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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 December 2016

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Food Hygiene Rating (Fee and Fixed Penalty Amount) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the draft Food Hygiene Rating (Fee and Fixed Penalty Amount) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Subject to the Assembly's approval, the order will outline the amount of fixed penalty to be applied for relevant non-display offences as set out in section 10 of the Food Hygiene Rating Act 2016. The order will also specify the fee associated with the request for rerating inspections as set out in section 4 of the Food Hygiene Rating Act 2016.

The aim of the Act is to enable consumers to make an informed choice when deciding where to purchase and, therefore, ultimately to improve hygiene standards. The Act had a positive response and received Royal Assent on 29 January 2016.

In summary, the key provisions of the Act are that it requires all food businesses within scope to display a valid food hygiene rating sticker; requires relevant employees within a food business, on request, to orally inform the person making the request of the establishment's food hygiene rating; requires all food businesses with an online food ordering facility to display a valid rating on said platform; introduces offences in relation to the non-display of a valid rating and provision of information about the rating; allows for fixed penalty notices to be applied for the non-display of valid rating offences; allows for the charging of a fee in relation to conducting a requested rerating visit; and specifies timescales within which requirements under the Act must be completed.

The order for which I seek Members' endorsement specifies the amount of the fixed penalty and the fee in relation to conducting a requested rerating visit. The advantages of introducing fixed penalty notices are twofold. In the first instance, they provide authorised officers with an additional enforcement tool. Secondly, they reduce the burden on the North of Ireland Courts Service by reducing the number of prosecutions taken. It therefore follows that the amount of fixed penalty notices applied must be at a sufficient level to deter people from committing the offence, but not so high that they would encourage offenders to aim for a more favourable outcome from a court hearing.

Where enforcement officers feel that a stronger penalty is more suitable, they retain the option of prosecuting the offender, who would then be liable to a fine of up to £1,000. A consultation on the draft order was carried out between March and June 2016, and the majority of respondents agreed with the amounts proposed.

Furthermore, at its meeting on 27 October 2016, the Health Committee agreed that it was content for my Department to make the proposed order, and it is with its support, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, that I bring this draft order before you today. Subject to affirmative resolution, the order will become effective forthwith. I commend the draft order to the House.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): On behalf of the Committee for Health, I am pleased to speak very briefly on this order, which sets out certain fees and penalties under the Food Hygiene Rating Act, as the Minister outlined.

When considering the Food Hygiene Rating Bill back in 2014-15, the previous Health Committee supported the overarching aim of the Bill to reduce the incidence of food-borne illness through the introduction of a mandatory food hygiene rating scheme. It was accepted

that this would not only help businesses to achieve and maintain compliance with food hygiene law but allow consumers to make informed choices about where they wish to eat or shop for food.

The current Committee considered the policy proposal for this statutory rule at its meeting on 15 September and considered the statutory rule itself more recently at the meeting on 27 October. When considering the statutory rule before the Assembly today, the Committee noted the important safeguards for businesses in the Act to allow businesses to request a re-rating of their premises and accepted that the fee of £150 set out in these regulations reflected the costs that would be incurred by district councils in conducting a re-rating inspection. The Committee also noted, and had no objection to, the fixed penalty amount of £200 that would be payable by businesses when a fixed penalty notice is served.

The Committee further noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules confirmed in her report, which was issued on 21 October 2016, that she has no issues to raise with regard to the technical aspect of the rule. At its meeting on 27 October 2016, the Committee agreed to recommend that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly and therefore supports the motion today.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister for her comments. I welcome this order, which, as the Minister alluded to, enables consumers to make more informed choices. A recent survey demonstrated that 90% of consumers look at the rating of the premises compared with the 22% who look online. I also welcome the fact that this will allow for an authorised officer of a district council to issue a fixed penalty notice for offences relating to non-display of a valid food hygiene rating, as this will undoubtedly succeed in reducing the number of offences that have to be dealt with through the courts.

I also note the largely positive consultation responses. One concern noted was about the re-rating fee following improvements. However, I believe that the positives far outweigh this, as the onus to openly display the rating and the opportunity for an upgraded rating will undoubtedly encourage businesses to make the necessary improvements. I also believe that it is beneficial that staff will be fully aware of their employer's rating, and having to verbally communicate this will also add to the desire to ensure a high rating. That is, of course, to the benefit of all our consumers. I ask the Minister to comment in her concluding remarks on the benefits of paying the fine early.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Members for their comments on the Act. It will lead to benefits for the public and for consumers. As we enter the festive period, it is estimated that 4.3 million meals will be eaten out. I encourage the public to make the most of the new transparency measures.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Food Hygiene Rating (Fee and Fixed Penalty Amount) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Abortion (Fatal Foetal Abnormality) Bill: First Stage

Mr Ford: I beg to introduce the Abortion (Fatal Foetal Abnormality) Bill [NIA 03/16-21], which is a Bill to make provision to decriminalise medical termination of a pregnancy in those circumstances where the foetus is diagnosed with a fatal abnormality.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Social Investment Fund

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All others will have five minutes.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the deep public concern regarding the formation, implementation and operation of the social investment fund; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to commission an independent review of the operation of the entire social investment fund process, taking particular account of the role of lead partners in this process and the impact that this role has had on good governance.

Quite rightly, a lot of points have been made over the past number of weeks about the situation at Charter NI and its chief executive, Dee Stitt. However, the issues and concerns

with the social investment fund (SIF) go much deeper and wider. The overarching question is whether the stated objectives of the social investment fund, worthy as they may be, could be more efficiently and effectively achieved through other means, and therefore whether the social investment fund is a worthwhile use of public money.

The implementation and operation of the social investment fund has been characterised by secrecy and cronyism. Indeed, in at least one respect, the ongoing association of DUP representatives, including the First Minister, with a current paramilitary who is chief executive of Charter NI has undermined the credibility of the Executive's commitment to tackling paramilitarism. It has quite simply been a disaster for the principle of good governance. The Assembly should take very seriously the comments of the former commissioner of standards, Sir Alistair Graham, who said that the social investment fund is "flawed" and requires root-and-branch reform.

The motion calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to review the social investment fund with a view to both learning lessons and determining whether the approach should continue. This review needs to be independent. There are very legitimate concerns that the flawed approach of the social investment fund could be replicated in other funding streams, notably that of the so-called Executive action plan on paramilitarism, which has an agenda of buying off paramilitaries rather than standing up for the principles of the rule of law and promoting a culture of lawfulness. Furthermore, while it is not the role of the Assembly to direct the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), it is reasonable to anticipate that the operation of the social investment fund will be subject to a full and rigorous investigation.

Listening to comments from some of the advocates of the social investment fund, you would think that the Government's interventions to deal with issues of employability, childcare, public health and deprivation were not being dealt with elsewhere. Indeed, the point applies equally to Government interventions that are deployed through the community and voluntary sector. This has regularly been viewed as an efficient way of delivering money quickly and distributing it to the grass roots, effective in producing outcomes and fair in funding decisions based on objective criteria in open and merit-based competitions.

A number of good examples can be cited from the Department for Employment and Learning.

The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) was a community-based employment intervention which gave assistance to marginalised and hard-to-reach unemployed people, beyond what was provided by the employment service through jobs and benefits offices. Take Pathways to Success, the Executive strategy for addressing people not in education, employment and training (NEET). One of its programmes was the collaboration and innovation fund (CIF). This placed £9 million in the hands of 18 different community-based projects to assist marginalised young people. These programmes were successful and popular; they even received endorsement from the London-based Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. Money was distributed in a timely and effective manner. However, these programmes had to be discontinued in 2015 due to excessive Executive cuts to the DEL budget. The NEETs strategy is now delivered only through the European social fund (ESF). Similarly, a much reduced LEMIS programme is being delivered geographically to eligible partners and through ESF.

Here is the irony. Through all this, the social investment fund has been protected by the Executive, despite all the cuts to, and underfunding of, the public sector, including cuts that were passed on to the community and voluntary sector. The very organisations that have been delivering quality programmes have been cut back, but not SIF.

The genesis of the social investment fund goes back to 2011.

The public rationale was about innovative approaches by placing decision-making power in the hands of local communities. The real rationale seems to be to concentrate power in the hands of certain local groups favoured by the two dominant political parties, namely, the DUP and Sinn Féin. To achieve this, political membership was locked into steering groups and was distributed by the proportional system of d'Hondt, which, of course, was skewed towards the larger parties. Some of the so-called independent members also have clear links to the two leading parties. Mr Stitt, for example, is also a member of the south-eastern group.

10.45 am

The most disturbing aspect of the process is that only groups represented on the steering groups can become lead partners. This is, ultimately, a closed shop and is clearly a conflict of interest. While we then see a

competitive process in the organisations that will deliver the services on the ground, many of those groups, if not all, previously could have, or indeed have, been funded through conventional approaches and directly by responsible Departments. In east Belfast, GEMS, which is the larger and more-experienced organisation in delivering community-based employability programmes for government, including some of the schemes that I have mentioned, is managed by Charter, which is the smaller and less-experienced organisation. That begs the question: what precisely is the benefit of that extra layer of bureaucracy in lead partners and associated management fees? Is it about channelling resources into the hands of the preferred and favoured organisations of the DUP and Sinn Féin? If so, why? There is a growing sense of frustration — I am sure that other Members will echo this — across wide swathes of the community and voluntary sector about resources being steered to certain favoured groups at the expense of others without open and merit-based competition. Without that, we, quite simply, do not have fair play. We may miss out on even better solutions that other organisations might offer. There is a growing sense of grievance.

Even more disturbingly, groups feel disempowered from speaking out lest they lose scarce resources. That is unhealthy and undemocratic. Groups that I have met have expressed those concerns to me. Some may argue that it takes local lead partners to source local client groups for schemes and that that is added value. Frankly, even that is disturbing; it reinforces the belief that there are local gatekeepers in too many communities and that the delivery partners are incapable of doing that directly themselves.

That brings us back to the issue of Charter NI. Let us be clear: the DUP has had a clear agenda of trying to direct funding to Charter over the last number of years. Sometimes Charter has been successful in winning competitive bids but, at other times, the DUP has increased the amount of cunning schemes to try to get it funds outside the normal process. That, in itself, is of significant concern, but the interface between Charter and the UDA should ring alarm bells. Alliance welcomes people with a paramilitary past playing a positive and constructive role in society. However, when people with a paramilitary present are doing so and, indeed, are managing public funds that have been awarded through a closed system, there is clearly a problem. The issue with Mr Stitt is more than the use of abusive language in a 'Guardian' video and more than the

reference to his band providing homeland security; it is the reference to working-class areas being jungles, with the inevitability of local hard men. That is the culture that I came here to break down. It is the culture that the Assembly should be breaking down. It goes to the very heart of any credible Executive action plan to tackle paramilitarism. The First Minister allowing herself to be associated with a current UDA leader and then describing the natural concerns expressed across the community as a "distraction" sends out a terrible message to wider society. If it is a distraction, it is a distraction from only the even deeper flaws of the entire social investment fund.

Mr Stalford: I was sent here to represent all the people of South Belfast but I draw a particular level of support from the type of community that Mr Dickson talked about in his contribution. I think of communities like Sandy Row, Taughmonagh and the Village, where his colleague Ms Bradshaw worked for many years in the community and voluntary sector.

Any dispassionate or reasonable observer looking at communities such as that would come to the conclusion that, for too long, they were sidelined, ignored and left behind. I accept that some of the responsibility for that falls on the shoulders of unionism and on government in general. The fact is that we are talking about communities where the development of capacity and community infrastructure was held back for many years because of the perverse circumstances of life in Northern Ireland.

I was sent here to represent those people, and I am firmly of the view that, for too long, they have been left behind. It is my responsibility, as someone who was born in Annadale and who comes from a working-class Protestant background, to ensure that aspiration is promoted, that education is developed, and that opportunities are opened up that otherwise would not have been there.

