. People in this House really need to wise up and realise the message that they are sending out. Some have said that, by bringing back this motion every six months, we send out a very poor message. The message that is being sent out is that we do not treat the love between two citizens the same as the love between two other citizens. I do not agree with that. The love between any two citizens may be as strong and as valid as the love between any other two citizens.

Once again, we see the shameful use and abuse of the petition of concern by the DUP. They are using a mechanism that was established to protect minorities to force their own narrow, outdated, religious dogma on all our citizens, regardless of the beliefs of those citizens. Despite the petition of concern, I am hopeful that, on this occasion, a majority of MLAs will deliver a moral victory by supporting this motion for marriage equality. Of course, the party opposite would, I believe, oppose once again the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the introduction of civil partnerships, if they were debated today.

The referendum in the South was a joyous occasion. It was an excellent demonstration in

public debate of how citizens can engage in a debate and bring round their politicians, some of whom were very reluctant to champion this issue. We now see senior figures in the Government in the South acting as cheerleaders for equal marriage, despite their personal concerns at the start.

The campaign needs to continue. The campaign in the South was won not just by members of the LGBT community but by their families and friends. Am I seriously to believe that no Members of this House who will oppose this motion have sons or daughters who are members of the LGBT community and who feel shunned by society as a result of the attitudes of what I hope will be a minority of MLAs opposing equal marriage? Those Members will not only be on the wrong side of history but on the wrong side of the present.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. It is clear that this debate has gathered considerable interest, if the emails, phone calls and text messages that I have received are anything to go by. It is also clear that it is a deeply emotive issue, and, as such, it is right that we are careful with the words we speak and the tone we use. Mindful of that, I want to set out why I will oppose the motion.

My first reason relates to the wording of the motion itself. I think that it would be wrong for the House to go down this route at this stage simply because we are coming towards the end of a mandate, and I think that we do not have the necessary time to debate the issue properly and give it the scrutiny it needs. In addition, it is obvious that it is not the will of the Executive at this time to progress this. That is my first reason for concluding that we are right to oppose this motion.

When we get down to the core issue, I believe that we are right to oppose this motion.

When we legislate for same-sex marriage, we will not be dealing with a rights issue as has been claimed: instead, we will be redefining what marriage is. Those who support changing the law are quick to talk about this being a rights issue — understandably, from their point of view, because it is very easy to argue on the basis that you are trying to extend rights to other people. However, civil partnerships provide rights and protections for same-sex couples. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that same-sex marriage is not a human right, so this is not a rights issue.

The legislation being proposed to the Executive would actually redefine what marriage is. Marriage is currently defined in Northern Ireland as:

"the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others"

To change that in order to allow for same-sex marriage would not simply tinker at the edges of what marriage is: it would completely transform it. In fact, it would turn it on its head.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way on that point.

Mr Givan: The Member cited the European Court of Human Rights. Does he also recognise that the United Nations Human Rights Committee has also said that the current definition of marriage in Northern Ireland is not a violation of international human rights law?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for his intervention on very a good point and for giving me an extra minute.

So we have this definition, and we have heard evidence that this is not a rights issue. Why has that definition held for so long? It is because marriage in its current form is good for society, and it is not something that we should want to change.

We have already learned here that legislation on this issue, first, would fundamentally change what marriage is; and secondly, it would not change the fact that same-sex couples already have rights through civil partnership. However, it would have an effect on the rights of many hundreds and thousands of people across Northern Ireland: those who believe and those who want to express their belief that marriage can only ever be between one man and one woman. Sadly, we have had numerous examples from the rest of the UK that have shown how teachers, adoption agencies, businesses and public servants have been negatively affected as a result of their beliefs on this issue. I have no doubt that the same would happen if this were to become law in Northern Ireland.

Finally, I want to express my concern at the way in which some people have denigrated others who hold to the traditional view of marriage as a result of their faith. They should not be excluded from this debate simply

because it is their faith that informs them on these issues. They should not be belittled for the views that they hold. I make no apology for the fact that my faith influences my thinking on all matters —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: No; I am running out of time.

I know that that will frustrate some people here who think that, when I enter this Chamber, I should flick a switch and turn that off. I cannot do that, and nor would I want to. We are all shaped by our lives, by our experiences and by our beliefs. These beliefs may be formed in different ways, but people should be entitled to hold and express those beliefs, no matter what the issue is. I am not here today to speak only for myself: I am representing the views of those across my constituency and across Northern Ireland who believe that marriage should be between one man and one woman; who believe that the rights of people are protected through civil partnerships; who believe that freedom of expression and liberty is at risk; and who believe that the motion should be rejected.

Ms Hanna: I support the motion and those who will be most affected by the outcome. Like many people, I watched the referendum in the South just before the summer. I actually campaigned in it, and, I have to say, as someone who has been involved in elections for going on for 15 years, that I do not remember one being as life-affirming and positive since the referendum that we had here in 1998. It was so moving to hear the impact and testimony from people who would be directly affected by the change and those who would not, particularly those who lived through a time when homosexuality was still illegal, which, unbelievably, was the case in the Republic until 1993. We have to remember, of course, that there were politicians who argued against the change then.

1.00 pm

I suspect that some of the most important testimony in moving votes, changing polling and the result in the South came from a former president, Mary McAleese, and from Tom Curran, the general secretary of Fine Gael. Both spoke about their experiences as parents and as families, their feelings when their children told them that they were gay and their worries and concerns. It was not because they loved their children any less or felt that they were different in any way, but it was their fears for their children and their prospects, how they

would be mistreated or treated differently and the things that they would be excluded from in their lives. The result in May, by the simple act of people standing with gay members of our community, going into a polling booth and voting in solidarity for them, slightly changed the outcomes of such conversations. The conversation that many young people will have with their parents will be that little bit easier on the basis that their country has stood with them and said that they are equal and validated and that their relationships are cherished.

That is what the Assembly can and should do today: send the message to everybody, but particularly to LGBT young people, who are disproportionately affected by mental health issues, saying that they are free and equal and can fall in love and plan their lives like everybody in the Chamber is allowed to do.

Since marriage equality was approved across the water, we can see that the world has not fallen in. Those of us who believe that marriage is an important building block in society should be encouraged that more people want to buy into that institution. We should also be very careful about spurious claims about unintended consequences. Families with same-sex couples exist, and those children are raised in happy, loving, healthy homes. What will damage them most is continuing to stigmatise their households and families and not allowing them legal status.

The issue has also given a complete lie to the notion that young people are not interested in politics. I had over 700 emails on the issue, and I know, from the messages, names and addresses, that it is not just a young person's issue; it is not a unionist or nationalist issue; it is not a religious or non-religious issue; and it is not a left/right issue. Opinions across the board believe that we should change our view.

Northern Ireland is now the only part of these islands in which your marriage is invalid if you are gay. We have to clear that up. If somebody is married in Dublin or London, at what point when they enter Northern Ireland do we think that their marriage ceases to exist?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that it is another example of the people being ahead of the politicians and that the politicians should listen to the people?

Ms Hanna: I think that it is. Polling shows that over two thirds of people support marriage equality, with a smaller number who have not made up their mind but are not opposed yet.

The separate but equal argument is that people should be happy with civil partnership. I ask Members who are married whether they would be happy to downgrade their marriage to a civil partnership if they think that it is fundamentally acceptable and that it gives people the same expression of their relationship.

I want to be very clear that I do not want any Member to feel coerced into voting for this. I believe very strongly in persuasion and not persecution. God knows, unless you are a clone — I am not suggesting that anybody in the Chamber is — at some point, we will all have an issue on which we will be at odds with our party. I do not want to be in a party or a society that does not allow such dissent in people's views.

I commend the people in my party who have a different view. While I fundamentally disagree with it, particularly when they have set out their case, I respect their right to do so.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hanna: Yes, I will.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the motion does not and will not affect marriages that take place in churches and that it is not a redefinition of marriage but an expansion of the understanding of marriage that makes it more inclusive?

Ms Hanna: Yes, it will. The faith that I belong to, for example, does not allow people who are divorced to be married, and it has not been forced into doing that.

I want all Members to engage on the issue. They should engage with the testimony that they have no doubt received from people. I understand that people are struggling with their faith, but I hope that they will, in time, realise that many others have seen that it is entirely compatible with Christian values of love and compassion.

Mr Kennedy: At the outset, I want to say that I oppose the motion. This is yet another debate on the issue within a very short time — I think that it is debate number five. I say again to the proposers of the motion that they are guilty of engaging in a highly cynical political exercise, undoubtedly an electoral exercise, which will be of absolutely no benefit to any section of our community, least of all the LGBT community, which I think is being deliberately used by some parties in the House for perceived political advantage.

The House will know that my party believes that issues of this nature are matters of personal conscience; therefore, although I have been called as an Ulster Unionist, I speak in a personal capacity. It is a matter of regret to me that members of all political parties are not allowed the liberty to speak freely to their consciences on the issue.

In previous debates on the matter, I made clear my opposition to any change in the current legislation to allow for same-sex marriage. That remains my position. It is a position based on my religious beliefs, and it is consistent with the teaching of my Church, the Presbyterian Church, and with the publicly expressed views of other Churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland and the main denominations in Northern Ireland and Ireland generally. Most important, it is a position that I believe is fundamentally consistent with the teaching of holy scripture. What is of importance to me in this debate is not the teaching of any Church, but the teaching of scripture itself. It is clear to me, from my understanding of scripture, that there should be no change in the current situation.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I will give way briefly.

Mr B McCrea: Given that the Member has talked about scripture, does he think that marriage is a wholly Christian concept?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. It is clearly not exclusively so, but many of its main foundations are found in the teaching of scripture.

Redefining marriage would have far-reaching consequences for our entire society, and I do not believe that there is widespread public support in Northern Ireland for such a proposal. In holding that view, I do not believe that I should be regarded as homophobic. Indeed, any such suggestion would offend and appal me. I do not disparage the LGBT community; neither is it my role or practice to be judgemental.

Like most Members, I have received much correspondence in the run-up to the debate from those on both sides of the argument. One such piece of correspondence, which outlined clear opposition to any change in the law in Northern Ireland, came from Professor Dr Stephen Williams, professor of systematic

theology at Union Theological College, Belfast, which is part of Queen's University, Belfast and where students are prepared for the Presbyterian ministry. Part of his submission addressed the equality argument, on which proponents of the debate wax lyrical. With the permission of Dr Williams, I will share a short section of his thinking on this aspect of the debate. I am grateful to him for his interest and insight. He wrote:

"The equality argument is not at all compelling. Actually, same-sex marriage will reveal, not abolish, differences between heterosexual and homosexual couples. Marriage is not all about children and many heterosexual households are, sadly, unfit places for children to be raised.

However, one difference stands out between heterosexual and homosexual couples: if the former cannot have their own children, it is not because they belong to different sexes; if the latter cannot have their own children, it is precisely because they belong to different sexes.

This makes the two types of marriage ... unequal, quite apart from any re-definition of marriage involved."

Dr Williams concluded:

"Same-sex marriage is the wrong way to tackle any discrimination against gay people."

Therefore, for the reasons that I have set out — personal and deeply held convictions, reasons that I believe are clearly supported and shared by a great many people and that I cannot and will not set aside — I remain opposed to the proposal.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Jim Allister, I advise him that, because of time constraints — I know that you are always generous about taking interventions — I will not be able to allocate the extra minute, as I have to call the Minister to respond.

Mr Allister: Thank you. For me, this is not a matter of popularism but a matter of principle. It is not about being on the right or wrong side of history. For me, it is unapologetically about being on the side of that which is right, informed by my conscience and my religious belief, which quite properly can and should inform these matters.

This is the fifth attempt in the House to redefine marriage, and that is what it is, despite what some have said. It is an attempt to redefine marriage, to replace the time-honoured, purposeful definition of "marriage" as being between one man and one woman with the perverse definition that demeans traditional marriage by equating it to same-sex marriage, to which there is no procreational purpose. There is only the purpose of pandering to the pretence that there is some right that is being denied. This is not a rights issue. As has been pointed out, there is no human right recognised by the European Convention on Human Rights or the European Court of Human Rights to same-sex marriage. It therefore cannot be and is not a rights issue, nor is it an issue of equality. Rather, there is a worked-up, phoney demand for rights where none does or should exist. There is no equality issue here.

Of course, the demand is based on the fatuous suggestion that same-sex marriage is really the same as regular man-to-woman marriage and that there is no difference between the two. I would like to quote a source that I am maybe not given to quoting, but it is very apt on this occasion. I quote from a letter from the Catholic bishops to Members of the House. The letter dealt appropriately with that point when it stated:

"The proposed ... motion before the assembly effectively says to parents, children and society that the state should not, and will not, promote any normative or ideal family environment for raising children. It therefore implies that the biological bond and natural ties between a child and its mother and father have no intrinsic value for the child or for society."

That is what the motion comes down to. It comes down to saying that the normative, natural environment of raising children with a father and a mother and their biological link is of no intrinsic value whatsoever and that you just equate the "unequatable" and simply roll together same-sex marriage, where procreation is impossible, with the traditional concept of regular marriage, where procreation is often but not on every occasion the natural process and the natural God-given environment in which to raise children to the best possible effect. So this is an issue that tries to equate two irreconcilable concepts: that of traditional marriage between a man and a woman and that of the phoney suggestion that, for no purpose other than to pander to what has been built up as a right when it is not a right, you give to others some equivalence to something that

there is no equivalence within; namely, same-sex marriage.

So, for the fifth time in the House, I will, robustly and with conviction, whatever the popularism might be, defend with my vote the right of traditional marriage, believing that that is a bedrock for the success of society, and believing that the more we tinker, tamper, demean and diminish that, the more we will take this society spiralling downwards. I think that we have done enough of that already.

1.15 pm

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I note that the call to act in the motion is directed at the Executive. However, as the subject matter falls within the remit of my Department, I have agreed to respond.

Apart from a few notable exceptions, the debate, which we have heard for the fifth time in this place, has taken place in a spirit of generosity. When my predecessor responded to the most recent motion on the subject, on 27 April this year, he referred to his feeling of *déjà vu*. Having listened to, essentially, the exact same arguments on this occasion, I have a similar feeling. I wonder whether the debate on this motion represents the best use of the Assembly's time. We have heard various opinions as to why the debate has come before us again, and I must say that I tend to agree with them.

For my part, I think that it is unhelpful, to say the least, to have to go over the same ground just six months down the line. I spoke as a Back-Bench politician in the previous debate on this issue. I said that every time this debate comes before the Assembly, it causes distress; it causes distress to the faith communities and it causes distress to the LGBT community as well. The more it comes up, again and again, without any prospect of resolution, it causes distress to everyone involved. However, I am content to reiterate the arguments in support of the policy position on same-sex marriage because I believe that those arguments are principled and persuasive and cannot easily be set aside.

This is not an equality issue. I think a number of commentators have attempted to make it so. Those opposite and, indeed, some in the UUP, would like to say that this is an equality issue for their own political reasons, but just because you keep saying that it is an equality issue does not make it an equality issue. We have heard from the ECHR and the United Nations that it is

not an equality issue. Those of us on this side of the House recall well what the president of Sinn Féin had to say about equality when he spoke in Enniskillen some time ago.

Contrary to what has been suggested, the law in Northern Ireland does not disparage or denigrate same-sex relationships, and same-sex couples are not precluded from having a loving, secure, stable and permanent relationship. Specific provision has been made to ensure legal recognition for same-sex relationships, and nothing — nothing — turns on the fact that same-sex couples are referred to as "partners" rather than "spouses". Let me assure Ms Hanna, who made the point that some of us on this side are probably struggling with our faith in relation to this issue, that I am not struggling with my faith in relation to any of the issues raised here today.

Put simply, the current law regarding same-sex relationships is operating perfectly well, and the usual drivers for legislative reform do not exist. Other jurisdictions are free to determine their own legislative path and to laud their own approach. We have heard the approach of the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, Great Britain being lauded. That is entirely a matter for people if they want to do that, but we are not bound to follow suit. That is what devolution is all about.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: No, I will not. I do not for one minute accept the suggestion that, because Northern Ireland has not followed suit and has not followed along as if we do not have our own mind on these matters, we are less enlightened than those jurisdictions that have "extended" marriage to same-sex couples. I place "extended" in inverted commas because, in reality, some of those jurisdictions have essentially repackaged their law on civil partnerships and, consequently, the rights and responsibilities of same-sex spouses are essentially the same as the rights and responsibilities of civil partners. I expect that that is why those jurisdictions offer the option of a simple conversion process. Some jurisdictions may claim to have extended marriage to same-sex couples, but closer scrutiny reveals significant qualifications, particularly in relation to assisted conception.

As you know, Mr Speaker, resources are extremely limited at present and I see little merit in a repackaging exercise for Northern Ireland. By the way, on Mr McKay's point about public opinion, it might interest him to know that, during the consultation on the Civil Partnership

Bill, 86% of correspondents opposed civil partnership at that point. He may want to reflect on arguing that point. At the point of introduction, the Civil Partnership Bill was assessed as being compliant with international law and standards and the law on civil partnership remains so today. We should be proud of the fact that our law strikes an appropriate balance between the interests of same-sex couples and the interests of people of faith. Those who are truly committed to diversity will see the intrinsic merit in protecting a diverse range of values and beliefs. They will not seek to elevate their own interests above all others, nor will they seek to silence those who may have different views.