I mentioned south Belfast. In reference to the party that tabled the motion, I served on Belfast City Council for 11 years alongside Alderman Tom Ekin of the Alliance Party. Tom not only played a role in the development of Weaver's Court and in the creation of jobs for local people, but he was prepared to put his money where his mouth is to encourage people down a better path and to promote a better path with a higher level of understanding, education and aspiration for the young people in those areas. He and I disagreed on many things, although I probably agreed with him more than any other member of the Alliance Party I have ever met.

We agreed on a lot of things because we could see that it was not right that communities such as that should be held back and their development retarded.

The social investment fund was born out of a desire to reflect the fact that local people and local communities know best what suits their needs, what their problems and challenges are, and that they should have a direct and meaningful way of tackling those problems. I am proud that I recently opened my constituency office in Sandy Row; it is situated in a building that is part of a social investment fund project. I revealed that in the Executive Office Committee not so long ago, and it is not a mystery to anyone. The reason why it took so long to get the office open is because the finance office would not allow me to pay rent to an Ulster Unionist councillor who was the previous person to own the building, rather than a community group.

I am proud of community groups such as Belfast South Community Resources, which are committed to peaceful, democratic means and which are determined to drive positive change —

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes, I will.

Ms Armstrong: Does the Member agree that the community and voluntary sector signed up to the concordat agreement with government for sustainable and constant funding, not one-off pots that give the communities that you are talking about small glimmers of hope that are taken away when the funding disappears?

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

Mr Stalford: The funding that you are talking about and the project that I was talking about are for the provision of a training and employment centre. It will not give a glimmer of hope; it will be a lifeline for many people from the community that I have referenced.

It is important, when people criticise the processes, to note that in the south Belfast area, Jeffrey Dudgeon replaced Bob Stoker, who in turn replaced Michael McGimpsey, on that steering group, so most of the Ulster Unionists in south Belfast went through it. Paula Bradshaw sat on that working group. In east Belfast, Chris Lyttle MLA sat on that SIF working group. Councillors Anne Donnelly and Marion Quinn of the SDLP sat on the

Londonderry one. In the southern area, the general secretary of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Colin McCusker, sat on that area working group.

Councillor Thomas O'Hanlon of the SDLP sat on that area working group. In the south-eastern — *[Interruption.]*

A Member: I'm watching you.

Mr Stalford: Keep watching, you might learn something. In the —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members not to make points from sedentary positions.

Mr Stalford: In the south-eastern area, Councillor Philip Sif — sorry, Philip Smith — sat on the area working group. *[Laughter.]* In the northern area, the Chief Whip Robin Swann MLA, sat on that area working group. Councillor Derek Hussey sat on the western area working group. Of course, the same people —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Stalford: The same people, of course, who criticised the scrutiny of this process had a direct hand in it. Therefore, when they come now feigning concern, they had years to do this.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Will the —

Mr Stalford: People will see this for what it is, which is nothing more than rank, political opportunism.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please take his seat? The Member's time is up.

Mr Lynch: I declare an interest as a member of the western group. The last Member did not read my name out, but I was on it. I welcome the opportunity to speak about my experience of the steering group and the delivery of the SIF funding.

The group consisted of a wide range and selection of people from the community and voluntary sectors, and it was not a closed shop as the mover of the motion has said. As well as members of most political parties being on it, as outlined by the last speaker, we consulted widely across the region, seeking interest from

as many groups and organisations as possible that might be eligible for the funding.

The steering group was guided by OFMDFM officials and involved strict criteria. Our focus was on increasing employability opportunities and tackling the issues of mental and physical health, and deprivation. During those initial periods, there was no criticism from the Opposition parties, only that the money was not being distributed quickly enough.

We were inundated with applications. Indeed, we could have spent most of the SIF money just within our area. However, after much discussion, guidance and consensus, we decided on approximately 10 projects. Unfortunately, not all of the projects could be funded.

The lead partners helped to ensure continual ownership of the projects by those who had organised them. The lead partners were chosen by a consensual process. For example, to demonstrate the value of some of the projects decided upon, a £920,000 new-build project at Fermanagh House was opened when the First Minister and the junior Minister came to Enniskillen. This project will provide much-needed support to local groups and charities.

Two years ago, an SDLP Member, Mr Attwood, suggested the SIF was a "slush fund" for paramilitaries. As a result, a member of the trustees of Fermanagh House, which is made up of a cross-section of people, was forced to pen a letter to the local press to defend the integrity and value of the group and say that Fermanagh Trust was not a political hostage to any political party or group.

At that successful launch, a couple of weeks ago, SDLP and Ulster Unionist Members were in attendance to share in the success of the project.

Today's motion focuses on lead partners and good governance. The Central Procurement Directorate was involved in Fermanagh House from the beginning until the end.

I want to mention a number of other projects that we decided upon, and they are listed in the research pack. Work Ready is a revenue project which seeks to provide employment and opportunities for 120 participants. At the launch, a young woman said:

"I had been out of work for some time. I found it difficult to get back to employment. The SIF Work Ready West programme enables me to return to full-time

employment. It has opened doors to other opportunities to allow me to develop my skills, knowledge and further my educational outcomes. It has given me back my self-worth as a person and allowed me to contribute to society."

A director of Women's Aid at the launch in Enniskillen, which I attended, said they had availed themselves of a young woman from the programme. She is now doing good work on their increasing workload tackling domestic violence. This project is hardly a "slush fund" for paramilitaries.

11.00 am

In conclusion, there was extensive voluntary input to the consultation and engagement on and delivery of the SIF programme. The model represented a unique and innovative joined-up approach to tackling disadvantage and enhancing prosperity. There were robust departmental governance and financial checks in place to manage public funds and deliver agreed outcomes effectively. The Opposition parties criticised that the money was not being distributed quickly enough. Now they are criticising that it is going out to good causes. That is a case of opposition for opposition's sake. We oppose the motion.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion, which calls for an independent review of the social investment fund and, in particular, scrutiny of the role of the lead partners.

I want to look at the timeline of the social investment fund. It was first announced in March 2011, shortly before an election. I have to be cynical about the timing of that. Was that to try to affect a political process? Right from the outset, it was not a good start. Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the plan was to spend £40 million in resource and £40 million in capital expenditure to improve deprived communities by addressing poverty, unemployment and physical deterioration — all very laudable objectives.

At that time, however, the former Department for Social Development had responsibility for the neighbourhood renewal programme — indeed, the Department for Communities continues to provide that — helping many of the disadvantaged areas that we are talking about. Of course, the programme's remit could have been widened and new criteria could have been set down so that it could have administered such a fund, but, perhaps for political reasons, Sinn Féin and the DUP did not want to give that

responsibility and funding to an SDLP Minister, who was the person in charge of the Department at that time. That should not be the reason that public money is directed one way or the other. Rather, it should be used in a way that is based on probity and models of good practice.

Of course, there was also the peace process model, through which we had local strategic partnerships between councils and the community and voluntary sector. Expertise had been built up in that area, and processes that had been built up were rigorous. Why was that model not considered?

The reform of local government was also starting to take place. Such a fund could easily have been passed to the existing councils, empowering councillors moving forward. Why therefore were some of the existing processes and expertise not used instead of the scheme that we are discussing today? That is a big question that has to be answered.

Two years later, in 2013, some £389,000 had been spent, largely on administration, but no schemes had been delivered. It was revealed by 'The Detail' that that was because there was a dispute between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Another year later, in October 2014, the then OFMDFM Committee was advised that, three and a half years after the fund's inception, £34.4 million had finally been allocated, but the expenditure had to be re-profiled from the initial period up to 2015 to a new period from 2014 to 2018. That means that there was at least a three-year delay, and, in that period, disadvantaged communities were not assisted. That needs to be reviewed. What was going wrong? That is worthy of a review in itself.

Commenting on the themes of poverty, unemployment and physical deterioration, my party, in its response to the consultation, said:

"Whilst these themes are commendable, they should mainly be dealt with through the administration of routine government practices."

If that advice had been followed, we would not be in the mess that we are in today.

There are really good schemes in the middle of this. In particular, I pick up on the capital improvements to Sure Start programmes. I am involved in Sure Start, and I know that the money will be very well spent in improving the lot of young children. Therefore, there are many laudable schemes. The trouble is that

there are flawed processes. The fund could have been even better.

Sir Alistair Graham, the former chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, stated that the social investment fund:

"doesn't stand up to the principles that are generally held to be appropriate for the awarding of public contracts."

Others have spotted that there is something wrong here. Where is the value —

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. Both of us represent East Antrim. Mr Beggs, you referred to Sure Start. Do you agree that there is a growing frustration among long-standing community and voluntary organisations, which have taken government funds from local authorities over long periods and have programmes that are well tried and tested, that they are faced with so-called pop-up community organisations?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: I agree entirely with the Member. When there are short-term schemes, there is a danger of not leaving an ongoing legacy behind.

There have been training and employment schemes in most areas. I am certainly aware of the scheme in the east Antrim area and have heard positive news from individuals who have been involved in it. In the training and employment project in east Belfast, £1.7 million was allocated to the lead party, Charter NI, but OFMDFM said that only £1.5 million is handed on to deliver the service. What I have not heard is what happens to the £200,000 that is creamed off by Charter NI. How does it justify the £200,000 expenditure that it receives? It would be much better if that £200,000 was spent directly on providing additional training and services for communities in need.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Beggs: That whole process is flawed, which is why we need an independent review. At the very least, the Audit Office should look at it and learn lessons so that it never happens again.

Ms Mallon: I support the motion.

"[A] 'network-closure', with some favoured organisations being hand-picked by politicians to plan and implement some of the fund's work."

That is a description of the social investment fund. It is not the words of the SDLP but is as reported in the final research report on the independence of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland by the Building Change Trust and Ulster University, which was published just a fortnight ago. That same academic report, which was based on interviews with government officials, CEOs and a range of individuals in the sector, identified as a major concern the:

"overly close relationship between politicians and some voluntary and community sector organisations."

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Mallon: Yes.

Ms S Bradley: Does the Member accept that there are some very good organisations receiving SIF money? So far, those who have spoken in defence of the process have completely ignored the point and tried to ride on the good reputational position that those organisations hold in the community.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute. Beidh nóiméad breise ag an Chomhalta.

Ms Mallon: The Member is absolutely correct, and I will specifically address that issue in my contribution.

As I said, in that academic independent research report, the social investment fund is specifically singled out as a crystallised example of that cosy relationship. Its singling out should come as a surprise to no one. The social investment fund is a masterclass in how not to manage something politically. It was blighted by delay and is now mired in controversy.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister and their Back-Benchers are trying furiously to peddle the myth — we heard it again today — that the blame for the controversy lies with those of us in the House and outside it who have the audacity to ask legitimate and valid questions about the openness and transparency, or lack of it, of the social investment fund. Their second tactic is to try to distract everyone from the reality of that lack of

openness and transparency by accusing all of us who ask those questions of deriding and demeaning all the community and voluntary organisations and projects involved in SIF. Let me unequivocally deal with both those failing tactics.

Time and again, my party colleagues and I have been on record recognising and acknowledging that there are good organisations with good individuals doing great work. We are supportive of those projects. Our issue is not with them; our issue is with the process. We have been on record as far back as 2011 raising concerns about the process, and the continual failure by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to address those concerns left our members, in all but one of the steering groups, with no option but to resign.

The social investment fund is mired in controversy. The public do not have any confidence or trust in its operation, not because of the Opposition but because of the approach of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the way in which they have handled this. It has been crystallised in their lack of courage in standing up to Dee Stitt, a self-confessed UDA boss and the CEO of an organisation that was handed £1.7 million of public money to administer and given half a million pounds for doing so. It is not the Opposition or the media who have called into question SIF and all associated with it; it is the silence from our First Minister and the weakness of our deputy First Minister in the face of Dee Stitt.

The First Minister cites employability legislation as the reason why she cannot get involved, but she is perfectly entitled as the First Minister to express her opinion on whether she believes that he is fit to hold office. She refuses to do so. Why? Almost two months on, the First Minister and deputy First Minister continue to refuse to answer a question that I posed, asking them to list all the organisations that applied to the social investment fund, the organisations that were successful and the funding awarded for each project. Why?

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have been asked to publish the minutes of the steering group meetings. They still have not done so. Why? They have been asked to publish the register of interests completed by all steering group members. They still have not done so. Why? They have been asked to outline clearly the value added by Charter NI to the employability project being delivered by GEMS, given the huge administration fee that it is receiving for it. They refuse to do so. Why?

The House is aware of the controversy and the difficulty that I have had in having my questions for urgent oral answer on this matter heard, and, in advance of today, our amendment calling for a review of the social investment fund process by the Audit Office, along with other amendments, was refused. Why? What is there to fear from an Audit Office review? If all is as the First Minister and deputy First Minister say, they shall be vindicated and its critics will be silenced, but they continue to run away. Let me reassure them that, for as long as they continue to run away, those of us who believe in openness and transparency will not go away. Of that, Mr McGuinness and Mrs Foster can rest assured.

Mr Irwin: I believe that the social investment fund is a very important funding stream for communities right across Northern Ireland, and that includes my constituency of Newry and Armagh. Many Members will be aware of the fantastic plans being processed for a new community hall and changing rooms at Kilcluney, which is on Mowhan Road in Markethill. In my view, as the town has not, historically, had the same investment in sports and facilities as other towns in the greater Armagh district, the forward thinking, perseverance and persistence of members of the Kilcluney hub committee have to be commended. The significant efforts of the hub members have ensured that the town not only has a state-of-the-art 3G playing surface with floodlights but will soon have a brand new sizeable community hall and changing rooms to service this fantastic full-size sports pitch, all within walking distance of the town. I refer to that project specifically because I am passionate about what SIF will ultimately deliver when the project is complete. Without SIF, this programme in Markethill would not have had the opportunity of this important investment.

I rather feel that the nature of the motion seeks to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It appears that the Opposition have latched on to one single matter relating to an individual in an organisation and are now moving to focus their indignation on the entire social investment fund programme. That is very unfortunate, and it is very unhelpful to the hundreds of people involved in managing SIF projects and targeting need in their communities.

When I was liaising with members of the public and speaking with groups about various matters relating to SIF, I certainly never got the sense that the process was in any way easy; rather, there was definitely a real sense that the funding process was rigorous and that it was designed to ensure that projects were

meticulously planned and that all the necessary procedures and protocols were in place to ensure that projects would be managed to completion and operated to a high standard.

That is without doubt what groups were relaying to me on the ground.

11.15 am

The fact that the Alliance Party has called into question the very formation of this programme is such a shame, given the countless hours that have been exhausted by hard-working members of the public and steering groups right across the Province, targeting need and working tirelessly to ensure that projects of real and lasting value are processed. Mr Ford has said that there was never a need for this funding. What a ridiculous statement, and what an affront to the volunteers and groups across the Province. Indeed, Alliance and the Ulster Unionist Party have called it a slush fund, yet I am very sure that we will have members of each party attend the various opening events when projects are completed. What hypocrisy. I will be interested to see in my constituency which members of other parties attend these opening events.

I say to the House that the House's combined community effort on the social investment fund must be supported. Any issues regarding particular individuals must, of course, be handled in an appropriate fashion with due regard to the law and process. That has already been made crystal clear by our First Minister. The social investment fund remains a valuable programme of support for communities, and, with important work ongoing, deadlines being set and contractors being appointed across many projects, there must not be any delay in this programme.

Mr McGuigan: I rise to oppose the motion, and I do so for a number of reasons. The first of these reasons is that, unlike my colleague to the left, I cannot agree with the assumption that there is deep public concern out there. That just does not stack up in my eyes. I know that I do not live in east Belfast, but I do speak to people, and, in the conversations that I have had with the public, with constituents and with friends, not once has the issue of the social investment fund been raised to me by them.

I do get that the Opposition have a role to fulfil and need to raise issues to make themselves relevant. They have valiantly tried to use this issue to do so. I have listened to them ask the questions, make their points and table their

debates frenetically like a disorientated boxer swinging wildly for all his might and hoping to get lucky and land that knockout punch, but I also have listened to answers from Ministers and others who have responded to all of this with cold, hard facts. The facts say that SIF was consulted on five years ago. In fact, as the deputy First Minister said in answer to one of those questions in this House:

"It is one of the most consulted-on programmes that we have ever been involved in. The process has been open and transparent." — [Official Report (Hansard), 21 November 2016, p30, col 1].

The facts state that all the major parties in this Chamber took part in a process not just around the formation but, in the intervening five years, in the implementation and operation of SIF. As has already been mentioned, they have released the congratulatory press statements and stood in the congratulatory photographs.

SIF is different from other funds. Its delivery model represents a unique, innovative and joined-up approach to tackling disadvantage and enhancing prosperity. That approach of bottom-up engagement with stakeholders from across the community, statutory, business and political spectrums in the steering group demonstrates confidence in the collaborative approach to identifying and delivering what local communities want and need. I also accept that all organisations that benefit from SIF funding are subject to all the normal checks and balances of public funding constraints.

I do not want to ignore the fact that there is a difficulty around an individual in east Belfast, but I have to say that the social investment fund goes far beyond east Belfast. I do not want to — as others in the Chamber seem to want to do — let that individual distract from what the social investment fund is all about, nor do I want to allow either that individual or Members of the House to put a halt to the good work of the social investment fund, which is helping people's lives right across the North. That is the second reason why I will oppose the motion. The social investment fund is not about an individual or an organisation in east Belfast. It is an investment fund that is designed and targeted to support some of our most disadvantaged communities by increasing employment opportunities, by tackling issues such as mental and physical health, by increasing and improving community services and facilities and by addressing dereliction to make areas more appealing for investment.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGuigan: Go ahead.

Mr Dickson: The Member makes reference to the fact that the fund delivers employability, improvements and the other things that he has just mentioned, but does he not accept and understand that that is already being done and has been done successfully by bona fide and tried-and-tested methodologies? Does he not genuinely understand when he is opposing the motion, that on the motion and the subject that we are talking around, there is deep public concern? Clearly, he seems to be wishing to ignore that public concern.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. I remind Members that, if an intervention is given, it should be brief.

Mr McGuigan: Go raibh maith agat. I have addressed the issue of "deep public concern", which, I think, is imaginary.

I should have thanked the research facility for putting together this information pack. It quite clearly demonstrates that the social investment fund is an additional fund, going beyond what has already been provided and married towards that, to give added impetus to socially deprived communities.

As I was saying, while the Opposition want to talk about something that was decided upon a number of years ago, I want to support the targeted £80 million of funding going to socially deprived communities: £44 million to improving 116 premises and £35 million to employment, education, early years intervention and the social economy, mental health provision, fuel poverty and community capacity. I look through the projects across the nine delivery zones of the social investment fund and wonder which of those projects the Opposition think should be halted or stopped. The social investment fund is a noble attempt to address years of underinvestment, and its delivery is making an impact. That is why I support it and wholeheartedly want it to continue.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to contribute as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office.

At the outset, I want to focus on the reference to "deep public concern" in the first line of the motion. Of course, I expect nothing less than such negative spin from the Alliance Party, which seeks to add further sensationalism and headline-grabbing to this already "Nolanised" and anti-Assembly BBC non-issue.

Much has been made, and will be made, of the role of Mr Stitt and Charter NI in the context of the social investment fund, but the reality is that it is such an insignificant part of the matter that it could not be further from the melodramatic "deep public concern" referred to. I would like to move on from the pessimism that many Members seek to bring to the Floor and focus on the optimistic, constructive and successful social investment fund. I would also like to take this opportunity to remind the Alliance Members, naysayers and doom merchants that their members have been involved in the consultation process and continue to be involved on the steering groups.

Some £3.3 million has been invested into the West Belfast Works project, which has supported people from the Shankill and west Belfast into employment. We have had £1 million invested in the Bridges Family Practice in east Belfast, to regenerate that rundown facility and make provision for a modern family medical practice. We have had £920,000 to deliver an extension to Fermanagh House in Enniskillen, which will help to provide facilities for community groups and support education and social projects across the county. In my constituency, South Antrim, the £3.3 million invested in the Building Employment through Education project, the £0.8 million in the Access to Employment project, the £1 million in the community mental health and well-being project and the £1.8 million in the fuel poverty project are all delivering for and on behalf of my constituents.

Those examples of investment show clear and tangible results, based on outcomes, of how the social investment fund is working as an effective vehicle to deliver social change. To intimate that there is anything else or give a broad-brush-stroke painting of it as a cover for paramilitarism is, frankly, a slap in the face to those communities that have bought into the process.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cameron: No, thank you.

Those 800 people who are now in paid work placements and training, the 1,300 children and families that have gained assistance and support and the 1,000 children being helped by education projects are clear evidence that the fund is providing the results that it set out to achieve. The community buy-in to the fund is central to its ongoing success. Without that commitment, the fund would have been managed in a top-down manner and, given that it aims to reach out to those in the most

disadvantaged areas and who experience the greatest disengagement, I feel that that simply would not have worked. Through tackling educational underachievement and the physical regeneration and refurbishment of community facilities, and through dealing with issues such as substance abuse and poor mental health, the fund engages at grass roots and seeks to join up government services with community-based schemes.

I understand fully, and do not mean to sound in any way patronising, that, with Assembly business schedules, we can at times forget that there are swathes of people who are disenfranchised and overlooked. We cannot let those people fall between the cracks and must create effective engagement between the decisions we make in this place and how that filters through onto the ground.

Good governance is, of course, vital to the success of the project and I am satisfied that the organisations that are receiving funding are operating with the appropriate structures, processes and policies required by the social investment fund. I am further satisfied that the Department is carrying out the correct checks and audits to ensure that funding is being administered in the proper manner.

In closing, I recognise that the social investment fund has had delays in getting up and running but is now successfully and effectively delivering real change to communities. My fear is that any review, at this point, would severely impact on these projects going forward. The limit on public finances has meant that we have had to look for innovative and inventive ways to get best value for money for the people of Northern Ireland. The social investment fund is providing community involvement and, simultaneously, tackling some of our greatest social problems. We must look beyond the headlines and see the bigger picture. Rather than pick holes and gripe, we must see the benefits that the social investment fund is delivering currently and will continue to bring in the future.

Mr Kennedy: It is important that we have the opportunity to debate this important issue before we break for the Christmas recess. I think that we have already heard that there are some in the House who would rather the issue was not on the agenda.

The social investment fund was intended to bring relief and hope to some of our most deprived communities. That, in itself, is a very noble thing and is supported by the majority of Members but I am afraid that it has descended

into controversy and not a little farce. Whilst there are those who feel the need to try to muddy the waters today and portray valid scrutiny and criticism as an attack on those whom the fund was supposed to help, that is not the case, as those who are slinging that mud are well aware. It is at times like this that the Executive parties reveal how thin their skin is.

This issue at stake today is not the idea or concept that addressing areas of deprivation throughout our country is in any way wrong; rather it is the maximum control freakery with which the SIF was planned and prepared by the DUP and Sinn Féin. I am happy to acknowledge the very valuable projects that SIF has supported, including the project in my constituency that was referred to earlier. I have actively supported and encouraged such projects. I pay tribute to those involved in working at the Kilcluney hub at Markethill. I feel more than entitled to attend events at Kilcluney, whether opening events or other events, because I have supported that fully and will continue to do so. We are not criticising the efforts of those at local community level. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, we are saying that we have legitimate concerns around the control freakery exercised by the funding Department, OFMDFM, now called the Executive Office.

Ms Lockhart: Thank you. As someone who sat on the southern zone, will the Member agree that his colleague Colin McCusker sat on that board, scrutinised everything and was very, very content with the projects that went forward from the southern zone?

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

Mr Kennedy: Clearly, the Member is in winter wonderland if she thinks that Colin McCusker or any representative from the Ulster Unionist Party would do otherwise, because, at community level, that is what supporting communities is about. We do not see anything wrong with, or strange about, people behaving in that fashion, but Colin McCusker — *[Interruption.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr Kennedy: — among others, was a minority voice.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members not to be making comments from sedentary positions.