Like many others in this House, I have received many emails from those who support "same-sex marriage" and more, in fact, from those who support the institution of marriage as it is. All the emails that I received in support of the motion were, essentially, drafted by Amnesty International. When I responded, only a handful came back a second time. Of those who did, only one was gracious enough to acknowledge my right to hold a different view. All others engaged in abusive emails. We had an initial facade and then the abusive follow-up. I regret that people in our society use abuse to push their own views forward. As I said to one of the correspondents who came back to me, when one engages in personal abuse, one has essentially lost the argument.

Those who support same-sex marriage are quick to suggest that any change to the law could be carefully managed to ensure that there are appropriate protections for people of faith. We have heard that here again today, but we have heard the contrary view as well. Given recent developments at home and abroad, as Mr Weir pointed out, I think that it is right to adopt a cautious approach and to leave things as they are. Ultimately, I see no need for legislative change. I invite Members to join me in rejecting the motion.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Sinn Féin wants to see this island be part of a progressive world where all citizens can be married regardless of their sexual orientation. We want to join the nations that have supported marriage equality: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, England, Scotland, Wales, Uruguay, the United States of America and the South of Ireland.

This is the fifth time that we have played our role in bringing this motion forward. We are very proud of that. The suffragettes had to bring many motions forward before people listened to the right of women to have a vote. People, many of whom were on the opposite benches, opposed interracial marriage or supported apartheid. People also had to fight for their rights and change civil marriage so that there could be marriage between different races.

Today's motion is a joint one with the SDLP. Previously, it was with the Green Party. I am honoured to make the winding-up speech on the motion. I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I genuinely welcome the tone of the debate. I am now calling on everyone in the Assembly to join us and make history. If a majority of the Assembly votes yes to equality, notwithstanding the knee-jerk reaction of the petition of concern, it will send a powerful message around the world; the same powerful message that reverberated around the globe when the South of Ireland voted yes a few short months ago.

The DUP is saying its usual no. It is citing civil partnerships, saying that there are only a few little differences, but it was opposed to civil partnership, and it has never said that it supports civil partnership. There are fundamental differences between civil partnership and civil marriage. It is using a petition of concern to discriminate against an entire community. Let us call it as it is. It is very disappointing to see a Government Minister, who has taken a Pledge of Office, urging people to vote no for equality.

I welcome Andy Allen's contribution today, but what is the leader of the UUP doing? Mike Nesbitt, the leader of the party, feels the hand of history on his shoulder and warns the party that it should not be on the wrong side of history, yet he tells us that he is going to vote no. For me, that is very strange leadership. I am sorry; I do not want to be dismissive, but it is poor leadership. It is a bizarre and contradictory position, and it does a grave disservice to the LGBT community. The question is this: is the leader of the UUP playing to the media gallery, talking out of both sides of his mouth?

I would like to thank the SDLP for this joint motion. I welcome Colum and Claire's contributions, and I agree with many of the comments that they made. I hope that all the other SDLP Members will join with them today in voting. The last time, we lost by two votes, and five Members of that party did not vote, but

I hope that those days are over. That is all that I will say about that, and I welcome the fact that we are presenting a joint motion today. I would say the same to my colleagues in the Alliance Party, but I want to pay tribute to Trevor Lunn's leadership. He has shown huge leadership. I hope that everyone in the Alliance Party will abide by their party policy and vote a resounding yes.

The tone of the debate is a far cry from the first debate in which I participated in the Assembly, when the fires of hell were visited on the LGBT community and some very choice and disgusting language was used. Thankfully, we are now having the debate in a much better environment. The arguments against have changed slightly as they realise that they are so out of step with society and particularly with young people. We have heard them say, "They have civil partnership, why do they want marriage?" or "It is a lifestyle choice". They say, "Let's not redefine marriage", but if you look at civil marriage over the years, of course it has been redefined as society evolves. None of us would have wanted the civil marriage that existed in the past; times are changing.

The other debate we get is, "My conscience won't allow me; what about religious belief?" To be honest, with the greatest of respect, they are mixing up their religious belief and their job as politicians. We can have a debate about that; I heard different people speaking. All parties in this Assembly that vote yes to this motion support freedom of religion; Claire Hanna said it. The Catholic Church does not support divorce, but it supports civil marriage. Let us be honest about this. As legislators, we are not here to legislate according to our consciences; we are here to legislate on the basis of equality. Nobody is saying that the Churches must practice equal marriage. That is a matter for the Churches now and in the future. Let us also be clear that there are many people who have religious beliefs who believe in equality and equal marriage. Let us not pretend that this is between Christians and non-Christians or people who practice various religions.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for giving way. If legislation was brought forward from the Executive in terms of people's religious beliefs, there are those in the LGBT community who would articulate that they have a faith. Should they be able to have a religious marriage or should they be restricted to civil marriage?

Ms Ruane: What we are calling for today is marriage equality in civil marriage. That debate is one for people in the various Churches. Let

us not be diverted; let us not have a red-herring debate. That is a debate for the Churches. Every party in the Assembly that votes yes is absolutely clear that yes voters support freedom of religion by allowing religious institutions to define, observe and practice marriage according to their beliefs.

1.30 pm

The other arguments that we have heard are the family values arguments. My message to those people is: do not insult families. Families come in all shapes and sizes. We have one-parent and two-parent families. We have gay and straight families. We have extended families. We have children who are fostered and adopted. We have families who have come from countries throughout the world. Yes, I am a huge believer in family values, but it depends on how you define "family". I was reared in a good family, and I am lucky to have a wonderful family myself, with children and a grandchild. The glue that holds my family together is the traditional family value of love, commitment and deep respect. Do people from the LGBT community not deserve love, commitment and respect? Why would I, who can get married, try to say to someone in another community that they cannot but I can?

See the argument about children? I do not buy that, folks, and I will tell you why. Many of our children might be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered. Are we going to say to our children that they are less equal than straight young people? I am not going to say that. That is not good family values. Equality, love, respect and commitment, for me, are important family values.

I am calling on everyone here today to vote yes. Let us get a majority and let us make a bit of history. For those who feel that they cannot vote yes, please abstain. Please abstain and play your part.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the question, I remind Members that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 53; Noes 52.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Ms Hanna, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr Allen, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Ms Sugden.

OTHER:

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs McKeivitt and Ms Ruane.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Cochrane-Watson, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mrs Pengelly, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Somerville, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

OTHER:

Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

Total Votes	105	Total Ayes	53	[50.5%]
Nationalist Votes	41	Nationalist Ayes	41	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	55	Unionist Ayes	4	[7.3%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	8	[88.9%]

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Nesbitt.

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Mr Speaker: Order, please. If Members are leaving the Chamber, I ask them to do so quietly.

Mental Health

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. *[Interruption.]* Order. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Apologies, but I tried to catch your eye before we started this debate. Standing Order 17(4) states:

"The Business Committee shall consult with the Speaker in order to establish the total time to be allocated to each debate".

Given that the business is scheduled to finish today by 4.40 pm, I wonder whether you can set out at some time — you may not be in a position to do it now — the relationship between the Speaker and the Business Committee in establishing the total time for debate available. I was disappointed not to be able to speak in the previous debate, as I know was Mr Agnew from the Green Party.

Mr Speaker: I understand the point of order and speak from a position of some sympathy for individuals in that corner of the Chamber. The Business Committee makes allowance for the proposers and seconders of motions and for winding-up speeches. It also makes provision for the Minister to speak.

In the previous debate, we had a high level of intervention. My last count was eight interventions, which took a further eight minutes out of the time allocated. I did alert Members to the fact that it was challenging to include all who put down their name to speak. In the event, two Members, one of whom got two interventions, were not called to make their full

contributions. The Minister did not take all the time that was allocated to her, but she was perfectly entitled to do so.

I hope that that responds to the Member's substantive point. In working with the Business Committee, we have to try to accommodate all possible combinations of circumstances. Sometimes interventions, which are perfectly valid and which enliven and enrich our debate, eat into the time allocated for fuller participation.

I would like to move on. Have you finished?

Mr B McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I am, of course, absolutely happy with the way in which you conducted the debate. There are two key points to make, however, if I can put them to you to consider and come back to me on.

One concerns the relationship, because Standing Order 17(4) states:

"The Business Committee shall consult with the Speaker".

I have no input to the Business Committee but I do have input to you. You said you were sympathetic, so I wonder whether you might use your good offices to say that there are debates in which it is known that people will want to speak. You can deal with that, Mr Speaker, in your own good time.

I would like you to consider a second point and respond in writing, or whatever is the right form. Standing Order 17(5) says that the Speaker shall have:

"regard to the balance of opinion ... the party strengths ... and the number of members who ... desire to speak."

There was a cross-community vote on the last motion. There are parties that did not get to speak at all. Mr Speaker, perhaps you would look at this to see if there is some way, whatever the time constraints you put on it, that every party in the Assembly gets the chance to speak at least once. I will leave it to you, Mr Speaker, to consider the best way forward.

Mr Speaker: OK. That is where we will leave the matter for now. I chair the Business Committee, so I do consult on and discuss each and every decision. In the course of any term, there will be changes. Indeed, there have been changes to the composition of the numbers of Members attached to particular parties. All of those are variables that affect our ability to

anticipate every circumstance, but I will reflect on the point that you made. I doubt very much that we have much room to accommodate every Member and the membership of every group on the basis of a guarantee, but we will do our best as we always do.

Fearghal, I am now down to nine minutes. If you like, I am prepared to put this matter off until after Question Time, or perhaps you can manage it in nine minutes.

Mr McKinney: Perhaps I will try nine minutes.

Mr Speaker: OK, that will be good. That will be interesting.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way? Only joking. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McKinney: If I do not manage, my colleagues can bring any other necessary points to the table.

I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that mental ill health affects one in four people every year; further recognises the importance of having quality services that are fairly resourced, trained staff to afford early access and support, and a focus on prevention, resilience and mental well-being; recognises the importance of rehabilitation, with clear objectives established for accessing mental health professionals, within 28 days and close to home; further recognises the importance of raising awareness, reducing stigma and discrimination in relation to mental ill health; and calls for the Executive to work in collaboration to make dealing with mental ill health a top Programme for Government priority.

At the outset, I welcome the Health Minister back into his post after a period of great uncertainty. I hope that, in the context of today's debate, the Minister can clarify the importance of him being in post to make strategic decisions on the future delivery of mental health services here.

As SDLP health spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to bring the very important issue of mental health to the Chamber. As many of you know, the prevalence of mental health problems has historically been and continues to be a major concern for us all. In that regard, I note the amendment, which the SDLP is happy to support. In our view, it neither adds

substantially nor takes away anything from the original motion. However, it does give the proposers extra time to speak, which I hope will be used to further elaborate on these urgent plans and to express the genuine concerns of the many people impacted on by mental ill health across Northern Ireland, and the many others, such as health staff, carers and families, who share the concerns reflected here today. Therefore, the amendment cannot be a gesture. I welcome the intention to establish a mental health trauma network, but I have severe doubts that it will be followed by the robust and strategic action plan that is so desperately needed.

It is widely recognised that the North has higher levels of mental ill health than any other region of these islands. It is estimated that one in four adults will suffer from a mental health problem at some stage of their life. Long-term social and economic deprivation and the Troubles have had a massive impact on the health and well-being of our population. A project carried out by the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the Ulster University indicated that 213,000 people here suffer from some sort of mental illness and that almost half of these illnesses are directly related to the Troubles. It is a startling figure.

Tribute must be paid to the many staff in our hospitals and community who continue to play an important role in delivering high-quality care. Much great work has also been undertaken by various organisations. I applaud the action that they have taken and the campaigns that they have been involved in. An example is the Change Your Mind campaign by the Association for Mental Health (NIAMH) and the Public Health Agency, which is aimed at reducing levels of stigma, discrimination and negative attitudes towards people with mental ill health.

However, severe challenges still exist and are of great concern. We have recently seen damaging headlines around the care provided to suicide and self-harm patients in our emergency departments and the inadequacy of children's mental health services. In this context, it is important to look again at some of the recent policy developments on the provision of mental health services here in the past eight years. One of the seminal reports dictating the nature of mental health services was the Bamford review of 2007. It made a number of key recommendations including the development of a comprehensive range of mental health services that would support people in the community, supplemented by the

2011 Transforming Your Care plan to bolster mental health treatment at home.

Again, in 2011, despite mental health ultimately taking a minor role, the Programme for Government set key milestones to strengthen the drive on improving health and well-being and in tackling disadvantage.

In theory, therefore, those developments should have resulted in massive strides forward in affording mental health provision the recognition and parity of esteem that it truly deserves, but — and you could hear the "but" coming — unfortunately, the progression has been tainted by lack of implementation and systemic failure to fund and measure.

The key challenges that the Executive have faced in the delivery of mental healthcare have been the role of Transforming Your Care, budgetary cuts and the cumulative effect that they have had on the Bamford action plan. In 2009, when the first action plan was embarked on, the total amount of additional funding that the Department anticipated was £44 million. However, due to the CSR, £29.5 million was spent. To delve even deeper, let us look at trust spend. Between 2008 and 2014, trusts spent something in the order of 25% less on mental healthcare. Those cuts have dramatically affected the Bamford action plan's ability to improve mental health services here. I have serious concerns about the future ability to carry out each initiative set out. There are very genuine concerns that, if more cuts are forced on the mental health budget, it could not be done without severely hampering existing services.

At this stage, we are well aware of the current status of the Transforming Your Care plan. If we look closely at it, we do not see any concrete evidence that the plans concerning mental health have been implemented to an appropriate degree. Most concerning is proposal 62, which stated the intention to close long-stay institutions and complete resettlement by 2015. As part of that, £11 million has been spent on the resettlement; that was basically closing Muckamore and Holywell and relocating patients. A recent report conducted by Queen's University and Action Mental Health lays bare the current status of community mental health provision across the North. In particular, the report expresses concerns about the range of inadequacies in community care services. One user stated:

"Long waiting lists ... poor levels of communication between professionals ... lack of facilities, and long term support".

Health professionals stated:

"Community mental health teams are stretched to the limit, too little staff and too many demands. Not enough voluntary resources are available".

Those are damning in themselves. They lead to very serious questions that must be asked as a result, of not just the Minister but of successive DUP Ministers. The current situation can be attributable only to systemic political failure to properly implement and fund a strategy to deal with the current and future demand for services.

There are other areas of concern. The issue of rural mental health has to figure. It is a major problem. The rehabilitation of patients has proven that to be the case. Asking people to travel big distances for treatment cannot be acceptable. Added to that is the fact that many farmers — and we have seen it in the headlines recently — are under extreme financial pressure, with livelihoods at risk. There is the attendant suicidal risk as well. It is important to mention the impact that suicides are having on families here. In the past 10 years, we have seen them increase by a staggering 84% despite the Protect Life strategy being introduced back in 2006. I understand that the Department is consulting on a new mental health and suicide prevention strategy, but it is paramount that vulnerable groups such as those in rural communities, young men, the LGBT community and those from areas of multiple social deprivation are targeted and given the appropriate level of support and service provision that they need.

There is now a massive risk that the current direction of travel in policy and in budgetary cuts will severely hamper services. In all of this, it is important to remember that a strategic approach and properly investing in mental health provision, especially earlier intervention and preventative services, is paramount in not only dramatically improving the quality of life for an individual and families but in reducing the economic costs associated with mental ill health. In that context, today's motion argues that the next Executive need to take mental health seriously and they need to set out an ambitious agenda; not a tokenistic one, as seen in the current Programme for Government. It should be a genuine, cross-governmental, mental health and well-being strategy that embraces issues such as employment, welfare, policing, criminal justice, housing and education, and the Public Health Agency should lead the way in championing preventive action and early intervention.

2.00 pm

I have met the deadline, Mr Speaker. I am thankful that there were no interventions, and I look forward to the rest of the debate.

The debate stood suspended.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 2 November 2015. — [Mr Swann.]

Motion not moved.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Disabled Facilities Grants

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the number of applications for disabled facilities grants. (AQO 8954/11-16)

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): The Housing Executive administers the disabled facilities grant, which has a significant impact on the lives of those who live with a disability in private sector housing, helping them to make adaptations to their homes.

In 2014-15, the Housing Executive approved over 1,200 disabled facilities grants and expended over £12 million in grant assistance. This year to date, 537 applications have been received, and almost 500 disabled facilities grant applications have been approved. Those grant applications address issues such as access to premises, downstairs bathrooms and wet rooms and downstairs bedrooms.

Mr Dallat: I have listened very carefully to the Minister, and I congratulate the Housing Executive on the work that it has done. Does the Minister agree, however, that very often time is not on the side of the people who need the disability facilities grants, many of whom

may be bed-blocking in hospitals? How does the Minister propose to clear the waiting list so that those people are not in long queues that they cannot afford to be in?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Obviously, this is an issue not only of the budget allocated but of the process that is used. I am well aware of the issue, not only as a Minister with responsibility, which is important, but as an MLA. Like yourself, I am well aware of constituents who are affected because the process can be somewhat protracted, particularly if you are dependent on a report from occupational therapy and are waiting for all of the particular elements to be in a row.