Mr Wells: He is having his cake and eating it.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I also ask Members not to challenge the authority of the Chair.

Mr Kennedy: The Member is young and inexperienced. *[Laughter.]* We should be abundantly clear that the mess in this has been with the establishment of the process. The public have been let down, and I think the defensiveness of the DUP and Sinn Féin reveals that they themselves know that.

11.30 am

The social investment fund has come under intense scrutiny over the past number of months, particularly focusing on one individual. However, it is important to remember that concerns about the design and management of the process were raised as far back as 2011. In our response to the consultation on the proposed social investment fund in 2011, the Ulster Unionist Party raised concerns. We identified problems with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister being solely responsible for identifying groups and individuals to form the steering groups, which, even at that time, perpetuated the feeling that the social investment fund could be used as a slush fund by the DUP and Sinn Féin.

It became clear, prior to the Assembly election, that the then First Minister and deputy First Minister could not give the money away. In January of this year, when officials from the Department appeared before the Committee, they revealed that the actual spend had been only £4 million of an available £80 million. January 2016 was 10 months on from the original date on which the social investment fund was supposed to finish. Is that not embarrassing?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I will give way briefly.

Mr Beggs: In my constituency, there was to be a scheme to address fuel poverty. Is the Member surprised to learn that funding has only recently been allocated? I am unaware of how much money, if any, has been spent on upgrading properties.

Mr Kennedy: Nothing, frankly, surprises me about the management of this at the top political level. This is not a criticism of people on the ground who have spent their own time

on effecting positive change in communities. I pay tribute to that work.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Kennedy: We are about getting a proper inquiry into the mess in the formulation of the process.

Mr Boylan: I will speak against the motion. I declare an interest as a member of the steering group in the southern zone. I want to pick up on some points that have been made. I agree with Carla Lockhart: Colin McCusker was part of the process from the very start and had the same input as anybody else.

Let me tell those who were not on any of the steering groups that all members had the same input. Many Members spoke about the good work that this money will do, yet still and all they attack the process.

I was going to speak positively at the start of my contribution about the social investment fund, because good work will be done and the money will be well spent. I can only speak about the work that we did on the southern steering group —

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: I want to make this point first; I will let you in in a minute.

The motion talks about public concern, but I have not heard any public concern. Far be it from me to pick on Belfast, but are we saying that we are going to look right across the North of this island and criticise all the groups because there is an issue that people have raised with a Belfast group? I am not going to speak any more about what has happened, because there has been enough talk about it.

I heard issues raised in some of the radio interviews from this morning and last week, and hopefully I will have time to pick up on them. Last year, the Alliance Party called for the money to be allocated in a hurry for other projects. There was a motion tabled by Chris Lyttle, Judith Cochrane and Stewart Dickson on the issue. The intervention by Roy Beggs in Stewart Dickson's speech was interesting. Stewart Dickson was saying that there are groups already doing this work and asking why should they not undertake it. The fund was to provide added value and be a strategic intervention to help groups that have not been supported.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No, I have to let somebody else in in a minute.

That is what it was about. I represent people in my area who have not had money or interventions. What did Mr Beggs say? He started talking about lead partners. On the one hand, he said that giving work to certain lead partners would cream off the money, but, on the other hand, he asked why the money was not given to councils and other groups that had done such work. The southern steering group has given the lead to Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and to Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, which have the capacity to deliver these programmes. Mr Beggs, hold on a minute.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I hear quite firmly from the Executive spokespeople here today that there is such confidence in the process. Could you then explain the tremor that exists when an independent review is mentioned?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. Beidh nóiméad breise ag an Chomhalta.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. There is no tremor at all here. The thing about it is this: your colleague sat on a group with me and agreed the projects and, no doubt, will turn up for photographs when they are presented. There is no tremor —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address his comments through the Chair.

Mr Boylan: Sorry, through you — *[Interruption.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members not to be making comments from a sedentary position.

Mr Boylan: The Member is talking about an independent process, and her colleague talked about an audit. If you genuinely think that I am going to support a process to delay this, after spending four years with all those people bringing these projects forward, there is not a chance.

In answer to your question: no, it is not a fear of an independent process. We have now discussed this with these groups, and these

groups are looking forward to this money being spent. Mr Beggs.

Mr Beggs: The Member indicated that, on some projects, local councils acted as lead bodies. Why has that process not been followed everywhere? How can you justify £200,000 being paid to one lead body, and the project that is actually delivering the funding and helping people on the ground has, I understand, an additional £300,000 of public funding for administration? Almost a third of the project funding went on administration, and fewer people were helped on the ground than should have been.

Mr Boylan: Through you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Why did you not ask your colleagues or some of your representatives on those groups? That is the question. *[Interruption.]* It was interesting what the debate was over the last couple of days. Mr Ford was on last Friday, I think, and he talked about Mr Lyttle going on some of the groups. He was asked why he put him on the groups. I was thinking to myself, "Was Mr Lyttle on that group with eyes wide shut or was it for look-see or whatever?". He had the opportunity, as a steering group member, to ask questions. Paula Bradshaw was on this morning as well. Every one of us who went on the groups signed a memorandum. The rules state:

"a member must disclose any potential conflict of interest on joining the steering group and if they arise during the course of the membership, to disclose them at any point in time."

The other key point for members on a group states:

"a steering group shall be aware that the Department is required to adopt and implement policies and practices to safeguard itself against fraud and irregularity."

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Boylan: And:

"All cases of attempted, suspected or proven fraud shall be reported by the steering group to the Department or relevant authority as soon as they are discovered."

So, there was ample opportunity for people, if they thought there were issues, to raise them. I

did not see any issues, so I will not be supporting the motion.

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

Mr Poots: I do not stand here today to defend the social investment fund; I stand here today to commend it. I hope that the Executive Office has the will to do a SIF2 because SIF has been doing wonderful work out there.

It has been targeted by a small number of people who have gone after one individual, who made a stupid and flippant remark, which means that everybody who has benefited from SIF is now the target of individuals in this Chamber who are acting out of political interests and not in the public interest in this instance.

I note all that the Alliance Party have been saying. I note that in North Down council, for example, Alderman Wilson, who is an Alliance person, chaired a SIF meeting on 7 May 2013. In attendance were none other than David Stitt and Robert Scott, and those members were congratulated on the informative presentation on the progress of the Kilcooley Sports Forum project business plan.

That was a meeting chaired by the Alliance Party. Also in attendance was one Councillor Muir. He seemed to pay a lot of attention to these things, because he was in attendance at another meeting when it was discussed, on 7 October 2014. Again, Councillor Wilson was there. He attended a further meeting, on 14 October 2015, which was chaired by none other than Councillor Armstrong, who, I think, is the same Kellie Armstrong who is now in this Assembly.

Here we have the Alliance Party, taking a full part in the process and giving the money to an organisation headed up by Mr Stitt, and they did not have an issue. They were in the meetings commending them — commending Mr Stitt for his wonderful work — and here they are today, complaining because of one stupid, flippant remark.

Let me be very clear: the work that is being done by the communities is excellent work. Mrs Long, at the invitation of her Alliance Party councillors, was to come to Lisburn last week and see the work that is going on with the Resurgam initiative, but, on the very day that she was to come, she cancelled, claiming that she had a conflict of interest because she was going to be participating in today's debate, wherever she is. How is it a conflict of interest

to come and see what is happening on the ground? If she had bothered to come and see what is happening on the ground, she would have seen initiatives that involve youth work. She would have seen buildings being put up in deprived communities that are making a tangible difference. Mr Lunn knows what is going on in the Lisburn community. He knows the benefit. When there is something taking place in Resurgam, Alliance Party councillors are tripping over themselves to get into photographs and everything else to be associated with it, but Mrs Long decided to pull out.

Let me tell you about one of the key initiatives that is happening in Lisburn, and that is the early years initiative. I commend it to every constituency in Northern Ireland. We identified a serious problem with the educational tail, where young people were not achieving at the higher end, and those young people are now being targeted at nursery and in early primary years. Money from SIF is going into speech therapy, having been channelled through Resurgam. Resurgam could have kept the money, but it is being channelled through the schools. As a consequence, those children are coming to school ready and able to take on the lessons. They will not form the educational tail that there has been in deprived working-class loyalist areas very often. I commend those kinds of initiatives.

Today, we have heard politicians from all over — Mr Kennedy and others — talk about the great projects that have been happening yet say that it is a terrible fund that is delivering them. The truth is that this is a hypocritical motion from a hypocritical party. SIF is doing great work. It is doing wonderful work. I want to see it going forward. Instead of targeting it because of one individual making a stupid comment, let us look at the good that is coming out of it. The same people did not have anything to say when, through neighbourhood renewal and all sorts of things, ex-prisoners' groups were getting the money, which was going to republican areas six or seven times more —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Poots: — than it was to loyalist areas. It is funny that, when it is money coming to loyalist areas — I am proud to be a loyalist by the way: loyal to the Queen and loyal to my country — the Alliance Party is complaining.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Claire Hanna, I have to let the Member know that she has two minutes.

Ms Hanna: OK. My colleague Nichola Mallon has outlined our consistent concerns about the process: the lack of open tender; the consistently opaque responses of OFMDFM; and the multi-layered and unresolved conflict of interest. It is worth saying that Government contributor after Government contributor was throwing up as straw men the good projects that we have all acknowledged here and immorally using them for cover. Each one of you has failed to acknowledge the substantive concerns that have been raised by many people and that are acknowledged in the deep concern in the DUP's own amendment that it tabled.

The fact is that the flaws are not oversights in the process. They are doing exactly what, as Mr McGuinness said last month, the fund was designed to do, which is to hand money to the Executive's preferred partners. It is the character of those preferred partners that is troubling very many people. We are told that groups are in transition but with absolutely no deadline for when they are supposed to become former paramilitaries. It is true, of course, that just because you have a past does not mean that you cannot have a future, but you cannot expect to be paid to be the future while simultaneously being the past.

We all voted in 1998 for paramilitary prisoners to be reintegrated. We did not vote for the elitism and patronage that has happened since and that has elevated people above their neighbourhoods. Sending those same neighbours to those people for renewal advice and employment advice is cruel. Two decades after the ceasefires, with most people much longer out of jail than they were in, the time for rewards for good behaviour is long since over. Therefore, as much as being anything about the process, this is about the failing of the Executive to tackle paramilitarism and the out-of-date group think of co-opting the troublemakers in order to make a them a permanent part of our community infrastructure. We are supposed to be —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Hanna: — giving money to people who are consistently good examples to their communities.

Toy soldier Dee Stitt is absolutely not that. If you will not face down that man, how can we have any confidence that you will face down hundreds of other paramilitaries?

11.45 am

Mr Ross (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Following the considerable media attention that has been given to SIF in recent weeks, it was inevitable that a motion such as this would be tabled. Of course it is the role of the Assembly to scrutinise Executive programmes, but it is concerning that it seems to be in response to what could be described as sensationalist and at times ill-informed media commentary on the social investment fund project. It is deeply unfortunate that recent media coverage focusing mainly on one individual has proven to be a distraction from what is in reality an innovative government project that is changing communities and lives across Northern Ireland. It is a project that is about communities identifying their needs and how to address them, rather than a top-down government approach that imposes solutions on communities. Before I address the points raised in the motion, I want to highlight some of the valuable opportunities that SIF provides to people in need and the very positive impact that it has on people's lives.

The social investment fund is now in full delivery mode, with all projects prioritised by local steering groups approved and funding committed in zonal budgets. A total of 68 projects will be delivered: 49 capital projects that will make improvements to 115 individual premises and 19 revenue-focused projects primarily on support for employment, early intervention and education as well as mental health, community capacity, transport, social economy and fuel poverty. Whilst the projects committed are at various stages of the delivery cycle, significant progress has been made over the last 18 months, with many projects now at delivery stage. As a result, 42 projects worth £54 million have commenced and 16 projects worth £27 million are operational. Five capital projects have completed their construction works and are providing vital services in local communities.

I had the enormous privilege of opening the Bridges Family Practice in east Belfast, which has totally transformed a once-derelict and unused Bryson Street surgery on the Newtownards Road into a state-of-the-art health centre that is accessible to everyone in the local community. The extension to Fermanagh House in Enniskillen has also been officially opened by the First Minister and junior

Minister Fearon. That SIF investment has transformed the property into a larger, more spacious environment with the capacity to offer increased services to local people and provide a one-stop shop. It will make a really positive difference to people in that community.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I will be brief. He will be aware that Charter NI's website lists its funding organisations, which include not only the Government but Belfast City Council, the Housing Executive and a Department that, up until six months ago, was under the control of the Alliance Party. Does he agree that, if there was some vast conspiracy involving a slush fund, the Alliance Party was obviously part of it?

Mr Ross: That point about hypocrisy and who has funded that organisation has been well made and aired over recent weeks. However, I do not want to focus on one organisation because that does a disservice to the entire social investment fund. I want to make progress because I have a lot to get through and do not have a lot of time.

I want to talk about some of the other projects, such as the West Lisburn Community Centre, which is also being completed. It is being transformed into a dedicated youth facility. It is modelled on current youth development centres such as those in Laurelhill and the Colin area. It contains a range of spaces, such as a sports hall, drop-in facilities, group rooms, art space and kitchen facilities. Those new facilities allow the centre to become a safe environment where the community can centralise its youth activities and young people can develop and interact. Youth provision will expand due to the increased capacity of the centre and an increased ability to operate projects from a dedicated youth facility.

Only a few weeks ago, I went down to visit the Lanyon tunnels project with my colleague junior Minister Fearon and the Lord Mayor of Belfast to see how innovative solutions can reinvigorate a part of the city that has lain derelict for many years and can connect local communities to the city centre. That is a great example of thinking outside the box in projects.

Those are only some of the valuable projects that capital investment from SIF has brought to local communities. There are many more. To date, over 6,000 participants are engaged in social investment fund revenue projects. They are local people whom we are supporting in key areas such as employment, early intervention and education across all of Northern Ireland.

We are investing £18.5 million in employment-focused projects and supporting over 1,300 people through training and paid work placements. These place local people with local employers, and over 100 people have already secured full-time jobs out of it. They credit their success directly to their engagement with SIF projects, particularly as most of the jobs are with SIF project employers. One of the projects, Work Ready West in the western zone, has just completed its interim evaluation and demonstrated real examples of people turning their life around as a result of the intervention received. Thirty-one individuals have left the project to date, and, of those, 20 have moved into employment or self-employment. That is a 65% success rate, which shows just how much impact the project is making. In addition, local people are openly speaking at events to demonstrate how much the project has impacted on their lives. One of the participants spoke about how her children felt that they had a different mother since she had been on the placement. Having been out of work for several years, she acknowledged that she had no confidence or self-belief and could not even attempt to apply for a job. She spoke about how straightforward the process was of securing a placement and how the ongoing support from the employer and the project officers had truly changed her life and that of her family. I have had the opportunity to visit a number of employability projects in south Belfast, west Belfast and Portadown, and I was able to speak to people who have been encouraged back into work, set up their own business and been given the confidence to try to make a difference and move on in their life.

Some £5.7 million is also being invested in early intervention projects across the SIF zones, providing a range of family support interventions in schools and communities to support physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. Over 2,000 participants are already availing themselves of the services, and many are sharing positive examples of how the support has helped them.

One of the other key areas in which SIF funds focus support is education. One project is now operational, with another two due to become operational over the coming months. That equates to over £5.5 million of investment in educational support to improve the life chances of those who need it most. Over 3,000 people are already engaged in support from the projects being rolled out, including improving educational skills to create greater employment opportunities; dedicated maths and English support at Key Stage 2 and 3; literacy support

for primary-school children; and family support to better integrate schools and communities.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ross: I am not giving way.

I want to emphasise those points because the social investment fund really is making a difference to people's lives and benefiting communities. The negative press coverage and the continued focus on a process that was openly consulted on and finalised on the basis of the outcome of that consultation continue to distract from the real value that the programme brings, which is, as I have said, a shame.

I will address some of the points raised. First, the motion refers to the:

"deep public concern regarding the formation, implementation and operation of the social investment fund".

The fact that some opposition politicians have welcomed SIF projects in their own area, sat on steering groups or turned up smiling for photographs, whilst choosing to criticise the fund, is a point that will not be missed by the general public.

Let me make it absolutely clear to the House that the development and final operation of the fund was the subject of in-depth public consultation. Not only was a pre-discussion paper published for public comment but this was followed by a formal public consultation process that included public events, an online questionnaire and the option to provide written responses. Almost 600 people engaged in the process and provided views on how SIF should operate. That included views on how steering groups should be selected and how the programme should be delivered.

I emphasise that the Department took the process very seriously, and the final programme that emerged was the direct result of what the public told us they wanted. On the establishment of steering groups, for example, 48% of respondents preferred option 4: the then Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister would invite groups and individuals to indicate interest in serving on the steering group. Subsequently, that was the approach that was adopted. Similarly, when asked about the delivery method, 72% preferred option 2, the community option: resources would be allocated directly to one or more organisations nominated by the steering group, and they, in turn, would deploy those resources to projects

included in the strategic area plan. Again, that was the approach adopted. I have to come to the conclusion that it is contradictory to imply that there is "deep public concern" about the "formation, implementation and operation" of a fund when its operation is based on exactly what people told us, as part of the public consultation, they wanted.

The motion also refers to an:

"independent review of the operation of the entire social investment fund process".

The Office of Government Commerce developed the gateway review process for projects and introduced it across government as part of the modernisation agenda to support the delivery of improved public services. That process has been operating since January 2001. The gateway review process is a series of short, focused, independent peer reviews at key stages of a project or programme. The review highlights risks and issues that, if not addressed, would threaten successful delivery. The reviews are carried out by a team of experienced people who are independent of the project or programme team and were chosen because of their relevant skills.

All reviewers have to go through an accreditation process and training. The social investment fund programme has undergone no fewer than four gateway reviews, commencing in 2011-12 and continuing as the programme has developed, with recommendations from each review being implemented. We are in the process of preparing to undergo a fifth gateway review as part of the ongoing quality assurance of that programme.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ross: I will not give way because I have very little time left.

If people want government to be innovative in policymaking, it requires continual review and adaptation and an agile response, and this is an example of the type of innovative project that government has tried to do. It is also worth saying that all government programmes are subject to internal and external audit, and SIF is no different from any other programme.

As I said, the decision to adopt a lead partner approach was a direct result of the consultation responses in which the public selected this as a preferred delivery option. The lead partner has an oversight role to lead and manage the procurement of delivery agents and their

resulting contract. It also reports to and draws down funding from the Department in respect of the project. This approach is not specific to SIF; it is an approach used in other programmes and funding schemes as well. It is a perfectly legitimate way of providing project oversight and ensuring that the original thinking behind the project is never lost sight of in the process of development and delivery. This oversight role is quite distinct from that of a project delivery that has been implemented through open public competitive procurement.

The motion also talks about the impact that the lead partner role has had on good governance. Good governance, of course, is a fundamental part of government funding, whether there is a lead partner approach or alternative delivery methods. As we have confirmed on many previous occasions and, indeed, as was acknowledged by an Alliance MLA on the radio this morning, a robust process is in place in relation to all social investment fund projects and, indeed, any departmental funding to ensure the capability of lead partners and delivery organisations to manage public money and manage a project prior to any funding commitments being given. All projects are required to have an approved business case that takes account of advice from accountants and economists. There are also robust vouching and verification processes in place to ensure that projects are delivering and that finances are being allocated appropriately. We take good governance incredibly seriously, and we have the necessary checks and balances in place to ensure that money can be properly accounted for. I cannot, therefore, see how the lead partner role has had any impact on good governance.

I would like to pay tribute to all the people and communities involved in the development and delivery of social investment projects. I regret that the ongoing, unwarranted criticism is taking away from their dedication, hard work and genuine success in improving people's lives. Some are willing to ignore this good work and risk tarnishing the good name of the individuals and organisations working to improve the quality of life of some of our most deprived communities. Others have welcomed initiatives in their own areas and acknowledged the positive impact that a project is having whilst, at the same time, going on the airwaves to criticise the programme. We have had more of that in the Chamber today. One could be forgiven for thinking that Members support the programme but not those who thought it up.

SIF is an innovative and community-led approach to addressing long-term issues

associated with poverty, unemployment and physical deterioration. It is an example of government trying something new and working in a genuine partnership with local communities. It is also a project that is transforming and will continue to transform communities and the lives of people right across Northern Ireland. This is exactly why councillors, MLAs and MPs from Alliance, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party turn up to support SIF projects in their local areas. It is exactly why a UUP member of the Executive Office Committee last week described the local SIF project in his area as very successful and said that he was happy to support it. It is exactly why the House should reject this motion.

Dr Farry: At the outset, I want to say that this is a valid and legitimate debate. It is shining a spotlight on what is in effect a DUP and Sinn Féin scandal. I want to thank those who have spoken in favour of the motion and who have joined in highlighting the very serious and substantial concerns voiced about SIF for their very positive and constructive comments. There is a consensus, certainly in this corner of the House, that this is a major and legitimate public concern.

I want to highlight the failure of the DUP and Sinn Féin to address the heart of the arguments that have been voiced by a number of Members today. We have seen quite a lot of deflection in this regard, so let me run through some of the issues. First, it is claimed that parties are only raising concerns over SIF now, following the particular scandal around Charter and Dee Stitt. In fact, a number of parties have been raising concerns about SIF consistently since 2011. It has certainly been raised by me in a number of Budget debates, looking at the inefficiency of SIF and whether we could spend the money in support of communities in a more efficient and effective way.

12.00 noon

There has also been a lot of mud thrown at various elected representatives who have been sitting on SIF partnerships and other forums with some of the groups that we have been discussing. That is elected representatives doing their job by representing their constituents and engaging in public scrutiny.

Yes, Charter NI, if you want to talk about that, has been funded through other Departments. However, the key point is that it was funded through open, competitive, merit-based processes. Yes, when I was Minister for

Employment and Learning, I funded Charter through the collaboration and innovation fund. Let me give some background to that. That came after a meeting in which I was invited by the then First Minister to run a pilot involving Fastrack to Information Technology Northern Ireland (FIT NI), with Charter as a subcontractor, with the potential to channel £7 million directly to that organisation outside normal procurement. That was some pilot. I said no to that. I advised that Charter could apply for public funds like any other organisation.

My experience of working with Charter was disappointing. Out of the 18 organisations on the collaboration and innovation fund, Charter gave us the most difficulty in terms of management. It is not actually a paradigm of good management, if that is what it is being asked to do in SIF. Everyone else was able —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr Allister: Has the Member not come to the heart of the matter? In all that we heard from the Minister, who did not want to take interventions, he never addressed the key issue: why was the scheme designed to exclude competition in respect of the lead partners? The answer is clear: it was always intended to be a vehicle for cronyism, but it could not be that if they dared to have open competition.

Dr Farry: Yes, that is very much the case. At the heart of this is the suspicion, which has not been addressed — so we assume, therefore, that it is by silence confirmed — that the point of SIF was that money was not being channelled to the so-called right community organisations. So a plan — whether we call it innovative from the standpoint of OFMDFM or cunning from the standpoint of others — was designed to ensure that the money went into the so-called right hands, at the expense of others in the community.

Some people have spoken about issues of public concern and said that there is no public concern. Frankly, there is; there is actually huge public concern. In particular, there is concern right across the community and voluntary sector. What we have seen here is a top-down approach to picking winners. There is a lot of talk about this being a bottom-up approach —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes, go ahead.

Mr Stalford: When the Member talks about the right organisations getting money, I presume he includes the Greater Village Regeneration Trust (GVRT). Perhaps he would like to speak to his colleague in front of him about its capacity to deliver successful projects.

Dr Farry: Let me be very clear: Paula Bradshaw was not the person who said that should be the lead organisation on the South Belfast Partnership Board. Again, the winners were picked from the top. We have not had a bottom-up process to choose the groups.