I assure the Member that under reviews, as you are well aware, Departments review the practice and the process. That is an element that I am more than happy to give further consideration to. We are often criticised in this House for what we have not done, but for those who I referred to in my substantive reply, we have approved over 1,200 disabled facilities grants and expended well over £12 million in grant assistance. That has made an invaluable contribution to the well-being, livelihood and day-to-day experience of those people who suffer with a disability.

I will certainly give further consideration to the comments of the Member, particularly with our colleagues in occupational therapy and the other component parts that make up the decision-making process.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his answer.

Following on from Mr Dallat's supplementary question, when a family with a newborn child with disabilities needs a new home — due, maybe, to needing an additional bedroom to supply a wet room or changing facilities, or to keep medical equipment in — has the Minister any way in which that process can be worked with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, so that there is a parallel process of allocating a new house and processing the disability grant?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Obviously, there is sometimes an element of this where, unfortunately, we have to look beyond the confines of the Housing Executive to provision by a housing association. I can think of one particular case at the moment which has been protracted for far too long and which, as Minister, I have tried to expedite. A very large family, with children who have particular

disabilities, has been unable to get appropriate housing. A number of locations have been looked at, but that case has gone on too long and I had a meeting just last week with the chief executive of a housing association in relation to it. It sometimes ends up going to housing associations, as much as to the Housing Executive.

It is just as I said to Mr Dallat: none of us know what will face us in the weeks and months ahead or what difficulties we may face as families. At the moment, I have a particular personal issue in relation to my father, who has just come out of hospital after a protracted length of time there. Additional resources are needed, and we will have to look at how his needs are going to be met. How much more is that the case when there are children with disabilities. That is an issue, and I am quite happy to include the issue of children with disabilities and how they are provided for in a new build situation, in the consideration that we give to how we make progress on this issue.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mrs Dolores Kelly, I inform the House that question 5 has been withdrawn.

Social Housing: Regulatory Framework

2. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he will publish the findings of the consultation on the proposal for a new regulatory framework for social housing. (AQO 8955/11-16)

Mr Storey: The response to the public consultation on a new regulatory framework for social housing was published on the Department for Social Development's website on 30 September 2015. It is planned to issue the final framework document early in the new year. Implementation will commence during 2016-17.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he give us some indicators as to how he will take forward the implementation? What are the key emerging trends that he wants to act on?

Mr Storey: I will set this in context. The Department regulates the work of all social housing providers in Northern Ireland, and uses a regulatory framework to do so. In the light of the changes in the housing sector in the last few years, and the reviews of regulatory frameworks in other jurisdictions, it was decided

to look again at this framework. The consultation document outlined proposals for a new regulatory framework, and the regulations will be carried out against three standards: the consumer, governance and finance. Obviously, that will bring us into the area of looking at risk-based processes. An element of flexibility will be built in to accommodate variations in organisations, such as size, development plans, previous history and business complexity. That gives us an indication of the breadth of what we are seeking to achieve, although I have to say — I know that the Member takes a particular interest in this issue — it is a challenging process that we set ourselves, because of the vastness of the sector and the particular challenges that we face.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. How did the Department decide what to include in this framework?

Mr Storey: The Department looked at best practice. Sometimes, that is good. It is maybe not always good to look at practice in other jurisdictions, because there is an underlying assumption that everybody else gets it right somewhere else, but that might not always be the case. When it comes to look at best practice, Northern Ireland leads the way in many of these things and in the way that we approach issues. We looked at best practice in other jurisdictions and compared those with our current controls in Northern Ireland. Many representatives from the housing association movement were also involved, and there were workshops under the social housing reform programme before the consultation was published. That contribution was key in the development of the new framework. As we move forward, we have tried to incorporate the issues that were raised.

Urban Villages

3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the measures his Department will take to support the urban villages initiative. (AQO 8956/11-16)

Mr Storey: As the Member will appreciate, the urban villages initiative is being led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. DSD has been supporting the urban villages initiative through submitting, in early May, a bid for funding at the June monitoring round for a number of projects in Belfast and Londonderry totalling £2.1 million. The projects were identified along with estimated costs by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB). My Department is also supporting the urban

villages initiative by assisting the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Strategic Investment Board when possible in the delivery of a number of those projects within the current financial year, and that work is ongoing.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. Many areas throughout the North are eagerly awaiting urban villages. Will you outline whether some are closer to taking off than others? Has any time frame been set that will give people confidence that they will take place?

Mr Storey: The process has been fraught with challenges. In some communities, it has been a challenge to try to get an understanding of what needs to be achieved with the urban villages concept. Under the OFMDFM urban villages initiative, there could be opportunities to bid for funding through future government monitoring rounds, and we are looking at that to see how to progress it. I want progress to be made on the ones that we originally identified. If we do that, we will be more successful in how we use this as a means in the future.

Through the June monitoring round, £500,000 was allocated to Londonderry, £400,000 was allocated to EastSide, and £1.2 million was allocated to the Colin town centre urban village to complete a number of projects. My Department will continue to progress the work within its control to maximise the spend in this financial year.

Mr McCausland: Will the Minister describe the projects that are being taken forward in urban village areas across the Province?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As I said in answer to the original question, DSD staff are working in partnership with OFMDFM and the Strategic Investment Board on a number of schemes that are at various stages of design and procurement. In the Newtownards Road area, seven schemes are ongoing, including pocket parks, artworks, domestic frontages and other public realm and environmental improvements. In the Colin area, there is a plan for a large-scale play park, with an overall cost, as I said, of £1.2 million. In Ballysillan — I have no doubt that the Member will be interested in that location — Ardoyne, Sandy Row, Donegall Pass and the Markets urban village areas, engagement with the local communities is being taken forward by the SIB to identify potential project proposals. Six projects are being taken forward in the Bogside and Fountain urban

village area in 2015-16, including two public realm schemes, shop frontage improvements, a play park, the renovation of a community centre and traffic safety initiatives. In addition, a number of longer-term proposals are being developed.

I trust that that gives the Member and other Members some sense of the diversity of what can be included and delivered under the concept of urban villages. Those who have engaged in those areas have found it to be challenging but rewarding when they see progress and an outcome that enhances their community.

2.15 pm

Mr Cree: The Minister mentioned the costs of the initiative. Does he agree that the lack of clarity on how much funding would be available has led to a very low uptake of projects outside the two cities, as he demonstrated quite clearly?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. It would be nice to have additional resource for many projects. There is always a sense when delivering, and even when planning for, projects such as this that there is not enough money in the fund. I am very conscious of the perception that this can become a very city-based initiative and that areas outside the confines of Belfast and Londonderry do not benefit. That is something that we need to take cognisance of. I, like other Ministers, am constrained by my budget. We have had that debate in the House on numerous occasions, but I do not think that any Minister is ever satisfied with the total amount that they receive. If additional funding was made available, serious consideration would be given to addressing the point that the Member raised.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the Urban Villages support for a cross-community youth project in inner east Belfast that led to the reinstallation of the Teenage Dreams public artwork, a good example of the project in action. Given that Urban Villages is a headline project of the Northern Ireland good relations strategy, Together: Building a United Community, what key good relations outcomes will it achieve for our community?

Mr Storey: I think that the Member has almost answered his own question. If we can make engagement and involvement possible for a community that is disengaged and feels that it does not have the infrastructure, or the

environment, even to build relationships in its own area, let alone the strength and capacity to go beyond it, that is to be welcomed. During my time in office, I have visited a variety of projects that are making an invaluable contribution, first and foremost to their local area. We need to instil in our communities a sense of pride; it is sad that in some areas of Northern Ireland a sense of pride in your local community is not the priority that it should be. However, initiatives such as Urban Villages — it does not have all the answers — bring progress in the form of tangible outcomes. It enhances opportunities for communities to move forward and to have confidence that their area is a place where they want to live and bring up their children and where others can interact with them in a very positive way.

Northside Project

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on his Department's involvement in the Northside project for the regeneration of Belfast city centre. (AQO 8957/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for the question. The Department's preferred developer for the proposed Northside regeneration scheme, Northside Regeneration Limited, submitted an outline planning application for a comprehensive mixed-use scheme, comprising 10 sites, at the end of June 2015. Applications for the approval of reserved matters for the individual sites are to be submitted in due course. A full planning application has already been submitted in relation to site 3.

Once the applications have been determined, and after consultation with Belfast City Council, the Department will need to be satisfied that there are sufficient financial resources behind the developer to ensure the completion of the scheme and that the regeneration benefits of the development merit the adoption of a statutory development scheme.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers. He will be aware that this is a substantial scheme. Does he plan to meet some of the many traders and residents who will be affected? They want the regeneration of the area, but they have considerable concerns.

Mr Storey: I trust that the Member knows, because I know that other Members are aware, that I endeavour to meet whomever wants to have a conversation when particular issues and

concerns are raised with us. I have a concern, and it is that the focus needs to be clearly on the huge benefits of investment to that particular part of the city.

The Member will be aware that I have had discussions with Executive colleagues, because, based on the plans for that particular part of the city, it is estimated that there will be somewhere in the region of £1 billion of investment. I want, as do my Executive colleagues and Members for the area, to see a concerted, planned and coordinated approach, not just to what is happening with Northside but to what is being planned by other elements of the Executive. Whether that is through DRD or through the work on the relocation of the university and other projects, we want to make sure that we maximise investment to the benefit of the people in the area and of organisations.

I cannot recall whether I have met traders specifically, but, if there are particular traders whom I have not met and who have issues, I am more than happy to meet them and listen to any concerns that they want to raise.

Ms P Bradley: In his answer to Mr Kelly, the Minister mentioned consultation with Belfast City Council. Does he know what its position on the Northside development is at this stage?

Mr Storey: The issue of Belfast City Council's involvement is an important one, and, for a number of reasons, I thank the Member for raising it. First, Belfast City Council officers have worked with my Department on the issue from the outset, beginning with the selection of Northside Regeneration Limited. Officials have suggested to council officers that a view of the process from elected members would be helpful at this stage, and that request is currently being considered.

I have said on a number of occasions that the scheme cannot be something that is imposed by my Department. It has to be done in consultation with the council, the local community and public representatives, because we all have a vested interest in ensuring that we get the best outcome. I have given that assurance repeatedly in the House, but I sound a warning. It is not a warning with a threat, and I am not trying to undermine the process in any way, but we need to make decisions about where this is going. I am concerned that those who would be behind this project financially may feel that the processes are taking too long and are too protracted, and, as such, they may decide to place their investment in somewhere other than this great city.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his detailed answers. Clearly, everyone, including local residents and business folk, is supportive of him trying to get investment into the area, but the problem is this: as far as the businesspeople are concerned, the plan as it exists does not attract investment into the area. In fact, they believe that it is doing the opposite and is deterring investment. There must therefore be a speedy outcome to all of this so that there can be a clear idea of what will happen in the area in the near future.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary comment, which I will take on board. It follows on from the comment made by another Member for North Belfast. The business community and, in particular, the local community will have to live with the consequences of all that is going on, because, let us remember that there is a considerable amount of activity already going on.

One point that I have made is that, using Northside and the various statutory instruments that are at our disposal, we will either have a controlled process or an uncontrolled situation in which, as I said in the substantive reply that I gave, we have a number of applications that are already approved.

We know the concerns and I have listened to those that people have expressed about student accommodation and all of that, but we need an overarching process and some degree of control; not control for the sake of it to satisfy the bureaucracy of the Civil Service but that manages the process and gives us an outcome in the best possible interests of traders, residents and the people of that particular part of Belfast.

Social Housing: Upper Bann

6. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister for Social Development how his Department is addressing the need for social housing in Upper Bann. (AQO 8959/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. In order to help address identified housing need in Upper Bann, there are currently 50 new housing units under construction in the Lurgan and Portadown area, which will be completed during this financial year. A further 52 units are programmed to start on site this year, with an additional 80 units programmed to start in 2016-17. The remaining housing need is expected to be addressed either through the reletting of

existing stock or the refurbishment of void properties in the area.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. What sites in Upper Bann are currently under construction?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Before I give the detail, I would like to say that I have come to the House on many occasions, given the responsibility that I have for housing, and I would love to be in a position where we were doing more in Northern Ireland. One thing that has become an interest and a passion for me is that we could really do something with housing in Northern Ireland. Look at the specifics in relation to the area that the Member represents. There are 38 social housing units currently under construction in the Lurgan area, with 12 in the Portadown area. For those who will be the beneficiaries of those particular units, that is welcome, but there is a huge issue of demand and other areas where we would like to do more. I trust that, in the days and weeks ahead, we can really focus on moving the debate on to a housing agenda that gives good quality homes to the people of Northern Ireland, as, I have no doubt, those that have already been developed in Upper Bann are and those that are currently on site will.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that the number of houses being built is just the tip of the iceberg of those that are required. Minister, you will be familiar with Mount Zion and the demand in the north Lurgan area in particular for units for older people. Will you agree to meet a delegation from Mount Zion on an exciting proposal they have to transform the current arrangement they have with Choice Housing from young person's dwellings to those for older people?

Mr Storey: Yes, I have already met representatives from Mount Zion, which was facilitated through my colleague Mr Moutray, but I have no difficulty in meeting a further delegation. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has not approved a proposed Supporting People scheme at Mount Zion, as you know. The Department has engaged with Shankill (Lurgan) Community Projects and Choice Housing Ireland Ltd to consider alternative housing options at Mount Zion. I am encouraged that, in recent correspondence that I have received from them, they have taken what can only be seen as a very proactive approach. Let me place on record our appreciation — I know that Members from the

Upper Bann constituency will endorse this — of the work that is carried out by Mount Zion.

There is a question that I have repeatedly asked through this process and in others. If they were not there delivering the service that they have delivered, the statutory system could not pick up that provision. I want to be of help. I welcome the fact that they have had some interesting outcomes with Habitat for Humanity. That is good progress, but that should not be so that some other organisation provides for the need and we abdicate our responsibility. I am happy to have a further meeting in relation to the issue.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have an indication from two other Members that they wish to question the Minister. Before I call Mr Ian Milne, I remind the Member that the question is on need for social housing in Upper Bann, so it should be a specific question on the constituency of Upper Bann.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sé go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. The question is about Upper Bann. How many new social homes are required to be built in Upper Bann between now and 2020 to address the current housing need?

2.30 pm

Mr Storey: It always amazes me how Members can be so inventive and move from one constituency to another, but there you are. The Housing Executive has identified a total projected housing need for 228 units in Upper Bann over the period 2014 to 2019.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Mr Ross Hussey of the same point.

Mr Hussey: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister advise how many properties have been transferred from the ownership of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to housing associations in Upper Bann?

Mr Storey: I do not have that information with me. I assure the Member that I will write to him to give it to him. I will also copy it to his colleague from Upper Bann who is absent.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That brings us to the end of listed questions. We now move on to topical questions. I call Mr Roy Beggs.

Mr Beggs: The Minister —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: My apologies. I turned too many sheets at the one time. I call Mrs Dolores Kelly.

Dingwell Flats: Demolition

T1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development, given that he will be aware of the dreadful murder of Mr Seeley in the Dingwell Park area of Taghnevan and the clamour for those flats to be demolished, whether he and the Housing Executive would be sympathetic to that demand, given that that area has been a breeding ground for antisocial behaviour for many years. (AQT 3041/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her question. First, I pass on my condolences to the family of Marcell Seeley following his tragic death and murder in that place. It was extremely sad, and we know that someone has been arrested in relation to that issue.

I am also aware of residents' concerns, including those expressed by the Member, who raised the issue with me, about the antisocial behaviour in the Dingwell flats. I have been assured by the Housing Executive of its continued commitment to dealing robustly with the issues in the estate. I also recently met Minister O'Dowd and the Deputy Mayor of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council, Catherine Seeley, to discuss these matters. I gave an undertaking, as I will give to the Member, to discuss these issues with the Housing Executive to see what more can be done.

Unfortunately, the issue in Dingwell flats is not uncommon. We have identified a particular issue, which is of concern to me as the Minister responsible for housing, and it is the placing of people in locations without any of the appropriate and necessary supports. We then see the consequences of what happens. I have heard particularly harrowing stories from the Member and from others about what it can be like for the neighbouring area, which is a settled community, and the difficulty that that creates.

I have had a brief discussion with the chief executive of the Housing Executive about the issue. I plan to have a further meeting with the Housing Executive, particularly in relation to that location.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's insight and acknowledgment that what happened in Dingwell Park was horrific, but was not an

isolated incident as far as antisocial behaviour and vulnerable people being placed in settled communities is concerned. Are there any lessons to be learned from the recently conducted review into supporting people, or could any amendments be made to assist and direct resources to those types of situations in which people need a bit of extra help?

Mr Storey: The Member is right to identify that a key element of the way in which we address these issues — it is one element — is the review that we have carried out into supporting people.

When I came into ministerial office, I gave a public commitment, not only in word but in deed, that the Supporting People budget would be protected. Although it was a huge challenge to deliver on that, we did so. We have now had a review of Supporting People. I am continuing to look at that document to see how we have covered all the areas, and if there are lessons to be learned, which undoubtedly and regrettably there are, we will see how we can assure public representatives and communities that, when we talk about Supporting People, that is really what we do. I know the real value of Supporting People; I have seen it played out in practice to many families. However, there may be, as there always are in these situations, elements of it that could be delivered better. That was why we initiated the review. I have given the undertaking that the review was not about trying to fundamentally change the delivery of Supporting People; it was to enhance its delivery and make it more beneficial to the people that it is there to support.