I have to say that there is a real air of tension across the community and voluntary sector. Groups are afraid to speak out about funding decisions, lest the few pennies that they still get are cut by the two parties in the lead. That is not healthy in any open, democratic and pluralistic society. We are building up a client state, and that should be of great concern to anyone who believes in democracy and the rule of law. We have to get away from that. Most people in this room know exactly what I am talking about.

Let us talk for a moment about the issue around Charter. I was frankly stunned to hear Edwin Poots talk about Dee Stitt's comments as "flippant". This is an ongoing problem every single day. The issue is not simply one set of remarks made in a 'Guardian' video; the issue here is that we have someone who is a current paramilitary, on a day-by-day basis, running an organisation in receipt of £1.7 million of public funds. That situation is not being addressed or faced up to in any respect. Let us be clear: the DUP has had an open agenda of trying to steer money towards Charter. It is not simply that Charter happened to win contracts in an incidental way; money has been steered to it. It is no accident that Alex Easton, for example, did a reference for Dee Stitt. It is no accident that we have two members of Charter sitting on two different steering groups. That is all done by design.

Comments were also made about the fact that the projects on the ground are of good quality. I have no reason to doubt that but I cannot make a full judgement because I do not know how they would stack up against other projects procured through other means. We can say, in absolute terms, "Yes, things are good" —

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member take an intervention?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Ms Bradshaw: Does the Member agree with me that it is only right and proper that we are concerned about a group like Charter, which is headed up by a UDA leader, receiving that funding given the number of death threats, attacks on our properties and bullets to our homes that we have received from the UDA in recent years?

Dr Farry: Absolutely. There are ongoing issues with respect to the role played by the UDA in our society.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr Carroll: The Member will be aware that the Executive have a strategy for eliminating racism. However, they are providing millions of pounds of public money to a man who openly brags about his paramilitary connection. Does the Member find this issue concerning given the links between paramilitaries and racist attacks in our society?

Dr Farry: Those links are obviously of concern. In terms of strategies, the even wider concern that we have to have is the fact that we have a so-called action plan from the Executive on combating paramilitary activity, the credibility of which has been ripped out by the fact that we are openly having photographs taken with current paramilitary figures. There was no point in having a big campaign launch yesterday about tackling organised crime and paramilitarism if, at the same time, people are giving comfort to current paramilitaries. It is a mixed signal for those in the community. Are people really going to be empowered to come forward and talk about their fears around organised crime and paramilitary activity if they see how the leadership in this society is reacting to them?

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: I respect the Member very much, but he is crossing the line between being a legislator and a prosecutor. For eight or nine minutes, the Member has been speaking about who may or may not be a paramilitary leader. Surely the criticism in that case should be directed at not the Executive but the police, who are responsible for gathering evidence, giving it

to prosecutors and bringing people before the courts to decide whether they are guilty.

Dr Farry: I agree with the Member: there is certainly a role for the police. They have questions to answer in terms of this particular issue and how robustly they are taking on paramilitaries. However, they cannot do so in a vacuum and without strong leadership from the Executive around these issues. I remind the Member that his leader in the Assembly — the deputy First Minister — has expressed concern about Mr Stitt, so it is not simply coming from these Benches and others in that regard.

The final point I want to stress is around value for money. We said that the rationale was about tackling deprivation and employability issues. All those things were being done and could have been done more through legitimate processes of Departments. I dare say that the money would have been spent a lot quicker; that certainly would have been my experience. Here is the rub: projects, particularly those using the community and voluntary sector, across the board have been cut over the past number of years while the favoured processes and groups through SIF have been protected. That is part and parcel of the resentment. Deprivation has built up. A report on educational underachievement from Queen's and Stranmillis has been buried by the Executive. People talk about —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Dr Farry: — dealing with the community. It is the self-picked community. The process by which people emerged was far from clear. A lot of voices in communities are not being given fair play or their fair share in that respect.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 38; Noes 53.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Hanna, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon,

Mr Mullan, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Dickson and Mr Lunn

NOES

Mr Anderson, Ms Archibald, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Gildernew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kelly, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCausland, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuigan, Miss McIlveen, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Middleton, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan, Mr Stafford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McGuigan and Mr Robinson

Question accordingly negatived.

Covenant Reference Group

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. I ask Members to leave the Chamber quietly, please. If they want to have a conversation, they should have it outside the Chamber.

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

Mr Beattie: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the need to deliver for the veterans' community in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Executive to nominate a Northern Ireland representative to the UK-wide Armed Forces covenant reference group, which will be responsible for ensuring that the Executive are kept updated of issues relating to the veterans' community in Northern Ireland.

This country is trying to move towards a brighter future — I think that we all agree on that — but we have a deeply troubled past. Therefore, I fully understand that any debate on the British military can be viewed as contentious. I know that you all have your prepared notes, but, please, I ask everybody to

listen to what is being proposed before you come back on what I say.

Before I address the motion, I will speak to those people who predominantly sit to my right-hand side. I acknowledge that this is a difficult subject for you and that it is a difficult motion for you to support. I fully understand that you feel that those whom you represent and many of the communities that you represent have been brutalised by the British military, certainly in the 1970s and the early 1980s. I can fully understand that, and I reiterate what I have said on many occasions: if anybody from the British military has broken the law, they need to answer to the law. In the future, I hope that you will be able to stand up and say, as I have, that those who were part of terrorist organisations have brutalised our country.

Those impact statements are really something for later, and I do not want to dwell on them. I also understand that there are many in the House who have grave concerns about British military actions around the world in the likes of Iraq — I served in Iraq and fully understand the concerns; I also have concerns about that conflict — Afghanistan, Syria or, indeed, Libya. I ask for some balance in the debate and some understanding that we are not all bad. The British military helped to stop ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, it helped to end genocide in Rwanda, it dropped aid to Yazidi Christians who were isolated on mountaintops, and it helped with the devastating Ebola virus in Sierra Leone. It also helps in this country; when a device is found somewhere, it is army technical officers who head out to dispose of it. Even today, members of our armed forces are helping the Afghan Government in Kabul, and we are deploying people from Northern Ireland to South Sudan in a peacekeeping role. That has to be applaudable. I ask for balance, but, with that balance, I have acknowledged how some may view the British military, and it is important to acknowledge that.

I have kept the wording of the motion as soft as possible because I fully understand the sensitivities with it. It is not about a political party; it is about trying to help vulnerable people in our community, whom we all represent. The armed forces community in Northern Ireland numbers over a quarter of a million people. That is serving personnel, veterans and their families and includes people who have served from the Second World War right up to more recent conflicts. I do not really want to argue about the conflicts because, in many ways, we need to point the finger at politicians as opposed to the military regarding the conflicts, but, if any incidents in those conflicts were

unlawful, we need to deal with the individuals involved. Many of those veterans feel isolated because of the ongoing security situation in Northern Ireland. They are isolated and not coming forward for help.

It is important that we as an Assembly and as the politicians of Northern Ireland represent everybody in our community, regardless of their present or past employment. I have to say something; I will repeat it twice so that people really understand what I am saying. The motion does not seek to give service personnel or veterans an advantage. It does not seek to give them an advantage. It seeks to give them representation so that they are not disadvantaged because of their service. There are times when they are disadvantaged.

In 2011, the Armed Forces Covenant was instigated throughout the United Kingdom. It was instigated here in Northern Ireland. We are part of the United Kingdom; it is here. However, we are not represented. We do not have the ability to have oversight or to scrutinise that Armed Forces Covenant. We do not have that because we are not in the covenant reference group.

If we were in the covenant reference group, we would have representation, we would have oversight and we would have scrutiny. The group produces an annual report. We can all read it — it is an open-source document — yet Northern Ireland has had no input to it since 2011. That, I think, is wrong. The covenant reference group is a Cabinet-led group with representation from all devolved Governments except Northern Ireland. That is fundamentally wrong. It has representation from the MoD, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Education, Health and Transport Departments — the list goes on — and representation from Wales and Scotland.

12.30 pm

What could such representation help us to do? The covenant fund is £10 million a year that we are able to bid for. We get our fair share, and, in the last 12 months, £450,000 has gone to Combat Stress and £600,000 to the Somme Nursing Home, but there are other worthy groups out there, including cross-community groups. This money has been used for cross-community groups, but, if we are not in the reference group, we cannot target it and we cannot direct it.

A Departments of Community Mental Health (DCMH) facility in Thiepval barracks is

underused. Only four people have gone to it, because nobody knows about it. It is paid for by the MoD, so this motion would not cost the Executive one single penny. If we could open up that facility, we could get help for our veterans who are suffering from mental illnesses. That must be a good thing, and it could help to alleviate issues in our health service.

Nobody in the military believes that they should get housing above anybody else, but service personnel leaving the military do not even realise that they are entitled to bid for social housing in Northern Ireland even if they live in England. They do not know that they are entitled to points because accommodation goes with the job: when you leave your job, you are made homeless and are entitled to points. They do not know this because we do not have anybody on the covenant reference group.

On education and learning, again, there is no ask. When you leave the military, the armed forces give you £1,000 a year to help you to retrain. Those in Northern Ireland are not using it, and they need to be educated.

As I said earlier, this affects all corners of our society. I visit a 94-year-old World War II RAF veteran who is living in a care home. He is deaf, nearly blind and getting no support. I know that people across the border in Ireland who served in the British military during the Second World War and later could also use this support. Somebody on the covenant reference group would be able to target and help them.

In conclusion, representation on the covenant reference group would not bypass any of the devolved functions. The Executive would still have the final say. There is no bypassing; it is purely about representation, but it would give us a link to what everybody else has in the United Kingdom has, but we, at present, do not. It would keep the Assembly informed and give our armed forces champions, who are on each of our 11 councils, somebody to work to. It would allow us to know what was going on and make sure that we got our fair share of what comes out of the Government in Westminster.

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

Mr Beattie: I commend the motion, and I acknowledge its difficulty for many, but I ask them to listen to my words. I am using soft words, and I do so deliberately because I understand.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. However, before I begin, I must declare my many interests. First, I am an army widow and receive an HM Forces pension. I am an ambassador for the ABF — the soldiers' charity — and a member of the community that we are debating today. I am painfully aware of how veterans and their families have contributed to and sacrificed for this society.

As we have heard, the Armed Forces covenant reference group meets with no input from Northern Ireland. Yet, as a jurisdiction, we play a significant role in our armed forces. Over 20% of the reserve regularly deployed in operations are from Northern Ireland, despite the fact that we make up only 3% of the entire UK population. We must not lose sight of the fact that the armed forces community is tri-service and multi-cap badged, and it comes from every section of our communities.

The forces covenant is an agreement between the armed forces community, the nation and the Government, and it encapsulates the moral obligation to those who serve, those who have served, their families and the bereaved, of which I am one. As Doug said, the covenant fund was set up giving £10 million per annum to fund the Government's armed forces commitments. Funding priorities are annually set by the covenant reference group, and we have no representation. There has been a further £170 million allocated to support covenant commitments since 2011, and, to date, as Doug has said, Northern Ireland has received £450,000 for combat stress and £60,000 for the Somme Nursing Home.

The covenant reference group was initially set up to oversee the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant, which is chaired by the Cabinet Office. In an answer to my DUP colleague Jim Shannon MP during parliamentary questions at Westminster, Mark Lancaster, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Ministry of Defence, stated that there are unique challenges in Northern Ireland, but he was pleased to report that they estimate that 93% of the covenant issues are being enforced. I am sorry, but the number of constituents I am currently dealing with regarding veterans' issues indicates otherwise. Mark Lancaster went on to say clearly that they needed to do better and that this will be his focus in the coming year. I look forward to that end result and his active support. I visit my constituents in prison. I visit them in hospital when they have attempted suicide. I go with them to looked-after child (LAC) reviews where they try to keep hold of their children, and I attend police stations with them when they have

issues with domestic violence and abuse through issues of PTSD.

I do not question the fact that more needs to be done in Northern Ireland to make veterans aware of the services, charities and Departments that they can have access to. Since my election in 2011, I have worked tirelessly with my party colleagues on behalf of my community. It was at my invitation that Lord Ashcroft's transition review team came to Northern Ireland. It met Ministers, senior personnel at 38 Brigade and representatives of the military charity sector. In his second follow-up report, published in November 2016, reference is made to Northern Ireland and the failings of the Armed Forces Covenant. He states that the Executive should appoint someone immediately to the covenant reference group.

On 26 October 2016, Kris Hopkins stated that it is up to the devolved Governments to make it work. Disappointingly, this shows a lack of understanding of the complex and multilayered issues that face the service community here in Northern Ireland. Those councils that have adopted the community covenant are to be applauded, however they do not have the same statutory authority as in Great Britain, and this results in the limited implementation of the meaningful application of the ethos of the covenant. They cannot compel the Housing Executive, the Education Authority or Health to consider years of service to the Crown as our colleagues in GB can when service personnel are transitioning to Civvy Street or need access to services such as education for themselves or their children or adequate clinical support for illness and life-changing injuries. We know that there is an open invitation for the Northern Ireland Executive to join that reference group, and, in fact, in October this year, when I spoke on 'Talkback' about this particular issue, my party leader, Arlene Foster, stated her support for me to be appointed to the group. A letter was sent to the Cabinet Office regarding this, and we are awaiting a response.

I want to put on record my acknowledgement of the work done by my colleagues at Westminster, my colleagues here in the Assembly and my colleagues at council level, and I absolutely agree that the needs of the armed forces community must be heard at the highest level of government. I thank Mr Beattie for bringing this forward.

Mr Kelly: I listened to Doug Beattie and what he had to say, and I will be able to cover that. I approach, and Sinn Féin approaches, this from the point of view of objective need and equality

of treatment. I have the Research and Information Service information pack that explains what the Armed Forces Covenant is about, and it is worth reading out the first couple of pieces of it. It says:

"The Armed Forces Covenant is an agreement between the armed forces community, the nation and the government."

Of course, the "nation" referred to is Britain, and the "government" referred to is the British Government. It continues:

"It encapsulates the moral obligation to those who serve, have served, their families and the bereaved."

As a republican, I do not find anything wrong with that. The British Government do have a moral obligation. It goes on to say:

"The covenant's twin underlying principles are that members of the armed forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services".

I cannot find myself disagreeing with that either. Of course they have the right to all the services that are there for every citizen. However, it does go on to say:

"and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured or the bereaved."

And there, we start to move away from the ideas of equality and equal treatment. There is a covenant fund, which is dealt with further down, and it says that £170 million —

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. He has indicated that it would mean moving away from equality and equal treatment: does he not accept that objective need moves away from equal treatment? Equal treatment treats everyone the same; objective need allows resource to be targeted specifically at those in most need. It is not contrary to equality provisions to target those in most need.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Kelly: I agree on this: I have risen to speak on both issues — equality of treatment and objective need. They are complementary, rather than opposing.

In the covenant fund, there is £170 million from 2011. The document goes through a list of how that is used in different packages. In 2013, the British Chancellor announced that £10 million per annum would be allocated in perpetuity from the financial year 2015-16. People may think that that is good work or that it is not enough money and all that; that is a debate that, I am sure, Doug Beattie and others will continue. I understand where they are coming from — in particular, Brenda Hale. However, it will not be a surprise to the House that I do not agree with the interventions of the British Government — in fairness to him, Mr Beattie said that there was bad and good in it — and certainly not with many of the interventions that they have been involved in in recent history and ancient history in terms of foreign wars. He mentioned Iraq: remember that people were sent to war on the basis of weapons of mass destruction that did not exist. I agree with Mr Beattie that this is not an issue around the soldiers who went out and fought; it is an issue around government.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kelly: I have already given way.

Tens of thousands have been killed in recent years; hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, have been injured; and, certainly, millions have faced huge poverty. We have only to turn on our TVs to see the refugee problem that we have. In my view, it has destabilised the area.

All of this, as you said, may not be the relevant issue. However, young men and women were sent out as soldiers and were killed. Many have sustained life-changing injuries. The Sinn Féin position is as described earlier: there are bereaved and injured from the conflict that occurred here in the North of Ireland. Unionists, if I may say this, cannot and will not agree to a pension for a small number of people relative to other conflicts — a matter of hundreds — who want to have a pension. They will not agree to the funding of the Lord Chief Justice's approach to coronial courts and inquests that, since we are talking about bereaved families, would bring some closure or, if not closure, alleviation of their pain. Some of them have waited for over 45 years. Coming on to the Eames/Bradley project, I remember that, when £12,000 was mentioned, not for compensation but for recognition of the suffering that victims had gone through, political unionism and the British Government took a fit at the idea that they would hand out any money at all for that.

There is a duty that includes combatants — I absolutely accept that — but it is much wider. It is a duty to all those who have suffered — civilian or soldier, combatant or non-combatant. We need to break the logjam of legacy for victims and survivors, and the British Government and political unionism can do that. Sinn Féin will oppose the motion on the basis of equality of treatment, which everyone should have access to, and objective need.

Mr Attwood: First of all, I acknowledge the tone of the remarks of Mr Beattie and Mrs Hale. They struck the right note in relation to the debate and the issues that inevitably revolve around this sort of debate. I also acknowledge, in particular, that I have not heard any senior member of a unionist party refer to the fact that there are people in Northern Ireland, particularly people of the community that I and others represent, who feel, as Mr Beattie put it, "brutalised" by the actions of the British Army. I have not heard that sort of description. In my view, the experience was more than one of feeling that they were brutalised: they were brutalised by the British Army in many, many, many instances over the years. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that that was the tone and character of the debate that we heard. I also respond to Mr Beattie by saying that it was not just the state agencies who brutalised the people whom I represent; the terror organisations also inflicted an unwelcome violence on people across this part of Ireland.

12.45 pm

I also want to acknowledge that, when we are speaking today, we are speaking about people in the Chamber who might have reason to rely on the covenant in terms of their objective needs. So, when we talk about the issue, we have to tread cautiously, because we are treading on the experiences of people in the Chamber and many, many people besides.

I have a view about the role of the British Army in Ireland historically and in recent decades. I do not intend to rehearse what that view is, except to say that it became very much a big part of the problem because military and paramilitary approaches were not the way to resolve the conflict of identity around which our conflict revolved. I also recognise that there have been many, many people in the British Army who fought in good faith and with sincere beliefs wherever they went around the world over the years, even though I would dispute what the political and military leadership directed them to do. Whilst I may differ with Mr Beattie and other people about the contribution

of the British Army around the world, I do not dispute the contribution of individual members of the army to the causes that they believed in. I say that — I have said this before in the Chamber — because my great-uncle, who I am named after, lies in an unmarked grave on the Belgian coast at a place called Nieuwpoort, having been killed in July 1917 in the First World War. I have visited with pride the memorial that bears his name.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the debate is around representation? As Mr Beattie set out when proposing the motion, there is no added cost to the Northern Ireland Executive. Given the fact that the Member has just spoken eloquently about the fact that this touches even this House, should it not be the case that Northern Ireland is represented to ensure that the people who are directly affected have their voice at that table nationally?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Attwood: Thank you for that intervention, and thank you for the extra time, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will touch on that in my concluding remarks.

It is our view — Naomi Long touched on this in her intervention on Mr Kelly — that the way to deal with any person who has particular requirements is on the basis of objective need. Over many decades, we have developed in Northern Ireland a policy and an architecture in order to ensure that objective need informs how people are responded to at public policy and state level. Maybe Mr Kelly will want to reflect on this: there is, if you like, special consideration for various sections of our society. The people who Mr Kelly speaks for on many occasions — prisoners — are given special consideration by way of funding from Europe. Our victims and survivors are given special consideration by the —

Mr Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I have only a minute. I normally give way, but I want to conclude my remarks.

That is not special consideration that creates some sort of hierarchy; it is a special consideration that is informed by the practice of objective need. If that is all that the covenant is about and, to go back to the point of the last intervention, if it is purely about representation and advocacy, I can understand why the argument has been made by Mr Beattie, Mrs

Hale and others that there should be somebody representing Northern Ireland on the covenant reference group.

So, for all those reasons, the SDLP will not resist or oppose the motion. If that is the argument that is being made in good faith, we accept it.

Mr Lunn: We support the motion. I congratulate Mr Beattie for tabling it and for proposing it in, in his own words, a "soft" way. I agree with his sentiments, and I also agree very much with Mrs Hale. I do not pretend to have the experience that either Mr Beattie or Mrs Hale has in this area, but I am prepared to learn. They both spoke remarkably well.

Should we be represented? Of course we should. This is a covenant that arises from the Armed Forces Act, which applies to the whole of the United Kingdom, and we appear to be the only part of the United Kingdom not represented on the reference group. Northern Ireland is getting some benefit from the various funds. We could perhaps continue to have no direct input into the reference group and hope for the best, but it would not make any sense to do so when there is a place there for us. I do not know what the objection is, because I have not studied it closely enough, but somebody seems to be objecting to this move. I hope that, on the basis of what has been said today, that objection will be removed.

Northern Ireland has done pretty well from the present arrangement. As we all know, £450 million has gone to Combat Stress in either this financial year or the last one, and I am told that about £1 million has been invested in Northern Ireland projects, which is 10% of the annual spend for our much trumpeted 3% of the population. So, we do pretty well. However, it is important that we are represented at the heart of this, and I hope that the Executive Office moves ahead to appoint somebody.

I appreciate that not all our population might be in total agreement with this. Mr Kelly, in his remarks, was very measured; towards the end he was less measured, but he sympathised with those who had been injured and bereaved, and I give him credit for that. Both Mr Beattie and Mr Kelly made the point that armies do not decide where they go to fight; Governments do that. If a soldier or an airman or a sailor comes back to Northern Ireland injured and needs particular treatment through rehabilitation, education, the health service or housing, it is incumbent on our Government, whether the UK Government or the Northern Ireland Assembly, to provide them with the very best facilities and

treatment that they can, because we owe it to them.

Old sores take time to heal, but people who do not support this proposition might need to reflect on where we would be today had it not been for the actions of our armed forces through the centuries. We can stand here now and speak with freedom because we fought the good fight when it had to be fought, and we cannot forget about our veterans. This is a big debate in the States as well, but we should be able to deal with it.

The question of section 75 was raised. The implementation group — the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee — came to the conclusion three or four years ago that this was not a particular problem, stating:

"Section 75 is a piece of equalities legislation and that the first key principle of the Covenant is no discrimination, we do not necessarily see any opposition between those."

The MOD said that it had taken legal advice on the question of section 75 being in conflict with the covenant and had come to the conclusion that it was not insuperable, let us put it that way. There may be some slight difficulties, but, with a reasonable approach and a fair attitude, it can be dealt with.

If our veterans, the injured and the bereaved need special assistance to reintegrate and move on with their lives, the covenant, through its schemes, the covenant for communities —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Lunn: — the reference group, the charitable endeavours, the community grants scheme and so on, provides a way to smooth the way back into society for our veterans. I thoroughly support the motion. If it had gone a bit further, I would still have supported it. It is a good motion.

Mr McGuigan: Unsurprisingly, I will be opposing the motion. I will be doing so on the basis that this Assembly needs to deliver for the whole community and all citizens in the North and not elevate particular groups for special treatment. On that basis, I look forward to the day when the Members who tabled this motion table a motion on an equality Act and a bill of rights for the North, and the implementation of both being supported by all parties and Members. That is the way to address

inequalities if and where they exist, and I could support that.

To be honest — and Gerry mentioned this — I could support the first of the two underlying principles in the covenant that we are debating, that is that no disadvantage should be faced compared with other citizens —

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGuigan: Go ahead.

Mr Allen: Would the Member not agree with me that, in stating that he would agree with the two underlying principles that Mr Kelly pointed out, in reality, opposing this motion goes against that? The Armed Forces covenant reference group is about ensuring that those who serve and have served, and their families, are not disadvantaged by virtue of their service.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Member for his intervention, but he stopped me short of what I was going to say in relation to what the second principle contained, which Gerry also addressed, and that we could not support. I cannot support it because the covenant itself states:

"special consideration is appropriate in some cases".