Public Realm Schemes: North Down

T2. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the public realm schemes in north Down. (AQT 3042/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question in relation to north Down. I am sure that he will be delighted to know that, over the past five years, there has been investment of almost £18.3 million in a number of major capital regeneration schemes in the north Down area, including public realm enhancement in Bangor, Holywood, Comber, Donaghadee and Newtownards. There have also been almost £21 million-worth of schemes, in which Ards and North Down Borough Council has invested £10 million, which represents the largest commitment by any council to the public realm investment and improvement scheme.

The schemes will upgrade the commercial core of town centres to encourage greater public use and stimulate investment. I have witnessed at first hand the positive impact that such initiatives have had in restoring life to town centres and city centres. Works in each of the town centres will include the installation of new footpaths in natural stone paving, new street lighting and furniture, landscaping and associated works. The Holywood scheme was recently completed, and those in Comber and Donaghadee are due to complete within the next few weeks. I know that that will please my colleague from the constituency as well.

Mr Weir: Can the Minister firm up the information on the Bangor scheme? I welcome the completions that have taken place, but is the Bangor scheme due for completion, and is its timescale on track?

Mr Storey: It seems that all politics is local, even when it comes to constituencies, when it gets very parochial. I assure the Member that the Bangor and Newtownards schemes are on target to complete in the summer of 2016.

I will say something that can be easily provided in a response to a question for written answer: I ask you to look at the amount of money that was contributed by the local council. At somewhere in the region of almost £11 million, it is the largest contribution of any of our local councils. That is not only a commitment by central government but a commitment and focus of attention by local government. When you put those two together, you get a good outcome. I think that other councils should look at what has been achieved — I had better get it right — by Ards and North Down Borough Council. In this age of new councils, you have to make sure that your terminology is correct.

Syrian Refugees: DSD Preparation

T3. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Social Development what he and his Department are doing to prepare for the arrival of the first groups Syrian refugees in Northern Ireland. (AQT 3043/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. Regrettably, this issue is obviously very topical. We would prefer not to be in the situation that we are in. I will preface what I say by trying to bring the House and our community in Northern Ireland to a place of reality. We are dealing here with real people, real families and real issues. Yes, we can raise a myriad of particular issues, but I think that we need to preface what

we say with the fact that we are dealing with real people here.

My Department is leading the operational planning group that is putting in place the arrangements to manage the arrival of Syrian refugees into Northern Ireland. The two main areas where the work of my Department will be affected by the arrival of Syrian refugees in Northern Ireland are the processing of benefits by the Social Security Agency and the provision of housing for those who come. Refugees who come to Northern Ireland under the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme will be entitled to welfare benefits on the same basis as UK citizens. The Social Security Agency is committed to providing whatever support it can for those being resettled here and is well advanced in the planning to ensure that those cases proceed as smoothly as possible.

My Department has also engaged with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to make arrangements for the processing of tax credits and child benefit, alongside the benefits administered by the Social Security Agency. The Department, along with the Housing Executive, has started work to identify locations that may be considered to be suitable when taking into account the availability of suitable housing and the capacity in key public services, such as education and health. Given the pressures on the social housing waiting lists, it is expected that the housing solution will mainly make use of the private rented sector.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive response. The Minister spoke about an operational planning group. I suspect that your Department is leading on that. Who else is involved in it?

Mr Storey: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I appreciate your warning. However, given the seriousness of the issue, it was important that I place it on record in the House, because this is the first opportunity when I have been able to do so during Question Time. Recently, in the local press, I have seen criticisms of the process from some local councils. I can give them an assurance, as I can the House, that we will continue to process the issue as speedily as we can. The Member asked about the operational planning group. It has a wide membership, including all public agencies that may be required to provide services to refugees; local government; and organisations in the voluntary sector who have expertise in

this field. If you bring those groups together, it gives us the core of the operational planning group. That is where the focus is currently.

Antisocial Behaviour Information Sharing

T4. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister for Social Development, on the back of a serious incident in Newcastle at the weekend, what steps DSD is taking to ensure the full sharing of antisocial behaviour information between the PSNI and housing associations. (AQT 3044/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, there is always a concern when particular incidents take place. Since November 2004, an information-sharing protocol with the PSNI has been in place, and it is being used successfully across a range of housing services. It includes the gathering of information and the development of cases where it is the intention of the executive to take legal action, the gathering of information and the development of cases where it is the intention of the executive to take legal action to secure injunctions or antisocial behaviour orders against an individual, and when considering an applicant's eligibility and entitlement to homelessness assistance or housing accommodation. The purpose of the protocol is to facilitate the sharing of data, where appropriate, between the Housing Executive and the PSNI in order to prevent crime. The protocol introduces and formalises service level delivery standards between the executive and the police, and the sharing of such information allows the agencies to work collaboratively and to consider the appropriate remedies to address antisocial behaviour.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for that. Minister, there is a frustration among the good people who live in that estate that the protocols are not nearly as robust as they were when it was the Housing Executive and the PSNI. What lessons have been learned from the previous protocols? How can it be tightened?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. In the light of the issue and the particular incident that the Member raises, I will give him an assurance. Again, it goes back to the point I made earlier. It is relatively easy to read an answer to a specific question in this House, but sometimes it does not get to the bottom of the specifics.

In the light of the incident that the Member referred to, I will refer the issue to the Housing

Executive, the PSNI and the housing association so that we can revisit the protocols. I will write to the Member.

2.45 pm

St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena

T5. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the St Patrick's Barracks site in Ballymena. (AQT 3045/11-16)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his topical question. Following the proposal that I made to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the development of the former military barracks for mixed public-sector use, it was agreed that the site should be acquired by my Department. A business case for the purchase of the site and its development, using a housing-led regeneration scheme, was approved. The site was subsequently bought by the Department for Social Development on 30 September, just a few days ago. My Department has appointed consultants to prepare a development plan setting out the potential areas on the site that could be used by public stakeholders. The development plan is expected to be completed by the end of the month if not sooner, and a programme of work to prepare the site for development is now being considered.

I have also given an assurance that I will take the local council into account. Indeed, it is my intention to meet the council because, as I said about the public realm works that we have undertaken in other jurisdictions and council areas, it is vital that we have buy-in from councils. I had preliminary discussions with the council this week. I look forward to developing one of the most prestigious sites in our constituency — I speak not only as Minister but, along with my colleague, as a representative of the North Antrim constituency — which has a huge history that we want to protect in an area that I have no doubt will make an invaluable contribution to the livelihood and well-being of our constituents.

Agriculture and Rural Development

River Pollution

1. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she plans to introduce a more joined-up approach with her Executive colleagues to

address effectively the problem of river pollution. (AQO 8969/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. River pollution can be caused by a range of sources including farms, sewage, industry and domestic. My remit covers farm source pollution, and my Department works with other Departments and agencies on a range of measures to prevent pollution and to improve water quality.

DARD and the DOE are jointly responsible for the implementation of the EU nitrates directive. The directive is implemented across the North by an action programme of measures that was first introduced in 2007. The purpose is to prevent water pollution from agricultural sources and to ensure that manures and chemical fertilisers are used efficiently. The current nitrates action programme for 2015-18 was agreed by the Executive in November 2014.

My Department also works in close partnership with the DOE, other Departments and stakeholders on the implementation of the water framework directive. This EU directive aims to deliver long-term sustainability for the water environment and covers all sectors that have an impact on water. Implementation is through river basin management plans, which have been agreed by the Executive.

My Department has also worked with a number of Departments on a long-term water strategy for the North of Ireland. The strategy is cross-cutting, and I expect it to come to the Executive for agreement in the coming months.

River pollution requires ongoing action. My Department has demonstrated that it is working in a joined-up way to address farm source pollution and to improve water quality.

Lord Morrow: It is obvious that no one area or sector of industry is the culprit here. The Minister said that her Department is doing things to ensure that the matter is tackled. Does she agree that it is time for new initiatives to ensure collective responsibility and for the matter to be tackled in a very direct way, which does not seem to be the case at present?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree that partnership working is key for all the sources from which pollution may occur. I have set out clearly my Department's responsibility. We have worked collectively and cooperatively with other Departments,

particularly on the nitrates programme and the water framework directive. The Rivers Agency obviously works in a joined-up way with a range of Departments and councils. Where there is room to improve, I am always open to that. If the Member has any ideas that he wants to bring forward or has other initiatives that we are not actively involved with, I am very happy to take those suggestions on board. As I said, a range of activity is ongoing with Departments, councils and Rivers Agency staff. Collectively, we can continue to work together to make sure that we target people who are deliberately polluting water courses and causing all sorts of problems. However, as I said, we need to have a cross-departmental approach to the issue.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answers. What action has been taken to assist farmers' compliance with the regulations?

Mrs O'Neill: A range of guidance documents to assist farmers to comply with the nitrates action programme and other EU environmental regulations has been produced by DARD and DOE and has been distributed to farmers. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides an ongoing programme of training workshops for farmers, including coverage of the nitrates action programme and farm waste. The workshops are open to all farmers. In addition, a series of online support tools are available to help farmers to comply with the requirements of the nitrates action plan regulations. These cover nitrogen loading, nutrient management and manure storage calculators.

DARD also provides a code of good agricultural practice for the prevention of water, air and soil pollution. The code gives practical guidance to farmers on pollution control and serves as a reference document for those involved in providing pollution control advice to farmers. The DARD farm advisory service newsletter is published biannually and is issued to all farmers. It includes key advisory messages relating to the nitrates action programme and the water framework directive. My Department also regularly issues advisory press articles on manure management and water quality.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's response. River pollution, or any pollution of our environment, must never be tolerated. Will the Minister join with the Alliance Party, which has been calling for years for an independent environmental agency, so that that can be introduced and we can overcome these problems once and for all?

Mrs O'Neill: The Environment Agency comes under the remit of the Department of the Environment, and it is about to go out to consultation on that matter. There will be an opportunity for us all to consider the best way forward on the basis of the information provided as part of that consultation process.

Rural Proofing Bill

2. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the rural proofing Bill. (AQO 8970/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to advise that I propose to introduce the Rural Needs Bill, which was previously referred to as the Rural Proofing Bill, to the Assembly on 9 November 2015. The Bill is designed to promote a fair and inclusive rural society by introducing a duty on government and local councils to consider the needs of our rural dwellers when developing policies and delivering public services. I will be working hard to ensure that this new legislation can complete its passage in the current Assembly mandate.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. What powers and provisions will the Rural Needs Bill contain?

Mrs O'Neill: The Bill is aimed at ensuring the fair and equitable treatment of rural communities in the policymaking process. It will build on the existing arrangements, for example, through placing the Executive's existing commitment on a statutory footing and by improving the promotion and monitoring of rural proofing.

It is proposed that the Bill will contain the following provisions in line with the final policy proposals agreed by the Executive: the introduction of a statutory duty on Departments and councils to consider the needs of people living in rural areas when developing new policies, strategies and plans or revising existing ones and when designing and delivering public services or making changes to the way in which they are delivered; the power to make regulations to extend the Bill to non-departmental public bodies as may be specified in such regulations; the power for DARD to support rural proofing and the implementation of the Bill through the provision of training, advice and guidance; a requirement for DARD to produce regular monitoring reports to be laid before the Assembly whereby DARD would

seek and collate information from all Departments on how they have considered the social and economic needs of people who live in rural areas; and the provision for Departments and councils to make arrangements for cooperation and collaboration to help to ensure a more consistent and cohesive approach to addressing the needs of rural dwellers.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for that update. What is her assessment of the legislative proposals from the Department of the Environment with regard to newly qualified young drivers and the restriction of carrying passengers and the assertion that the proposal did not need to be rural proofed? What is her position on that?

Mrs O'Neill: I am bringing the legislation forward because I believe that all proposals, strategies, policies and decisions taken at central and local government level need to be rural proofed. Like me, the Member represents a rural constituency, and we know the challenges that there are, particularly for young people who, perhaps, are employed and could be working until 11.00 pm and who are trying to get home with public transport not being readily available. There are particular challenges posed as a result of the DOE legislation that has been put on the table.

I am bringing forward legislation in order to protect against those decisions being taken in future without due consideration being given to the needs of rural people.

Mr Rogers: Minister, what discussions have you had with other members of the Executive to improve decision-making in other Departments on rural proofing? I am thinking particularly about residential homes. When I look at the consultation, I see little emphasis placed on the rural-proofing aspect.

Mrs O'Neill: Again, that is why we need to have legislation. Rural dwellers need to be confident that, when policy decisions are being taken by decision makers in government, their needs are being reflected. I am concerned that, although rural proofing has been in place for quite a number of years, it has not been consistent to date. It has not been applied across the board, and some Departments are better than others at making sure that it happens. I think that the legislation will strengthen that and, when I lay a report each year before the Assembly, it will clearly put that on record. We will be able to see at first hand how Departments have actively engaged and how they have actively

rural-proofed policy decisions. I believe that that will lead to improvements in the longer term for rural dwellers.

Rural Development Programme

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps will she take to ensure that Northern Ireland rural development programme 2014-2020 funding is equitably distributed between the Protestant and Catholic communities. (AQO 8971/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: A full equality impact assessment (EQIA) of the rural development programme (RDP) 2014-2020 was carried out in 2013. That included a 16-week public consultation period. The equality assessment was finalised as part of the submission of the rural development programme and associated documents to the European Commission on 14 October 2014 and is available on the DARD website.

Our aim is to ensure equality of opportunity for all applicants to the RDP. The distribution of funds will depend on the number and quality of eligible applications and how best they fit the objectives of their respective schemes. For land-based schemes such as the areas of natural constraint (ANC) scheme, funding will depend on the nature and type of land. The EQIA set out a number of mitigating actions to ensure equality of opportunity for potential beneficiaries. Those were structured around each of the section 75 groups examined as part of the EQIA. An equality action plan has been drafted, and it has aligned the EQIA mitigating recommendations against key areas of programme implementation. The action plan will be updated biannually in advance of the programme monitoring committee on the actions taken for each process. That should help ensure that the mitigating actions recommended in the EQIA are considered during further programme development and implementation.

Mr Campbell: The Minister has outlined the EQIA process, but is she aware that, in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area, for example, where the local action group (LAG) delivers rural development programme funding, the councillor make-up is broadly reflective of the political and religious breakdown but the social partners are not, given that 80% of the social partners are from the nationalist community in an area that is probably 75% unionist? Will she ensure that consideration is given to community

background when ascertaining in future the composition of local action groups, because delivery of funding flows from those groups?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Member will be aware of the LEADER approach, which is very much a bottom-up approach. The people who came forward for the LAGs on the ground came from the grassroots and the community. They are made up of people who came forward. Obviously, we want things to be reflective, but, for me, what is most important in the rural development programme is that we get that funding out and deliver projects for rural people as a whole. It does not matter what background you have.

I cannot comment specifically on the make-up of the LAG that you referred to, but I can say that I know that every effort was made to make sure that the groups were inclusive as possible and that we looked to groups that were under-represented. I am delighted that, this time around, we have more women and more young people. That was something that we did not have in the previous programme, so there has been very much a positive sea change in the membership of the groups. As I said, it is very much a grassroots-up approach. The people came from the community and were chosen for the local action groups, and I think that they are reflective of the people who came forward. Obviously, we want all our groups to be inclusive, and we want to make sure that the people who are making the decisions are reflective of the community. I think that that is the case with all the LAGs that have been appointed to date.

Mr Dallat: I pay tribute to the rural development programme for the work that has been done. Will the Minister agree that the needs and aspirations of the rural community are far greater than to be described in sectarian headcount terms? Will she outline how the business communities, Protestant and Catholic, if we have to use those terms, will benefit from the rural development programme between now and 2020?

3.00 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I very much concur with what the Member said. I think that what is most important is that we spend every single penny of this European funding to the best effect for rural communities as a whole. I look forward to being able to open a number of the schemes over the next number of months. This is the largest ever rural development programme that we have had in the North of Ireland. There is

up to £623 million of funding, £250 million of which is for our farm business improvement scheme. We have the rural business investment scheme, which will be opened very shortly. We also have tourism measures and basic services for communities. There is such a range of fantastic schemes coming online over the next number of months. My priority is to work with the LAGs to make sure that they sign off on the strategies, which we hope to have completed by the end of the year so that we can very quickly see the spend. I absolutely agree with you. What is most important in this programme is that we get the spend out there and help rural communities in their entirety, regardless of what their background may be.

Mr Dickson: Minister, do you agree with me that the most important aspect of the programme is ensuring that those entitled to receive the funds do so and that there is not some form of sectarian headcount, as has been produced in the question? In fact, do you not find the question offensive and counter to any Building a United Community strategy of the Executive?

Mrs O'Neill: I do agree with you. As I said, I think that what is most important here is that we spend every single penny to best effect to enhance rural communities and businesses and to look after our environment and our farmers.

Mr Allister: Under the previous programme, it turns out that several million pounds were siphoned off to sporting bodies, most particularly and most generously to the GAA, with Tyrone GAA, said to be one of richest, getting almost £1 million. Given the crisis in front-line farming, what assurances are there this time that rural funding will actually go to meet those front-line and essential needs, rather than being squandered, as happened previously?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that the Member should be careful with his language. There was no siphoning off from any funds from the rural development programme. Anybody who received funding through the rural development programme did so because a panel assessed their application and decided that they were eligible. All funds were spent to the best effect for rural communities right across all the measures that I have already set out. A number of sporting organisations were also able to benefit from the programme, which is right and proper. The GAA, like any other organisation, is at the heart of a rural community. Why should it not be able to benefit if the project that it is providing is for

wider community benefit? In the cases that have been assisted with finance, the local action groups, which are made up of political representatives and community sector individuals who have come forward, have taken decisions and used to best effect the funding that they have been allocated. They have decided, within the rules of the programme, that those funding applications were eligible and have funded them accordingly.

Animal Cruelty: Tougher Sentences

4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any representations she has made to introduce tougher sentences for people convicted of animal cruelty. (AQO 8972/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Following considerable public interest in the enforcement of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, the Assembly agreed a private Members' motion in March 2014 that called for a review of the implementation of the 2011 Act, particularly sentencing guidelines and practices. The purpose of the review is to ensure that animal welfare enforcement is dealt with effectively.

The Department published an interim report of the review in February 2015, which recommended increasing the maximum sentence and fine on conviction for the more serious summary offences and increasing the maximum prison term in the case of indictable offences. That will mean that the penalties for animal welfare offences here are as tough as or tougher than any that are available in the Twenty-six Counties or in Britain. There was substantial support for the recommendation during the consultation on the interim report.

Primary legislation is needed to amend the 2011 Act to implement that recommendation. DARD does not have any suitable primary legislation available within this mandate. However, given the high level of public support for the recommendation, I wanted to implement it quickly. I therefore wrote to the Justice Minister in July to request that he consider amending the maximum sentences in the 2011 Act through the Justice (No. 2) Bill. The Bill deals with, among other things, fine collection and prison services. The Justice Minister is content to include the necessary provisions in the Justice (No. 2) Bill, and my officials are working with officials in his Department to progress the Bill. It is anticipated that the Bill will be scrutinised by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and the Justice Committee in November, and I trust that you

will support the amendments to increase the sentences and fines in the Welfare of Animals Act when the Justice (No. 2) Bill comes before the Assembly.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer to my question. Indeed, I welcome her comments. I am sure that she will be all too familiar with the case in my constituency where a member of the public was given a very lenient sentence despite letting her dog hang to death on the ropes of her curtains. I think that the public have got behind this because of that case. In your response, you talked about that the fact that we are coming towards the end of the mandate. Is there a possibility that this can be expedited and brought in as quickly as possible? There is a fear among the community about other people who have treated animals in the appalling way that that lady in Antrim did.

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, I condemn all acts of animal cruelty, and I think that that was very much reflected in comments we received in response to the public consultation on the interim report. In terms of timescale, the Justice Minister is committed to taking his Justice (No. 2) Bill through the Assembly in this mandate, and my officials are working with him to make sure that the proposed changes to sentencing are included in that Bill.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response to the Member's question. Can she further clarify, at this point, what the proposed changes to sentencing will entail?

Mrs O'Neill: The interim report of the review of the Welfare of Animals Act recommended that DARD consider increasing the maximum sentences as follows. It was recommended to increase the maximum prison sentence available for those found guilty of the more serious summary offences from six months to 12 months and for the maximum fine to go from £5,000 to £20,000. For indictable offences, the recommendation was to increase the maximum prison sentence for those found guilty on indictment from two years to five years. The maximum unlimited fine would remain unchanged. I propose to amend certain offences, including breaching a disqualification order, selling or parting with an animal pending the outcome of an appeal to a deprivation order and offences relating to images of animal fighting, so that they become a hybrid offence. In the case of unnecessary suffering and animal fighting, which are already hybrid offences, I propose to increase the current penalties on

summary conviction to 12 months and/or a fine of £20,000. That will give effect to the recommendations from the review, as those represent the most serious offences under the 2011 Act, and it is appropriate that the penalties available to the Magistrates' Court reflect that.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the announcement today. Does the Minister agree that this is at least one example of two Executive Ministers — her and the Minister of Justice — working together to respond to an issue of serious public concern in increasing the maximum sentence for serious offences to five years? What other provisions might the review of the Welfare of Animals Act bring forward?

Mrs O'Neill: I very much welcome the partnership approach that we have taken. The Justice Minister was in a position to bring forward a Bill that could encompass the changes that we wanted to make. It has worked out very well for us in being able to respond to the public concern and public angst that was there. We will respond to it in a very speedy manner.

In the wider review, we have consulted on the interim report, and the group that was set up to initiate the review is working its way through the final report. We hope to have that over the next number of months. There are practical things that we can be doing on an ongoing basis, and officials are working their way through that.

Rural Development Programme: Capital Grants

5. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline when farmers will be able to apply for capital schemes as part of the rural development programme 2014-2020. (AQO 8973/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The 2014-2020 rural development programme (RDP) will make a range of capital support measures available to farmers. Those include the business investment scheme, the European innovation partnership operational groups and innovation demonstration scheme, which are all part of the farm business improvement scheme, as well as farm diversification support under the LEADER programme and capital support for agri-environment agreement holders. With the rural development programme now approved by the European Commission, my officials are continuing to work hard to secure the relevant business case approvals and to make the necessary arrangements to open the schemes in a phased way.

The farm business improvement scheme will be a cornerstone of the new RDP and will be a package of measures aimed at knowledge transfer, cooperation and innovation, as well as capital investment, which will help to support sustainable growth in the sector. The first phase of the farm business improvement scheme, which comprises the knowledge transfer schemes, will start with the launch of the business development groups for farmers. The first phase is intended to help farmers to clearly identify their needs ahead of any capital investment and to make informed decisions about developing their businesses. The other farm business improvement schemes will follow in a coordinated manner, including the proposed capital programme that is planned for next year. The knowledge transfer element of the farm business improvement scheme will open in November in preparation for the majority of capital schemes to open in 2016.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does her Department have a preliminary plan in place to deal with those moneys?

Mrs O'Neill: The main plan is that we will get the programmes opened as quickly as possible. The first programme that we will see opened will be the farm business improvement scheme and the development groups. That will open very shortly. That allows us to work with farmers on helping them identify their business plan and their practical needs. Alongside that, as I said, we expect all the capital programmes to come on stream next year, and those include the farm business improvement scheme, the rural business investment scheme and the spend with the local action groups. It is quite an exciting time for rural development in being able to get all those schemes opened. Officials have been working very hard to make sure that we do that as quickly as possible.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Has her Department engaged in any preparatory work with farmers, as the previous Member asked, in anticipation of opening other schemes or any schemes?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the plan is to roll out the farm business scheme in a phased way. The early focus is going to be on making advice and support available to farmers through the knowledge transfer measures. That first phase will open next Monday, with business development groups for farmers to come along

to discuss with officials and get help to work through their business needs and discuss the opportunities for capital grants when they come online in the first quarter of next year.

I encourage all farmers to get involved with the business development groups because they will help farmers to improve their knowledge of business management and to look at new technologies and innovative ways of working. DARD is also planning to deliver farm-family key skills training schemes, which will include safety and business planning. These early measures will help farmers to think carefully about their business plans before they make any decisions about capital investment.

The other farm business improvement schemes will follow in a coordinated manner, including the business investment scheme capital programme planned for next year. Any farmer considering making a capital investment may wish to start thinking now about what they might need to do in advance, such as considering the implications of planning and health and safety legislation.

Farmers who are considering construction work should be familiarising themselves with legislation that applies to farm businesses, including the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007. They may also want to check the performance of their business through benchmarking. They can contact CAFRE, which will help them.

Mrs Dobson: Given the interest from farmers, I was concerned about the lack of detail forthcoming from officials who presented to the Agriculture Committee recently. There can be little doubt that the capital grants scheme will be of most interest to the sector. Can the Minister detail some specific points identified in this year's whole farm needs assessment?

Mrs O'Neill: Officials were in front of the Committee last week. There was a detailed engagement in terms of going forward. We have a high number of schemes that we are trying to develop and get business plans passed for. We have been working our way through that.

The farm business improvement scheme and capital grants scheme are what most farmers are looking to, as capital investment will help them to invest in being more efficient and productive. That will not come on stream until next year, which is why there is no scheme detail out there. However, that will be forthcoming in an appropriate and timely manner.

I am now encouraging farmers to get involved with the business development groups because we have set this out in a phased approach. First, it is a matter of working with farmers on a practical basis to identify their needs to develop business plans. Then it will be about knowledge transfer and exchange, working with CAFRE advisers. The third phase will be the capital grants scheme.

As information becomes available, we will certainly be providing it. We are not going to leave anyone in the dark. I want to make sure that farmers avail themselves of the scheme when it becomes available in the early part of next year.

The Department carried out the farm needs assessment to improve the design of the farm business improvement scheme. We received over 2,500 responses, so that was positive in terms of farmers wanting to be part of the process. That was important for us to be able to design the scheme.

There is no attempt to hold back information. Farmers will have it as soon as I have it to give them. As I said in answer to Ian Milne, the first phase — the business development scheme — will open next Monday. That is positive, and I encourage all farmers to get involved with that first tranche.

Omagh Veterinary Laboratory

6. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the implementation of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's strategic review, to outline the future of the Omagh veterinary laboratory. (AQO 8974/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: There are no plans to close the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's (AFBI) Omagh site. However, a number of efficiency measures will be implemented.

AFBI's 2020 strategy proposed the centralisation of ancillary veterinary laboratory testing at its Stoney Road site, just outside the Stormont Estate. This proposal would enable a modest reduction in staffing requirements at AFBI's laboratory facilities in Omagh, while maintaining the existing range and geographic coverage of disease diagnostic services to the livestock industry.

AFBI proposes to move the preparation of microscopic slides of animal tissues to Stoney Road and return them to Omagh for examination and reporting. It will also

centralise all parasitological examination work at Stoney Road. That will produce savings while continuing to provide laboratory services from the Omagh facility to livestock owners and vets.

As these are internal AFBI efficiency measures, I had no reason to raise any concerns. As such, I accepted AFBI's proposals for how it manages the services it delivers from the Omagh site.

3.15 pm

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister recognise that it is very important for the farming community in the counties of Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh that we have post-mortems carried out on animals, be they cattle, sheep, pigs or hens? Does she recognise that it is important that enough investment is retained to make sure that we have a viable service going forward?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. As I said, while AFBI will make some modest savings at the Omagh plant, I am glad that, as part of its decisions on the way forward, it has decided to continue to provide the laboratory services there, which will assist livestock owners and vets from all the areas that you have referred to.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. Can the Minister outline her vision for the future of the AFBI estate?

Mrs O'Neill: Work is ongoing with AFBI to establish the future of the AFBI estate based on its strategic vision and scientific priorities. AFBI's 2020 strategy contains its costed proposals to address its budget pressures for the year ahead and the rest of the decade, including proposals that are relevant to the future consolidation and rationalisation of AFBI's estate. An initial outline business case for the capital investment required to relocate AFBI's headquarters facilities from Newforge and to consider the future of the Loughgall facilities has been prepared and is being refined further to incorporate feedback from DFP in the context of AFBI's 2020 strategy. A master plan for the farm buildings at the AFBI Hillsborough estate is being developed. It is envisaged that there will be a consolidation, replacement and modernisation programme.

Suffice to say that AFBI has taken a look at how it conducts its work. It has developed very much a shrink-to-grow strategy. We can work collectively with AFBI to make sure that we have a very strong scientific base going into the

future that will assist and work with the industry to identify its needs, including research needs.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. That brings us to the end of listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

Supply Chain: Large Retailers

T1. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the large retailers, given the unfairness that still exists within the supply chain, with farmers being squeezed. (AQT 3051/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I totally agree with you about the supply chain. There is a need for fairness in the supply chain. The Member will know that I have consistently raised that point. At the centre of the Going For Growth strategy from its inception has been the fact that there needs to be recognition of that one supply chain and that everybody along that supply chain needs to enjoy the risks and the benefits that come from that more joined-up approach. I hosted the first supply chain forum in the last number of weeks. That saw representatives from right across the industry, including the major retailers, discussing how we can start to build trust and repair relationships that have absolutely broken down and how we can collectively work together. I am going to continue to drive forward that piece of work, because I think that it is absolutely key. I regularly meet the major retailers and make the point that, if they want to have the fantastic, first-class product that our farmers produce into the future, they need to make sure that our farmers receive a fair price for the product that they receive.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the actions that the Minister has been taking but, to date, we have not really seen much on the ground for the supplier at the farm gate. Can the Minister advise what comfort we can give to the farming community that action is being taken that will see their price at the farm gate reach a proper level that makes it sustainable for them?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is very aware that pricing is something that is outside the control of government. However, within government, we can take forward the initiatives that we are actively involved with, which I have already set out. Farmers can be in no doubt about my role. My role is to champion the needs of the farmer, and that is what I bring to any conversation that I have with retailers. However, if we do not correct the supply chain problem, farmers are going to be the ones that are continually

pushed on the price that they receive. That is why we need to have this sea change in attitudes right across the supply chain. If we can look afresh at how the supply chain works and how the ongoing communication works right across the supply chain, perhaps we will see changes for the farming industry further down the line. I certainly make sure that I raise that point. I am very passionate about raising that point. I believe that Going For Growth as a strategy is only successful if there is that fairness in the supply chain.

River Lagan: Gravel Removal

T2. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to advise whether DARD and the Rivers Agency have restored the river bed at the Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park or reimbursed the Lagan Canal Trust, given that she will be aware of the removal last month of a lot of gravel from the bed of the River Lagan at that location in south Belfast and the impact that that has had on salmon spawning there and the risk of increased winter flooding. (AQT 3052/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not believe that the Rivers Agency needs to reimburse. I do not have all the details of that scenario, but I had a conversation with the Rivers Agency about it last week. There was very much a partnership approach. The council and others were involved in the project. The Rivers Agency did not feel that it was at fault, but I am happy to write to the Member with more details on the next steps. We do not want to interfere with the spawning of salmon and want to make sure that that process is ongoing.

Ms Hanna: On the back of that, the angling clubs are concerned that there is miscommunication between DARD, DCAL and them. Has the Minister any suggestions on what mechanisms might be put in place to address that communications imbalance?

Mrs O'Neill: Inland fisheries are DCAL's responsibility. However, in this instance, the Rivers Agency was involved in the work on the banks of the Lagan, so I am very open to a conversation with the CAL Minister if there is a need for that. We took action last week on the back of what happened. I was approached by local media, who raised the issue with me. We will not be found wanting in working together if that is what is needed to make sure that we correct the problem.

Farming: Cross-border Collaborative Work

T3. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, while mindful of other questions that have been asked, particularly on issues that affect the farming community, to outline the extent of the collaborative work that takes place between and among farmers across the island of Ireland. (AQT 3053/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: We work collectively on a range of areas. We deal with a lot of issues at North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meetings. Even outside those, we continually address a number of issues, particularly CAP, mapping exercises and areas of natural constraint (ANC) designation. We have been working together on the development of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy; the plant health strategy; the Loughs Agency; country-of-origin labelling; fish diseases; fisheries; research and development cooperation; the equine industry; pillar 2 knowledge transfer groups; the all-island rural innovation awards; the Forest Service; veterinary medicines; agricultural emissions; and multi-agency livestock crime liaison and legislation enforcement issues. A range of issues are taken forward on an ongoing and daily basis not only at official level but between Minister Coveney and me.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer, including the comprehensive range of issues that have been of benefit to farming and rural communities. Will she take this opportunity to give us an update, particularly on labelling and how that has helped farmers across the island?

Mrs O'Neill: I am pretty concerned about labelling, and have been for some time. I continually raise the issue at European level and with Minister Coveney. When I last met him on 2 July, he indicated that he would also liaise with the commissioner regarding terms on labels that would be deemed acceptable, explore the use of an "island of Ireland" label and subsequently issue guidelines to the industry. I have since written to the Minister seeking an update on progress and additional voluntary labelling for meat packaging. I will keep the Member informed of any progress. It is important that we resolve the issue. It affected the lamb sector this year and beef last year. It will have a trickle-down effect on all sectors, so, if we are able to address the issue

of voluntary labels with wording that might say, "A product of the island of Ireland", it would allow us to continue traditional trade on the island and look towards new markets collectively.

Basic Farm Payment Cross-compliance Land Inspections

T4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's time frame for the assessment of basic farm payment cross-compliance land inspections by local offices. (AQT 3054/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any specific time frame with me, but, suffice it to say, we are trying to meet our targets and get the maximum number of farmers paid in December. We are working towards that, and inspections are ongoing. As soon as inspection findings are received, the intention is to turn them around as quickly as possible. As I said, I want to make sure that we pay the maximum number of people in the first payment batch, which goes out in the first week in December.

Mr Irwin: I received information today that land inspections that took place in June have, five months later, still not been assessed. Does the Minister believe that that is timely?

Mrs O'Neill: I have no information to suggest that that is the case. If you want to pick up the matter with me outside of Question Time, that is not a problem.

Rural Development Programme: Cross-border Opportunities

T5. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what cross-border opportunities will be developed through the roll-out of the new rural development programme. (AQT 3055/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The LEADER scheme of the new rural development programme, which will be delivered by the newly formed local action groups (LAGs), contains a 7% focus on cross-border cooperation. My Department will be working closely with the new LAGs to develop cross-border projects that may focus on tourism, recreation and the development of social enterprises.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will

each LAG be compelled to develop cross-border projects? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, it is mandatory for each LAG to develop at least two cross-border projects. A joint North/South conference is proposed for January to assist LAGs in establishing partnerships so that they can share ideas, look at best practice and, hopefully, identify worthy and worthwhile projects that they can take forward in each of their respective areas.

Basic Farm Payment Cross-compliance Land Inspections

T6. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many basic farm payment land inspections her Department has carried out by classic and remote sensing this year. (AQT 3056/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the figures on me, but I am happy to provide the Member with them. He will know that we have been ramping up the number of remote sensing inspections each year. We may have had up to 2,500 this year, but I will confirm that with you in writing.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her answer. She indicated that she wants to increase the number of inspections carried out by remote sensing. What methods are you using to do that?

Mrs O'Neill: Going out and doing our inspections by remote sensing is an internal measure for the Department. Obviously, it is important that we get the photography — there is a word for it — and all such things right. The benefit of us being able to increase the number year on year is that we can get more people paid in the first batch in December. This year we hope to repeat that experience. We should eventually get to the stage where all inspections are done by remote sensing, which will speed everything up.

Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

T7. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her future intentions for the areas of natural constraint (ANC) scheme. (AQT 3057/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: As part of the decisions on CAP reform in June 2014, I announced that a payment would be made to farmers in severely disadvantaged areas (SDAs) from the rural development programme Pillar II under an ANC

scheme. That would operate for two years — 2016 and 2017 — and be reviewed thereafter.

Work has just commenced on looking at the future options for supporting those areas, and my intention is to advance the consultation by 31 March to enable any potential changes to the architecture of the CAP regime in the 2016-17 period to be notified to the EU Commission before its deadline of 1 August 2016.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. What was the value of ANC payments this year?

Mrs O'Neill: The most recent payments, which were made in March of this year, equated to £23.81 per hectare for disadvantaged areas and common land, and £47.62 per hectare for severely disadvantaged areas.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Chris Hazzard and Mr Paul Givan are not in their places.

Horse Mussel Beds: Strangford Lough

T10. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the good health or otherwise of the horse mussel beds in Strangford lough. (AQT 3060/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will know that my officials met the Commission and informally accepted a number of actions that it felt were necessary to deal with our responsibilities under the habitats directive. He will also know that the Commission was content with the scheme that we put forward and that things have been running very smoothly. Obviously, the situation is continually reviewed, but the Commission has formally advised us that, as a result of the progress that has been made, it is content.

The Strangford lough fishing licences are reviewed and awarded annually, with the aim of establishing an environmentally and economically sustainable fishery in the lough. Obviously, the health of the horse mussel is key to that, so it is a very positive picture.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for that answer. She is attributing a great deal of knowledge to me that I do not have, because I am not on the Agriculture Committee.

The last time I asked about this, we were talking about horse mussel beds being the size of a table-tennis table when they should have been the size of a football pitch. When you talk about progress — as you say, the Commission appears to be moderately satisfied — are we still at risk of infraction proceedings if that progress does not continue?

Mrs O'Neill: We are not at risk in that the Commission is content with the proposals that we have put forward. When I say "the picture is positive", it is more positive than it was. We have a revised restoration plan in place that is all about protecting the horse mussel. We have fishery restrictions, which, as you may remember, were in place in Strangford lough.

All the initiatives that are being taken are to protect the horse mussel and to make sure that we live up to our obligations and are not fined. We do not believe that the Commission has any intention of fining us at this time.

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Mental Health

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises that mental ill health affects one in four people every year; further recognises the importance of having quality services that are fairly resourced, trained staff to afford early access and support, and a focus on prevention, resilience and mental well-being; recognises the importance of rehabilitation, with clear objectives established for accessing mental health professionals, within 28 days and close to home; further recognises the importance of raising awareness, reducing stigma and discrimination in relation to mental ill health; and calls for the Executive to work in collaboration to make dealing with mental ill health a top Programme for Government priority. — [Mr McKinney.]

Mr Easton: I beg to move the following amendment:

Insert after third "health;":

"urges broad support for the urgent implementation of the world-class mental trauma service announced by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in September;"

I thank the proposer of the motion for bringing it to the House for debate.

It is widely recognised that Northern Ireland has higher levels of mental ill health than any other region of the United Kingdom. It is estimated that one in four adults across Northern Ireland suffers from a form of mental ill health at some stage of their life. Mental illness does not discriminate, as it affects many people from all walks of life. Despite better outcomes from treatment for mental illness, there is still a stigma attached to it that prevents people from coming forward for help. More needs to be done to do away with that stigma and to encourage people to come forward, as well as to find and deliver the best services that we can to tackle mental ill health.

The Bamford review set in motion some of the most significant changes ever seen in mental health services. Those changes have transformed how we care for people with a mental illness and have significantly improved outcomes for many. The Bamford vision is to treat people in the community, close to their friends and family, and for inpatient care to be provided only for acute cases in which someone needs to be detained for their own safety and well-being. At the time of the Bamford review, we were spending 60% of the mental health budget on hospital services and 40% on community services; we now spend 44% on hospital services and 56% on community services. That is what Transforming Your Care is all about: care in the community.

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

As Bamford has been rolled out, we have seen improvements in how we treat, handle and help those with mental ill health. In 2014, the Department launched the regional mental healthcare pathway, You in Mind, to commit the health service to delivering care that is more personalised and improves the experience of people with mental health problems. The trusts provide a range of services — including psychology, psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and trauma therapy — that promote mental health and well-being. As we deliver services that are recovery-orientated and move away from reliance on drugs towards providing people with access to psychological and cognitive behavioural or talking therapies, we see that the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the Public Health Agency (PHA) are delivering joined-up services on how mental health services, GPs and other primary care providers and hospitals can get better at making earlier interventions

and moving people from long-stay hospital wards to community-based arrangements.

The Department published a stepped-care service model for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) that promotes a more consistent, person-centred approach to mental health service delivery for children and young people. To reduce stigma, the Public Health Agency is working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health (NIAMH) to deliver a future wide-ranging, three-year anti-stigma programme. There is also cooperation at cross-departmental level, with the ministerial coordination group on suicide prevention. The Department is working with DARD and DCAL on a joint initiative on awareness and help-seeking behaviour through rural networks and sporting organisations. That is Departments working together. We also have the Mental Capacity Bill, currently at Committee Stage, which sees the Justice and Health Departments working together in partnership.

That brings me, finally, to my amendment, which urges broad support for the urgent implementation of the world-class mental trauma service announced by the Health Minister in September. What will it do? It started with discussions in the Stormont House Agreement implementation group, which considered proposals to implement the agreement's commitment to establish a comprehensive mental trauma service in the health service. That was discussed by all the political parties that were in the Executive at that time. If agreed fully, it will lead to a better joined-up service that will provide opportunities for Departments, organisations and groups across sectors to share expertise and resources, ultimately benefiting service users.

I urge the House not to divide on the issue. I believe that we want the same things and the same outcomes. Let us show that we can unite on this very important issue. The amendment, I believe, strengthens the motion.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important topic, and I welcome the Minister back to his desk. I hope that we will see some direct action coming from today's debate and the many others that are coming in front of it and behind it. It is important that we move mental health further up the political agenda with a clear strategic investment. It goes without saying that that is long overdue. Two recent reports — one from Queen's University and the other from the University of Ulster — have painted that in stark

terms. The report from Queen's does not make easy reading in some regards. It highlights key issues of underfunding, a deeply fragmented system and concerns regarding children and young people's services. As a society, we must take note of that and act on it.

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of mental ill health, and it is becoming a major public health issue. It is now regarded as one of the four most significant causes of ill health and disability. It is estimated that one in four people in the North has a mental health problem. There is evidence that mental health problems are 25% higher here than in England. Despite that, between 2008 and 2014, the actual spend on mental health services by trusts was around 25% less than was previously proposed, while spending in areas like primary care increased.

There are key messages in both reports about how we treat people as people. There are concerns, particularly in the Queen's report, about how service users are perceived by the system. The report highlights fragmentation across the system and poor communication between parts of the system, and it states that services have become very separate from each other and are very much working in silos. Care respondents frequently mentioned poor communication between different professionals, specialisms and facilities and often:

"had to fight to receive the appropriate level of services".

We must also respond to concerns about young people. I quote the Queen's research:

"When a 14 year old won't open up, or talk, there is nothing for them. They are completely abandoned and left to their own devices, even when parents are begging for help".

I want to make specific reference to the impact on mental health for those who have suffered sexual abuse. In 2012-13, there were 1,948 sexual offences in the North. If the core problem of psychological trauma is addressed at an earlier age, the victim is less likely to suffer the wider health implications that can arise from sexual trauma — another area of work that it would be wise for us to take note of.

The Children's Law Centre pointed to research that shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of children and young people with mental health needs. It is estimated that 10% of children between five and 15 years old have a significant mental

health issue. In the last 25 years, there has been a 70% increase in the number of teenagers with depression and anxiety. As far back as 1999, the Chief Medical Officer recognised that children and young people in the North would suffer significant mental health problems before their eighteenth birthday.

A number of recommendations flow from the reports, one of which calls for the mental health budget to be ring-fenced. Another one calls for a mental health champion. I also acknowledge the recent work by Professor Siobhan O'Neill examining the link —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: — between suicide and mental health. There are clear lessons for all of us in both reports, and I appeal to the Minister, in his response today —

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

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: — to commit to taking action on a proper mental health strategy with decent and fitting investment.

Mr Nesbitt: I begin with early apologies: I have a meeting at 4.00 pm elsewhere on the estate that, I think, will cause me to leave the Chamber earlier than I would have wished. I support the motion as amended, and, if time permits, I will return to the amendment.

My interest in mental health and well-being started at home, 21 years ago, when my wife suffered a serious mental health and well-being issue. It has not made me an expert by any stretch of the imagination — I do not claim that — but it has made me very aware of certain issues, not least the stigma that still surrounds mental health and well-being. If one of the 108 MLAs arrived in the Building with a broken arm, the other 107 would approach to ask, "What happened?" and "How can I help?". With mental health, the exact opposite happens: the instinct is not to mention it and to stay clear. There is no logical reason for that sort of stigma in 2015.

I hugely admire my wife for her public contribution to this debate, not least in tackling the stigma and saying to others that it is OK to speak publicly about poor mental health and well-being issues. It encourages me to ask the other parties in the Chamber whether they will support the Ulster Unionists in calling for a mental health champion. Victims and survivors

have a champion; older people have a champion; and children and young people have a champion: why not those suffering from poor mental health and well-being? I am not calling for a big commission or £1 million per annum. This can be done with a negligible impact on the public purse, but it would send out a hugely positive message to all those suffering from poor mental health and well-being.

The Chair of the Health Committee has already referred to the huge scale of the problem in Northern Ireland. I believe that globally, on a per capita basis, Northern Ireland may have the worst mental health and well-being on the planet. We are certainly up there with the likes of Israel and Lebanon, and nobody can be in any doubt that it is one of the most toxic legacies of the Troubles. Take a map of the Troubles hotspots measured in shootings, murders, bombings and the rest, as The Cost of the Troubles Study did in 1999, and you have a very clear picture. Then, take a contemporaneous map of poor mental health in Northern Ireland in terms of alcohol abuse, drug addiction and attempted and completed suicides: effectively, you have a match. There is no doubt — the evidence is there that this is a legacy issue for us.

I support the motion, not least because it recognises the need to make help available as close to home as possible. As a victims' commissioner, I spent time with a man from Fermanagh who used to come up to Maryfield for cognitive behavioural therapy. His daughter, who drove him there, said that, as they left to head back to Fermanagh, he was in great form, but, by the time they got off the motorway, she could sense him slipping back. When they hit Augher, Clogher and Fivemiletown, he was nearly as bad as when they had left. This kind of medicalised help — that sort of intervention — needs to be as close to the front room as possible.

I mentioned the amendment, and, because it urges us to offer broad support to the Minister of Health's initiative, I can support it. I cannot give it any further support because as yet we lack the detail. The Minister would acknowledge that all he did was task senior officials to look at what might constitute a world-class mental trauma service. I am glad that he is looking at that. It is, of course, a commitment in the Stormont House Agreement of 23 December last year. I will certainly support him if he puts forward solid proposals for a world-class mental trauma service.

To my mind, if we are to tackle this as we should, the solution is not purely a medicalised one.

We need to look at the societal interventions out there that can be copied so that the tens of thousands of people who woke up this morning feeling no real purpose in their lives can find that purpose —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — can start living fulfilled lives and go to bed with a sense of achievement. That is the prize.

3.45 pm

Mr McCarthy: I am happy to support the motion and the amendment on behalf of the Alliance Party. The motion is not dissimilar to one that I brought to the House on 28 April 2014, which we got full support for. I welcome our Health Minister to the Chamber and hope that he can give us a positive response at the end of this debate.

It is recognised that around one in four people have mental health conditions or problems. Unfortunately, that is more prevalent in Northern Ireland, and the legacy of the Troubles is a particular factor. At the same time, Northern Ireland spends less per head of the population on mental health than other jurisdictions. I acknowledge that some positive changes have occurred in the quality of and access to services, and that there has been some rebalancing of mental health expenditure from acute inpatient services towards the delivery of services in the community. Nevertheless, we are still investing a lower share of health spending on mental health in general compared with other regions. Pressure remains on some areas in particular, such as psychological therapies and child and adolescent mental health services.

Mental health services remain the Cinderella of the health service, which is a shame. They remain underfunded in comparison with services for physical illness, and there is considerable underfunding here in comparison with the rest of the UK. This systemic under-resourcing of mental health services is perhaps the clearest example of the reality that we do not have the balance of funding in our health service correct at this time. We urgently need to reassess our priorities and reach out to people like Margaret Gibson, who recently wrote to a morning newspaper to plead with

MLAs — that is us; all of us — to listen and to provide her and her family with a proper mental health service.

Addressing mental health issues is more than just an issue for the Department of Health but for the Executive as a whole. The Bamford review of mental health and learning disabilities, as has been mentioned, provides the overarching framework for addressing mental health issues in our society. I welcome the Executive-wide Bamford action plan 2012-15 and support its full implementation. However, I remember that, when the Bamford report was launched, no extra funding was provided. Perhaps that is why we are suffering today.

One key component of Bamford is the Mental Capacity Bill, as has been mentioned. That legislation is now moving through its Committee Stage. It offers the prospect of Northern Ireland becoming a world leader through having a single statutory framework for decision-making and care for physical and mental health conditions. Our Department of Justice is jointly working with the Health Department, and we all wish to see a speedy end and a good result. Time is tight in which to get that legislation through before this Assembly term ends. Unfortunately, the process has been held up due, I maintain, to the absence of a Minister, which prevented the Department from responding to requests from the Committee. Any further delays would result in a real missed opportunity, not least as this legislation has been under development for almost a decade. I would be grateful if the Minister would give the Assembly an assurance that all efforts will be made to ensure that the legislation can pass through all its stages before the Assembly winds up next year.

Concern has been expressed at the potential cost of implementing the mental capacity legislation. It is important that we also understand the implications of not proceeding. Notwithstanding the Executive's financial difficulties, I think that the Minister should also give an assurance that the legislation will proceed and, at the very least, that the Bill or aspects of it will be commenced as circumstances allow.

I also welcome some of the initiatives that have been taken in recent years, including the Executive's economic inactivity strategy and the consultation on a disability employment strategy that was recently published by my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry. If we can help people to stay in work or to access and sustain employment, it would improve their self-esteem and help our

economy. We must be clear in our message that many people can continue to lead meaningful lives despite mental health conditions. Addressing discrimination and stigma, as already mentioned, is therefore particularly important.

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

Mr McCarthy: It is also important to acknowledge —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is up, please.

Mr McCarthy: — the crucial role played by the voluntary organisations. I commend FASA for its recent opening of the Nightingale project on the Newtownards Road.

Mr G Robinson: In speaking in favour of the amendment, I have to commence from the beginning and say that I hope that the proposers of the motion will agree a budget and allow forward planning by the Minister and all Departments.

As someone who had a close family member suffering from mental health problems a few years ago, I fully appreciate the trauma that the patient and family go through. For whatever reasons, there is a high level of mental health issues every year — about 400,000 in Northern Ireland — and it is a challenge to ensure services that are capable of dealing with that level of need.

The Minister has outlined the world-class mental trauma service in September. I believe that that is the way forward. I would like to pay tribute to the first-class staff who maintain our mental health services. While they deal with the problems of others, it is rarely recognised that they need our support.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Member for giving way. He will know that I have the full support of the current Health Minister on armed forces issues. We are aware of the devastating impact that PTSD has on sufferers and their families but, sadly, many healthcare professionals do not recognise the symptoms, instead using guidelines for schizophrenia and bipolar, resulting in sufferers being turned away, as a Belfast hospital did recently. Does my colleague agree that we must recognise and acknowledge that PTSD as a mental health issue may stand alone, that it disproportionately affects members of our security and armed forces and that the implementation of a mental

trauma service would be welcomed by the families as well as by all service users?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an additional minute.

Mr G Robinson: I fully agree with Mrs Hale and acknowledge that all pathways to mental health services must be available to serving and ex-serving members of our armed forces. I believe that the Minister will address that particular issue later in the debate.

I ask Members to support mental health today. The best way to do that is to vote for the amended motion. That will give staff and patients a world-class service, which will have clear, strategic goals that will benefit those in need of, and those manning, the service. I welcome an emphasis on prevention, as a preventative model is always better than a curative one.

I would like to say a few words about the stigma attached to mental health. As chair of the all-party group on epilepsy, I have learned how damaging stigma can be for individuals and families. I understand that the same applies in cases where mental illness occurs. The best way to address that is to educate our population as to the need to be proactive with mental illness. Bearing a condition only leads to suspicion and stigma. The sooner a problem is identified, the sooner that work can begin to address the situation and put support in place.

I urge all Members to support the amended motion, as I see it as the best way to provide and continually develop the services required for those with mental health issues.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Today's debate gives clear focus to the issue of mental illness within our society, and I commend the proposers for bringing it forward. It brings home to us the very real truth that probably one in four people are grappling with mental ill health at any given time.

We know that there is a connection between mental ill health and suicide. That can sometimes lead to a person taking the tragic decision to end their own life. Some 280 people per year feel that they have no other choice. Some of those tragic deaths could be avoided if the right services and supports were in place. Early intervention is key to addressing the needs of people who feel isolated, depressed and hopeless.

In that context, it is a matter of grave concern that the services that are offered by Lifeline are under threat, and we have all received lobbying from that organisation to urge us to support its funding being continued. Lifeline is a 24/7 suicide crisis prevention helpline and counselling service. The situation must be addressed to ensure that the lives of people who desperately need that important service are not placed at risk.

On that note, a recent study by Action Mental Health and Queen's University, Belfast has alerted us to the fact that sufferers of mental health conditions are being let down on an ongoing basis due to major reductions in funding to psychiatric support services in the North. Following the research launch a few weeks ago, David Babington, the chief executive of Action Mental Health, flagged up some very salient points. He told us that mental health services here are already underfunded and that further funding cuts mean that people who rely on those services have to wait far longer for the help that they so badly need. While the funding for primary care services has been increased by 136% over the last six years, facilities for mental health provision have suffered a 26% underspend. That is a matter of huge concern.

Officials in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors know only too well that people who use mental health services experience increased social isolation, stigmatisation and total frustration with the lack of provision for their needs. We need to do something about that to ensure that people do not continue to suffer needlessly. The situation is as dire as it could possibly be, and it is clear that there is a real need for the Executive to give a positive reaction to the needs of the sector to address the lack of understanding and investment in resources, education and professional training.

A number of recommendations arose from the study, and it is timely and worthwhile for those to be given genuine consideration. They include: a more secure funding basis for mental health services; the establishment of a regional working group to examine the extent and impact of mental health service fragmentation, including variations in provision between urban and rural settings; the establishment of a mental health champion to renew the Bamford vision; and the need for attention to be given to the role of carers. Other important recommendations include the need for a recovery ethos to be more firmly embedded in the practices of users and carers, for a person-centred approach to be in place and for a relationship-building approach to be

central to service delivery. One other very important recommendation is for action to be taken to reduce the stigma that surrounds mental ill health. People have talked at length about that.

The study found that statutory and voluntary sector organisations identified the need for better partnership working between different sectors and service providers. There must be a genuine review of mental health service provision so that a coherent strategy can be produced that will use resources in a way that serves the real needs of sufferers. The role of the community and voluntary sector is crucial in that provision, and the future lies in an effective collaboration between that sector and the statutory agencies so that the widest possible range of providers and approaches are made available for those who need those services.

Several weeks ago, the Health Minister made a very welcome announcement about the setting up of a world-leading mental health service to provide high-quality and effective treatment for people who are experiencing trauma-related mental health problems. He stated that mental ill health is the greatest cause of disability here and much of that relates directly to the conflict. In that regard, a special case has to be made for the North of Ireland so that there is a real recognition of the impact of the conflict and how it has contributed to the high levels —

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

Ms McCorley: — of mental ill health here.

I urge people to support the motion and that proper strategies are put in place to address mental health issues.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion and the amendment. While mental health issues have always been branded the Cinderella of the health service, through a lot of good work by charities, and since the Bamford review, things are slowly beginning to change. However, that said, much work is yet to be done.

It is alarming that we are still in a situation in which one in four of the population in Northern Ireland suffer from mental ill health each year. There is no doubt that that will increase, because, unfortunately, more and more young people require those services. I see this trend through my constituency office, as I help families on a regular basis to access services, perhaps for one of their younger family members. It is always a stressful time for the

family. They always relax, if you like, when they get somewhere where they know that their child or an older member can go to be treated and well looked after and where they know that is being provided for them. In rural areas, that can sometimes create further difficulties of travelling times and distances. It is therefore vital that appropriate services are in place to provide proper care and support to patients, carers and families affected by mental illnesses, and that such services are readily available and consistent across all trust areas.

4.00 pm

The motion speaks of all the important things that we fully agree with — for instance:

"the importance of having quality services that are fairly resourced, trained staff to afford early access and support, and a focus on prevention, resilience and mental well-being",

and it goes right on to raising awareness and reducing stigma and discrimination in relation to mental health issues. However, one thing that it left out was the implementation of the world-class mental trauma service announced by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in September. That is the reason why we brought forward the amendment to the motion. The Minister has outlined his vision for Northern Ireland to become a world leader in treating psychological trauma and mental ill health.

As a Member who spoke previously said, there is no doubt that it is a legacy issue. As they grow older, problems and difficulties are created for those who were involved or were victims of the Troubles over the years. They get more and more depressed. Therefore, any service that is provided must be all-inclusive. It must not only be for the citizens of Northern Ireland but include all those who served in the army or other services here.

The key message that we must get out from the House today is that mental illness can be overcome and defeated. There is a stigma out there around mental health and illness which has to be overcome, and that is the clear message that must be sent out from the House. Of course, there are challenges to the mental health sector in rural areas and communities. We can see, and fully understand why, a lot of services are based in urban areas, where the populations tend to be. However, let us look at the more isolated rural communities, such as farming communities, which have suffered over

the past years. There has been a lot of pressure on them. We have seen a lot of farmers in despair and at breaking point. Again, it is important that we do not forget those areas but continue to ensure that proper services are provided for them.

Being from west Tyrone, I cannot close my remarks without saying to the Minister that I look forward to him soon making a decision on the second phase for the new acute mental health hospital in Omagh. That acute mental health hospital, to be provided as the second phase of the new building in Omagh, will be a great help to people in the rural west of Northern Ireland.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. In the North, of course, we have significant mental health problems in comparison to other jurisdictions, as has already been said. We have higher rates of suicide. We have, arguably, a higher rate of stigmatisation in areas as well. Stigma increases isolation and makes it much harder for people to come forward to receive treatment and help. Mental health problems face all of us — ourselves as much as anybody else. Much more needs to be done. People need to speak out about their own experiences to help tackle the stigma that hangs over those with such health problems.

Prevention, of course, is much better than cure, which is why it is important to have services not only in the Department of Health but in other Departments. In DE, for example, there is the independent counselling service for schools. It is also important to make the link between mental health problems and physical health and well-being. Ensuring that people live in a safe and healthy environment in terms of their housing and that they have choice in active travel and sports are important health factors. Mental health does not just go into a box but is connected to all those issues, which all have an impact.

I am a rural MLA, and it is concerning that people living in rural areas have significantly less access to vital mental health services than those living in urban areas, so it is important that funding to key groups in rural areas continues. I can think of many such groups in my North Antrim constituency. The Hope Centre in Ballymena helps people recovering from drug addiction and their families, and Solas in Ballycastle was set up in reaction to the rising suicide rate in the Moyle area. It is a community-led mental health and well-being group. Such groups are located in very isolated

areas, and any reduction in funding often results in their going to the wall. That always needs to be taken into consideration.

Earlier today, we had a debate about marriage equality and the LGB and T community. That community faces huge mental health and well-being problems because of bullying and intimidation. The rates of self-harm and suicide attempts are absolutely shocking. We can do something about that. It is important to comment on that, because the more that we can change attitudes and views that are based on people's sexual orientation, the greater impact there will be on that community. The earlier debate about marriage equality is very much connected to mental health when it comes to the LGB and T community, and it is worth bearing that in mind.

As others said, strategies need to be put in place to deal with this huge issue. As the Member who has just spoken said, there has been an increase in the number of people accessing these services. That could be for a number of reasons, but I hope that people who previously did not want to be seen accessing these services are doing so now. Stigma is a big issue when it comes to mental health. The more that people such as us — people in leadership positions — talk about their mental health difficulties — we all have issues — the more chance there is of helping to de-stigmatise what is essentially a massive health issue. Somebody in the sector once asked me, "Why do you always talk about having a mental health problem? If you break your leg, you don't go about saying you have a physical health problem". It is a health issue and problem, regardless of whether it is to do with the state of your mind or something physical. All those things are interconnected.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that services need to be rural proofed now more than ever to ensure that the right facilities go into rural areas?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McKay: I absolutely agree with the Member. As a Member for North Antrim, I know how isolated communities can feel. In rural areas, you find that the community steps up to the plate. It happens in urban areas as well, but, when you are a considerable distance from certain health services, you find that the community steps up to the plate. It is vital that those community groups and organisations in places such as Ballycastle, the glens and

Ballymena continue to have our full support, because they carry out an important role in preventing greater mental health problems. Often, I do not think that their role in prevention is recognised by a number of Departments.

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

Mr McKay: I urge Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Mrs D Kelly: I begin by paying tribute to the men and women who have forged careers in caring for people with mental ill health and also the carers and families of sufferers. It is no easy task at all and one that largely goes unacknowledged.

Recently, I met some of my former colleagues in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to discuss mental health services in my constituency, and I was very impressed by the ways of working smarter. Many people are thinking of new and innovative partnerships to try to better meet the needs of sufferers and their families and also, in a very financially constrained climate, to try to do things differently. I understand that there is now a new group of nurses called "nurse prescribers", which is a wonderful initiative. I understand, too, that the Justice Minister is about to sign off on the elements of the domestic and sexual violence strategy for which he is responsible. I urge you also to make that a priority amongst your commitments and priorities over the next few days. I do not think that any of us could not acknowledge the impact that domestic violence has on the lives of children and families with regard to mental ill health. That should be a key priority amongst many, I am sure, that face the Minister.

I also want to touch on workforce planning because I understand that, under mental health terms and conditions, many staff, particularly in the nursing professions, can leave at age 55. Therefore, there needs to be some element of planning to fill those gaps. Having spoken to many of my former colleagues, some of whom have recently retired and some who are planning to do so, I know that we are losing the huge experience and dedication of those staff. They will be difficult to replace. There is also the opportunity to work alongside the Open University with regard to the employment-based route for some support workers and nursing auxiliary-type staff. I urge the Minister to give that consideration as a Programme for Government initiative by himself and the Minister for Employment and Learning.

I want to focus my remarks on looking at dementia services, which are also part of the Minister's very broad portfolio. In 2014-15, in Upper Bann, which is in the Southern Trust area, there were 2,995 referrals. The demand for dementia services rose by 36% in the Southern Trust area alone. I am aware of the Public Health Agency's work to develop a framework strategy for dementia services for Northern Ireland, which is partly funded, I understand, by Atlantic Philanthropies. I hope that, in looking at all those holistic needs, we also look at the need for short breaks and respite services for carers and that particular attention is also paid to the needs of dementia sufferers who are under 65 years of age because, currently, there is no specific specialist provision for that type of service. As we all acknowledge, many people with learning disabilities are living longer. We also see many of them suffering from dementia, maybe from their late forties onwards, so very niche services are needed in the dementia strategy.

As regards young people, adolescents and CAMHS provision, Bamford made specific recommendations on their needs. I do not believe that those have yet been fulfilled. I worked for 22 years in mental health services, and I still have sisters working in the specialties. They tell me about the younger age of chronic alcoholics who are presenting in long-stay hospitals; people in their twenties displaying symptoms that you would have expected to see in someone who had been a chronic alcoholic for 40 or 50 years. That is mind-blowing with regard to needs. We face a number of time bombs across mental ill health.

I acknowledge the post-traumatic stress needs of the security and armed forces, but I think that, tonight, we will learn more about some of the nurses who were at the front line during the years of the conflict. I met an old colleague who broke down after 30 years. She was a nurse who had attended the scene of the Abercorn bomb; another horrific example of our troubled past.

In looking at the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder, I urge the party on the opposite Benches to look not just at the needs of the armed services —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — but at those of all our emergency services.

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I call the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety —

My apologies: I call Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You are forgiven.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. In recent weeks, the Assembly has debated major issues such as patient waiting times, autism and delays in key cancer services. Another issue, however, arguably just as pressing, is our endemic rates of poor mental health and how we, as an Assembly and a society, respond to that.

One in four people in Northern Ireland will experience a form of mental ill health in their life. Let us think about that for a moment: if we think of our family and our friends, one in four is a perturbing figure. Although the issue affects all regions and communities across the UK, we know that there is a 25% higher incidence of mental health problems in Northern Ireland compared with England and Scotland. The total financial cost of mental illness in Northern Ireland is estimated to be in the region of £3 billion annually, with the majority of costs not healthcare-related. Instead, the costs are to reduced economic output, owing to factors such as sickness absence and non-employment. Human costs, however, entail by far the biggest financial loss, in the form of premature death and institutional problems.

Anyone, no matter what age, gender, socio-economic status, life experience or profession can develop mental health problems, and it is often an invisible condition. As constituency MLAs, I am sure that we all know of people who are facing serious mental health issues but who mask their condition, often bottling it up until it becomes just too much to handle. Quite simply, far too many people are being lost to suicide, particularly young people in relatively confined geographic areas.

I pay tribute to the local charities, including MindWise, that do fantastic work, often with very limited resources, with the most vulnerable in our society. Given that suicide remains one of the largest killers in Northern Ireland after cancer and heart disease, it is clear that there is so much more that we need to do. Northern Ireland's suicide rate has almost doubled since 1998, putting us in the top quarter of the global league table of suicide rates. Worryingly, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that the trend is associated with the Troubles. For instance, the young people who

experienced the worst of the violence in the 1970s are the cohort with the highest and most rapidly increasing suicide rates in the decade after 1998.

The Ulster Unionist Party has serious concerns about the Public Health Agency consultation on the future of the Lifeline crisis intervention service. The most well-known feature is, of course, the crisis response helpline, and I am in no doubt whatsoever that it has been a salvation for people experiencing great distress or despair. I ask the Minister directly today to throw that service an urgent lifeline. As the figures for service users prove, it is simply not true to say that the current service is Belfastcentric. In fact, from April 2012 until September this year, there were 1,184 referrals in my constituency of Upper Bann alone. The facts speak for themselves on that important and life-saving issue.

The Appleby report found that Northern Ireland required almost 44% higher per capita funding than England, yet actual spending at the time was between 10% and 30% lower than per capita spending on mental health in England. Michael McGimpsey identified mental health as an area that required additional funding and used the remainder of his time in office to begin delivering just that.

Later, the Bamford review clearly identified the need for improved access to services and for a more coordinated framework for provision to be developed. Frustratingly, however, few of the recommendations have been followed through to completion. It is about time that the Executive and the Department step up to the mark and start giving our local mental health provision the support that it deserves.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Now it is time for the Minister to respond.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the debate and the opportunity to participate in it. I welcome the opportunity to focus on mental health, which, as many Members have acknowledged during the debate, has historically been a poor relation in health and social care. As Mr Buchanan mentioned in his contribution, thankfully, things are starting to change. A lot of high-quality, essential work is carried out in our communities and in our hospitals by talented and dedicated people. They very much deserve our respect and our thanks.

We face significant challenges in the arena of mental health: the legacy of the Troubles; an

ageing population; areas of deprivation; unemployment; and stress at work. There is barely an element of modern life that does not have the potential to adversely impact upon someone's mental health. As an Executive, we face the challenge of prioritising how we spend finite amounts of public money. One in four adults in Northern Ireland will suffer from a mental health problem at some stage in their life. Northern Ireland has higher levels of mental ill health than any other region in the United Kingdom. The Public Health Agency's 'Making Life Better' strategy, published in 2014, established that Northern Ireland has a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental illness than England.

In the past decade, significant reform and modernisation of mental health services has taken place, although I acknowledge that more needs to be done. The Bamford review, which was referenced by many contributors, set in motion some of the most significant changes ever seen in mental health services here. Those changes have transformed how we care for people with a mental illness and have significantly improved the achievable outcomes. The Bamford vision is that people with a mental illness should be treated in the community, close to their families and friends, unless there is a clinical reason for not doing so. The focus in the last number of years in service development has been on early intervention, home treatment services and the development of psychological therapy services. Transforming Your Care endorses this approach. Since Bamford reported in 2008, investment in mental health services has increased to £247 million a year. That is an increase from £200 million a year. More importantly, the balance of funding has shifted. At the time of the Bamford review, we were spending 60% of the mental health budget on hospital services and only 40% on community services. Now we spend 44% on hospital services and 56% on community services. We are working towards closing old, inappropriate institutions that are no longer fit for purpose, and we are steadily opening new, more appropriate community-based accommodation around Northern Ireland.

In October 2014, the Department launched a regional mental healthcare pathway called You in Mind. The focus of the pathway is to commit Health and Social Care to delivering care that is more personalised and improves the experience of people with mental health problems by adopting a more evidence-based and recovery-orientated approach. One of the key elements was the publication in 2010 of 'A Strategy for the Development of Psychological

Therapy Services', which has largely been implemented. A range of services are provided, including psychology, psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and trauma therapy. The HSC Board estimates that between 75,000 and 80,000 sessions are provided annually. Recent investment has focused on the training of existing staff in psychological therapies and the establishment of primary care talking therapy hubs. The HSC Board is into the second year of a five-year plan to establish these hubs across each trust area. The hubs focus on providing a range of psychological therapies for people who are experiencing common mental health problems. They are developed around general practice and will improve access to earlier support and care.

There is even an economic argument to support excellence in the provision of psychological therapies and mental health services generally. DSD has since 2008 provided funding to my Department to support the welfare-to-work agenda. A Queen's University/Health and Social Care Board report in 2014, published to support the continuation of this funding, found that 44% to 46% of people claiming illness-related out-of-work benefits do so because of mental ill health. However, for every £1 invested in psychological therapy services, there is a saving of £1.75 to the public sector. The report estimates that, within two years of recovery following successful treatment, the employment rate for those with moderate to severe mental health problems is increased by 11.4% and by 4.3% for those with mild mental health problems. I argue that we need to continue investment in this area.

I turn to the issue of CAMHS, which Dolores Kelly mentioned in her contribution. The Bamford review set out the strategic direction for children's mental health services, which are mainly delivered through community-based teams. There is also a 33-bed children and adolescent mental health inpatient unit at Beechcroft. In July 2012, the Department published a stepped-care service model for CAMHS, and this promotes a more consistent, person-centred approach to mental health service delivery for children and young people. Improvements include an increased focus on early intervention, better multidisciplinary working and collaboration with the community and voluntary, education and youth justice sectors.

I want to turn to an issue that was not raised but which is an important mental health issue nonetheless, and that is eating disorder services. Those are currently provided through a stepped-care approach that ranges from early

detection and intervention, to community-based treatment, to specialist inpatient provision. However, I am aware that there is considerable support for a local specialist eating disorders unit. We need to be sure that any such service would be sustainable in the long term. I therefore asked my officials in October to start considering all the various options available to us.

Members will recall my announcement in September that I want Northern Ireland to become a world leader in treating people with psychological trauma and that I have tasked officials to create an innovative service that will meet the needs of those suffering from mental trauma. I welcome the amendment before us today. My announcement followed on from exploratory discussions in the Stormont House Agreement implementation group, which considered proposals to implement the agreement's commitment to establish a comprehensive mental trauma service in the health service. The full details continue to be developed, but the intention is that the final model will support the voluntary and community sector to create an integrated approach with the Health and Social Care system to address mental health need.

The service would allow for a range of interventions, meeting the spectrum of need across our community, irrespective of where that is. It would involve leading-edge, evidence-based treatments in line with NICE guidelines and be based on the authoritative and internationally recognised stepped-care model that focuses on the recovery of the individual from psychological trauma. The model recognises that, for people to recover, they may often need a combination of evidence-based social, family, psychological and psychiatric interventions; in short, a collaborative partnership across community, voluntary and statutory services.

In establishing the service, I intend to achieve four main aims: to address comprehensively the legacy of the Troubles and unmet mental health needs; to improve individual, family and community experience of mental health trauma care; to improve the psychological and social outcomes for individuals, their families and communities who have been traumatised as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland; and to improve governance and accountability.

The last of those is very often overlooked, but I believe that it is important that we provide care either in the statutory sector or in the voluntary and community sector and that services are joined up, involve less duplication and enable

more timely responses to psychological problems that are effective from the outset. A joined-up service will provide opportunities for organisations and groups across sectors to share expertise and resources, ultimately benefiting service users.

My Department, together with the Health and Social Care Board, has been concentrating on designing the medium- to high-impact, high-intensity support that, in the model, would be provided within Health and Social Care and involve treatment for people with diagnosable and complex mental health problems. Care at that level must be provided by registered mental health professionals. The current model estimates that we would need to recruit over 40 additional whole-time equivalent specialists to accommodate the volume of patients and levels of need. That gives a further indication of the scale of the challenge that we face. Finalising the design of the model and financing such a service are significant challenges that we need to overcome. I urge all Members, including Executive colleagues, to work together to agree those arrangements as soon as possible. Just as the Royal Victoria Hospital is world class in dealing with physical trauma, I hope that we can agree that a mental trauma service would be a fitting legacy to those who continue to suffer as a result of the Troubles.

In respect of the point raised by my colleague Brenda Hale about post-traumatic stress disorder and unrecognised symptoms among armed forces personnel, I am happy to contact her about the issues that she raised and, hopefully, provide her with an adequate response. She will be aware that the Department is involved in working with the armed forces across a range of health issues and chairs a forum that meets regularly and which involves representatives from the charity Combat Stress. For serving members of the armed forces, mental health services are provided by the Ministry of Defence, and services for veterans and dependants are provided within Health and Social Care. She raises a very important issue, and I am very happy to contact her about any specific concerns that she may have.

4.30 pm

It is vital that we speak openly about mental health and encourage people who are experiencing emotional difficulties to seek help. Health and Social Care is working across a number of levels to reduce the stigma associated with mental ill health. The PHA and the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health are working in partnership to deliver a

future wide-ranging three-year anti-stigma programme entitled Change Your Mind. The cross-departmental ministerial coordination group on suicide prevention has expanded its remit to cover a broader range of activities to promote positive mental health. My Department is working with DARD and DCAL on a joint initiative to promote mental health awareness and help-seeking behaviour through rural networks and sporting organisations.

Another progressive development is the Mental Capacity Bill, which is currently at Committee Stage. If passed, it will be an international first in establishing a fused approach for mental health and mental capacity law. I am very grateful to Members from all sides who are considering the Bill so assiduously, and I urge colleagues to continue to work together to ensure that we pass Final Stage before the end of this mandate.

In her remarks, Jo-Anne Dobson mentioned the Lifeline service, and I want to use this opportunity to provide an update to the House. The current Lifeline contract ends on 31 December this year, with the possibility of extension until 30 September next year. I understand that an extension has twice been offered to the current provider of Lifeline services but has been refused on both occasions. The Lifeline crisis response service is a key component of the Protect Life suicide prevention strategy. The PHA is keen to engage with the relevant stakeholders to ensure that the future service specification is appropriately informed, and the agency has already undertaken a Lifeline pre-engagement public consultation, the findings of which have assisted in identifying the most effective and efficient model to obtain the best outcomes for taking the service beyond 2015.

The proposals for the future delivery of the Lifeline service retain four essential core components of the current service. Those are a free-to-call crisis telephone helpline that will be accessible 24 hours a day; skilled helpline staff trained in crisis de-escalation and in assessing suicide risk; signposting callers to the most appropriate service for their needs; and referral to follow-on support where necessary. By splitting the provision of immediate helpline support from follow-up support, the proposals avoid a potential perverse incentive whereby the helpline provider would gain financially from referring a client to follow-up support that it also delivers. By ensuring that follow-up support is locally based, access to that service should be improved, particularly for rural dwellers.

The point is that the plans that are out for consultation at this time are looking at better integration with elsewhere in the service, particularly with the Ambulance Service, and better coverage across Northern Ireland. That recognises a criticism that the service has not been up to standard outside Belfast. There should also be improved governance. The important point for Members to remember is that, at the end of this consultation and at the end of this work, the Lifeline service will be retained, and we are seeking to improve the service that people receive.

In conclusion, improving people's mental health is vital for their well-being and that of their families. It is as important as their physical health. People with a mental illness must be supported to take control of their lives and live purposefully in their communities. While our mental health services have come a long way since Bamford, we have much more to do. I am committed to further reform and innovation. That will require funding. Some of that can be found by reprioritising existing resources, but new money will also be needed. That will be difficult to find, but we all have a responsibility to ensure that we have sufficient means to meet the mental health challenges that we face as a community.

Mrs Cameron: I rise as a DUP member of the Health Committee and as a member of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Mental Capacity Bill, which is currently going through. I welcome the opportunity to contribute on this important matter. As we are all aware and as many Members have highlighted, during our lifetime, one in four of us will be affected by some degree of mental health difficulty. Many of us in the Chamber, including me, will be well aware of what it is like to suffer from poor mental health at some stage in our lives. In my case, after childbirth, I did not recognise that I was suffering from postnatal depression. Unfortunately for me, I was not diagnosed. In fact, I was not even aware that I should be seeking help at that time of my life. Twenty-three years on, I trust that mothers today are more aware and that the stigma that has always been there has lessened over time.

In the eight years since the publication of the Bamford report, we have made significant improvements in how we deal with patients presenting with mental health issues. That is a trend that we must continue and build on, in keeping with Transforming Your Care.

At the core of any strategy, we must focus on ensuring that stigma surrounding mental ill health is removed. Sadly, many

misconceptions, inaccuracies and misnomers surround the issue, meaning that many people, particularly men, are reluctant to ask for help.

With the Bamford vision to be able to treat as many people as possible within a community setting, our efforts must centre on normalising the reality of mental ill health and ensuring that we work towards community-based support systems, such as within the family, friendship circles or local help networks. Coupled with recognising the parity between mental and physical health, that would provide a strong foundation on which to provide early intervention and improve outcomes for those suffering from poor mental health.

In September, the Health Minister announced plans for a world-leading mental trauma service. At the time of the announcement, he recognised that mental ill health was the biggest cause of disability in Northern Ireland. He also acknowledged that over 213,000 people were suffering from mental health difficulties that could be attributed directly to the Troubles. That figure is likely to be much higher due to the ripple effects on families, causing a worrying precedent for future generations.

It is clear that this service is much-needed and will be possible only with inter-departmental working. I cannot think of one Department that does not have a part to play in shaping the service, whether it be the Department of Education looking at early coping mechanisms such as one I witnessed on a recent visit to Ballycraig Primary School in my constituency, which provides a fantastic nurture facility to help children to cope with emotional and social difficulties; the Department of Agriculture in reaching out to the increasing number of members of the farming community who are experiencing depression; or the Department for Social Development in tackling drug and alcohol abuse through funding charities such as FASA, to name but a few.

There is no silver bullet and these are not changes that will happen overnight. However, working with the community and voluntary sector, we can make a real societal change.

I want to turn to some comments from the Floor in relation to our party's amendment. I welcome the support given to the amendment. Fearghal McKinney, the proposer of the motion, said that it neither added to nor took away from the motion. He welcomed the intention to develop a mental trauma service.

Alex Easton, the proposer of the amendment, said that a mental trauma service has been discussed by all political parties and that it would lead to a better, joined-up service, allowing opportunity to share expertise and resources to the benefit of service users. Maeve McLaughlin spoke of the huge scale of the mental health problem in Northern Ireland.

Mike Nesbitt, supporting the motion as amended, spoke of his awareness, in particular, of the stigma in relation to mental health, given his own wife's experiences. He talked about a mental health champion and the commitment in the Stormont House Agreement to have that trauma service.

Kieran McCarthy spoke to the motion and amendment. He said that Northern Ireland spent less per head than the rest of the UK on mental health. He also spoke of how the Mental Capacity Bill was moving through Committee Stage.

George Robinson said that he believed that a world-class mental health trauma centre —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is almost up —

Mrs Cameron: — was the way forward. There were other contributions as well.

Whilst the motion transcends politics, it is obvious that none of this will be possible without agreement to welfare reform. We all understand the severe cost that is being imposed. I thank the Members across the Floor for supporting the amendment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as deis cainte a thabhairt domh ar cheist ríthábhachtach seo na sláinte intinne. Éirím ar an ócáid seo le hachóimriú a dhéanamh ar an rún, ach caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil muidinne ar an taobh seo an-sásta tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú fosta. Tá súil agam go mbeidh mé in inmhe cothrom na Féinne a thabhairt do oiread Comhaltaí a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht agus is féidir liom.

I welcome the opportunity to wind up what has been a very positive debate on the motion. While Members may disagree slightly on the nuances of the implementation of mental health services, they all agree on the scale of mental health issues and that it cannot be ignored. The provision of mental health services is one of our society's greatest challenges. In Northern Ireland, this has only been amplified

by the conflict, which has left many people with lasting mental scars.

Mrs Dobson and Mr McKinney mentioned the figures. One in four people in Northern Ireland has a mental health problem, with the region having a 25% higher risk of problems than England, for example. A significant portion is directly related to trauma experienced during the conflict, with over 213,000 people dealing with mental health issues. As Ms McLaughlin mentioned, further figures note that, between 2008 and 2014, actual spending on mental health services was 25% less than it was in the previous period. Certain figures quoted in today's debate continue to paint a grim picture of our current position regarding mental health aid.

As Mr McKinney and others said, the 2007 Bamford review heralded a new understanding that mental ill health was not only widespread across the region but, further, that it needed serious planning and funding obligations to meet the demand and create new positivity. Bamford held that:

"people with a mental illness should be treated in the community, close to their families and friends, unless there is a clinical reason for not doing so."

This goal was later reflected in Transforming Your Care. The Minister outlined the move towards treatment in the community when he mentioned the hubs. He said that these were based around general practice and involved cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and trauma therapy and evidence-based, recovery-orientated approaches.

Mr McCarthy mentioned Transforming Your Care and said that we need to reassess our priorities. Ms McLaughlin mentioned the fact that funding for mental health is now 25% less in real terms, a point that I have already covered. It is frustrating for those involved in the mental health sector and those who rely on it to find that a lack of funding and continued cutbacks continue to stall progress on the Bamford principles. The scale of need recognised in the Bamford report and Northern Ireland's own unfortunate position was further recognised by the Heenan-Anderson Commission, which rightly identified that the legacy of trauma from the conflict could only be dealt with through a world-class, universal mental health system.

Dolores Kelly praised the professional staff involved in mental healthcare and the work of family carers and friends. She mentioned the

need for smarter ways of working and referred to nurse prescribers, who she said are making an excellent contribution. Mrs Kelly also outlined the close connection between domestic violence and the mental health of women and children and emphasised the need to bring forward the sexual violence strategy. She also mentioned the experience of CAMHS in dealing with chronic alcoholism in people who are much younger than the past norm.

She said that that was a problem that needed to be addressed urgently. She also mentioned that the dementia services in her constituency last year had almost 3,000 referrals, which was a 36% increase on the previous year. That is obviously a problem that needs to be tackled.

4.45 pm

The proper provision of a quality mental health service is not simply to address the needs of those affected by the conflict; it is for the common good of everyone in Northern Ireland, young and old. Access to properly funded services delivering the best care possible is critical to helping people to identify their own struggle and grants them the tools to manage their mental health. It is critical that the Assembly recognises the scale of mental health issues in Northern Ireland and that we do everything in our power to raise awareness and banish all the stigma that has been erroneously attached to mental illness in our society.

Mr Buchanan referred to stigma. He said that mental health services were often the Cinderella services of the health system, so it would be good if the Minister were to prove to be their Prince Charming. The truth is that we can talk easily of physical illnesses, even cancer, but there is still unwillingness to speak openly about mental health and well-being. As Mr Nesbitt said, it is time to take it out into the open and champion it in public to remove the stigma and make it OK to talk. Talking is often the first step towards mental well-being. I praise the work of the race against suicide, an island-wide voluntary strategy that seeks to emphasise that it is OK to talk. Recently, in my constituency, starting in Crossmaglen, we had the Slieve Gullion spin-off cycle, which made a tremendous contribution locally to highlighting mental health issues and suicide and urging people experiencing mental health difficulties to talk about them.

Mr McCarthy urged that the Mental Capacity Bill be expedited and resourced to the greatest extent possible. The Minister referred to it also and urged Members to bring the Bill forward

and make it the best it can be. George Robinson emphasised the need for prevention and, where there is mental ill health, the need for early intervention. That was reflected by other Members. Jo-Anne Dobson and Rosie McCorley mentioned the importance of retaining the Lifeline service intact. We in the SDLP support them in that regard. The Minister responded to that and outlined his plans. Many Members referred to the world-leading mental health trauma service. The Minister responded to that: he said that he would take a collaborative approach based on those who suffer because of the Troubles, including individual victims. He also said that there would be emphasis on governance and accountability and that the approach would be cross-sectoral in nature. Daithí McKay mentioned the high rates of suicide. He referred to the LGBT community and the trauma that members of that community suffer through bullying, self-harm and suicide. He referred to today's debate on equal marriage. The vote on that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr D Bradley: — is a positive outcome, even though there was a petition of concern. It will give the LGBT community an uplift.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute. I support the motion and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that mental ill health affects one in four people every year; further recognises the importance of having quality services that are fairly resourced, trained staff to afford early access and support, and a focus on prevention, resilience and mental well-being; recognises the importance of rehabilitation, with clear objectives established for accessing mental health professionals, within 28 days and close to home; further recognises the importance of raising awareness, reducing stigma and discrimination in relation to mental ill health; urges broad support for the urgent implementation of the world-class mental trauma service announced by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in September; and calls for the Executive to work in collaboration to make

*dealing with mental ill health a top Programme
for Government priority.*

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

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