I cannot agree with that. I know there are Members who want to create hierarchies. Unfortunately, that is what this debate is about — in some way elevating the status of the British Army and its members in the North.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGuigan: I want to continue.

I do not claim to be an expert on the employment obligations or additional services of duty of care provided by the British Army to its members. I have only my personal experiences and that of my community of contact with and knowledge of the special consideration that the British Army meted out here in the North.

I recognise, like others, the tone and content of Mr Beattie's contribution. For that reason, and for the reason that I have only five minutes to speak, I will not dwell on that experience because it would require much longer.

I want to assure Members that I did as Doug Beattie asked and listened to his and others' contributions. I want to assure everybody that my opposition to this motion is not based on my own very negative experiences of the British Army. Nor is it based on my antipathy to the actions and wars engaged in by the British Army across the globe in recent years.

I will not say, however, that my opposition is not political, because that is not the case. It is very political. It is political in the sense that my opposition to supporting this covenant is based on the protection of right and entitlements and fair access to services for every citizen who lives here in the North.

I, as an MLA, want to represent everyone as best I can and make laws and support legislation that are based on equality. Gerry talked about the issue in relation to victims and survivors. I would certainly not want to agree to anything that would elevate the rights and entitlements of British soldiers over the rights of victims and survivors of the conflict.

On top of that, I would not want to elevate the rights and entitlements of British soldiers over and above doctors and nurses, firemen and firewomen who risked their lives, people with disabilities or long-term illnesses, members of the PSNI, teachers, community and voluntary workers — the list goes on.

My answer to all that is no, and, for that reason, I will be opposing the motion.

Mr Allen: As I sit here, I vividly recall, at the age of 15 or 16, sitting in a school not far from here, deciding my career prospects and eventually choosing to join the military.

In 2008, I was deployed to Afghanistan with the 1st Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment. As my colleague Doug Beattie pointed out, we do not bring this motion forward to call for individuals to vote to legitimise or endorse any conflict. As individual soldiers, we do not choose where we go in the world.

We go to try to protect those citizens whom we are sent to defend, and we do that as best we can. Unfortunately, quite often, we are put in harm's way. I am evidence of that. In 2008, I was injured in Afghanistan. I recognise that there are many like me who have suffered physical and psychological injuries through service to Queen and country.

1.00 pm

The military covenant rightly points out that we as a nation have an obligation to those who serve and have served and their families to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by virtue of their service. I listened with interest to Members opposite say how they could support the two values of the covenant but not the preferential treatment element. I call on them to rethink and ask them to abstain in the vote in acknowledgement that the motion does not, in any way, shape or form, call for preferential treatment. I speak to many veterans and their families on the ground, day and daily, and I am yet to come across any who want preferential treatment. I can sit here and say in testimony that, in no way, shape or form, would I have it that I be put in front of a doctor —

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Mr Kelly talked about young men being "sent out", which is an admission that the Government deploy our army, not the military and certainly not the service personnel themselves.

I make this point to the Member. Members across the way talk about people being elevated by the covenant. Those of us in working-class communities have watched former prisoner organisations, including many republican prisoner organisations, receive funding from government. If that is not creating a disjointed and uneven playing field, what is?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allen: I thank the Member for his point. I was not conscripted into the army. I went to Afghanistan quite willingly. I chose to go to Afghanistan knowing the potential consequences. I have had individuals approach me and say, "You sit and seek sympathy, but, going there, you knew full well that you could be injured or, worse, not come back". I accept that. I do not dispute that whatsoever. However, it is not unrealistic to expect government to look after us when we are injured, whether physically or psychologically. We should expect our Government to be able to step up.

I acknowledge that the various different service charities that support veterans day and daily, often unseen and unnoticed behind closed doors, do sterling work, but that cannot be the only work that goes on. The covenant reference group would give individuals a platform and an opportunity. I would have no difficulties with Mrs Hale being nominated on to it. Personally, I would much rather see a non-

political representative. From the various discussions that I have had with military people on the ground, I know that they would like to see somebody who has no party political affiliation and who would report to the Minister for Communities, for example. I raise that only because of my engagement with the various armed forces' veterans and their families on the ground. That is what they are advising and telling me.

As has been outlined, the Armed Forces covenant reference group sets the priorities for £10 million a year funding. That is funding that will come regardless of whether we have a representative on the covenant reference group. However, if we have a representative on there, that will be a voice for those Northern Ireland veterans and their families. It will ensure that their needs and concerns are being voiced. We heard a comment about Combat Stress and the Somme Nursing Home receiving pivotal and vital funding. However, what we have not heard about is the fact that, owing to donations being scarce, Combat Stress has been forced into a decision to withdraw its welfare support from the front line. It has been revealed that nearly 3,000 individuals who rely on that service will be impacted on. Those are issues that could be raised at the covenant reference group.

I reiterate that this is not about providing preferential treatment. It is not about providing a passport so that somebody can queue-jump or move up the list to get something. I echo that I would not have it that I am put on a list before a doctor, a nurse or any one of our brave emergency services workers, or, for that matter, any other citizen in Northern Ireland, because, as an MLA, I fight day and daily to ensure that all our people are represented.

I believe that it is our duty as MLAs to ensure that we provide for our armed forces community in Northern Ireland as best we can.

Mrs Long: I had not intended to speak in the debate but felt that I wanted to in light of some of what I have heard against the motion, particularly from Sinn Féin. I understand the sensitivities that debates on the armed forces can raise in our society, particularly given our history of conflict here, but I think that it is really important that, when we approach this, we do it with maturity and recognise that people are affected by this legislation in Northern Ireland as things stand today. All that the motion calls for is for someone from Northern Ireland to be represented on the group that steers those decisions. That seems to me to be a very rational thing to do.

When we did the review in Westminster into the Armed Forces Covenant and its delivery in Northern Ireland, we found that delivery here was pretty good. Ministers have been quite good at maintaining responsibility over the areas for which they are accountable with regard to the Armed Forces Covenant.

However, they do not get to report on the work that they do because, due to our political situation, there is no one to put their report into the annual report, with the result that we have ended up having to rely on individual reports from individual Ministers on what they did to meet the Armed Forces Covenant and the experience of veterans who gave evidence to us.

As regards equality and equal treatment, let us be clear: they are not the same thing. If we want a more equal society, treating everyone the same will not get us there. Those with advantage will continue to be advantaged, and those with disadvantage will continue to be disadvantaged. The only way in which we can bring about a more equal society is with special consideration targeting objective need — not just assessing it but targeting it — looking at what people require in order to give them the opportunity to improve their circumstances.

Mr Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: I am happy to give way to the Member.

Mr Kelly: Just to be very clear: at no time have I argued against anything mentioned here, although it is the first time that I have seen £10 million per annum allocated in perpetuity for anything. I am not arguing against what is here. What I am arguing for is that the same treatment be given to other people, particularly those who, in our conflict, have gone through similar experiences to those outlined by Andy Allen and others. I understand absolutely that people have suffered. What I am arguing very clearly is that it cannot be specific to or given to the British armed forces above others. That is what the argument is here. In the second principle, which Andy Allen mentioned a few times, it says that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would have to say that it does not say that. It says that the disadvantage that people have suffered is to be addressed, not that they are to be advantaged. Special consideration is not advantage: it is to consider the special

conditions in which they have lived. I do not have a difficulty with funding going to organisations that have helped, for example, to support ex-prisoners — a very specific group in society — to enable them to get the qualifications and support that they need to re-enter the workplace. That is a very specific group of people who have been given very specific consideration and the support that they require to allow them to live a more equal life and overcome the disadvantage that having been imprisoned would have otherwise been to their ability to have an equal chance in society on their release.

It is good that we should do that if we want to tackle inequality, but we cannot do it for one group and then say that we are not willing to do it when it comes to the armed services.

Families are often moved around. They can find it difficult, for example, to establish where they are entitled to apply for housing. It can be difficult for a family in that situation to access the housing waiting list in the same way as other people because of their deployment and history with regard to where they have lived, which is often army accommodation. All those issues are not about putting them to the top of the list but restoring them to the place where they would have been on the list had they not been giving service in the army, which disrupted the situation for them.

It is hugely important that we do this in a sensible way. We in Northern Ireland, in our rather haphazard way, already deliver for the armed services community.

What we do not have is direct input into shaping the policies that drive that process right across the UK. Also, our Ministers do not have the opportunity to feed directly back into the system. From the Westminster report of the review, we know that the then housing Minister was dealing with these issues in a way that was compliant with section 75 and with all Housing Executive regulations to ensure that the armed services were not being disadvantaged. In the same way, Stephen Farry, who was the then Employment and Learning Minister, was offering support to people when they came out of the armed services so that they were able to access training to enable them to reintegrate into normal life. It is important for a society that we do that.

The motion is not about debating the whys and wherefores of the Armed Forces Covenant; it simply asks that Northern Ireland has the opportunity to feed into the process. We are doing these things anyway, but, at the moment,

our voice is not heard. I fully support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it.

Mr E McCann: Having listened to the various speeches in the debate, I will abstain on the motion. I am not a natural supporter of the British Army. My experience of it, as mentioned by others here, has been entirely negative. What first comes to mind when I hear the British Army mentioned is lying in the gutter of Rossville Street — literally, in the gutter — the street where I was born and brought up, and then crawling away. I was doing a leopard crawl, as they call it, dragging myself by my elbows to get away from the death storm that had erupted in our area on Bloody Sunday. I find it difficult to adopt the benign attitude to the British Army that so many have taken here.

That said, I approved of the demands of the Bloody Sunday campaign, which included the prosecution of those responsible for the massacre in Derry in 1972. This morning, members of the Bloody Sunday families were informed that the results of the PSNI investigation into the killings were handed to the public prosecution service in England this morning, so we will see what comes of that. I have spoken to the PSNI officers involved, and they have interviewed all the shooters who are still alive and whom they could find — the people who pulled the triggers on Bloody Sunday. Regardless of whether they have spoken to more senior people, the fact is that none of the senior people have been interviewed under caution, and none are on the list of people named in this morning's report. If shooters from Bloody Sunday are charged with unlawful killing, punished in a way the courts think appropriate and put behind bars, I will not be out with a placard complaining about it or saying that it is an injustice. However, let me say this: the people who pulled the triggers on Bloody Sunday are, in my opinion, nowhere near as guilty of the killings as the officers who sent them in there, or the senior politicians who organised and approved, two days in advance of Bloody Sunday, an operation in which it was highly foreseeable — it had to be foreseeable because it was foreseen — that innocent people would die.

It is like Kipling said about the army when he referred to the "poor bloody infantry" and:

*"Then it's 'Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' Tommy, 'ow's yer soul? '
But it's 'Thin red line of 'eroes' when the drums begin to roll."*

That is true of armies all over the world. It is certainly true of the British Army, and it is

certainly true of the way in which veterans of British Army actions are treated by their Government and the establishment. Some time ago, there was a piece in the 'Daily Mirror' in which, I think, Mr Beattie was quoted, among others. Philip Wesley, a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, described how, on leaving the army to look after his daughter when they became a one-parent family, his life:

"has been one of food banks, low-paid work, soaring energy bills and expensive housing."

He could not get out of it. That is a typical and common description given by soldiers of the way in which they were treated after being sent out to fight, as they would have understood it, for their country.

The massive injustice done to veterans by those who sent them to do what they did is a far bigger problem and has to be addressed. I am not minimising anything referred to by Mr Beattie, Mr Allen or anybody else. I am not minimising the experiences that they described but talking about the general, overall mistreatment. The fact that soldiers are abandoned when they have done what the state wanted them to do seems to me to be a much more fundamental problem than anything addressed in the motion. For that reason, my comrade Gerry Carroll and I will abstain.

1.15 pm

Ms Dillon: I do not intend to speak for very long on the motion. Many of the points that I would have made have already been made. We will oppose the motion because of the equality issue, and that is given all of what has been said by other Members in the Chamber today, as well as what Mr McCann has just said. Whilst I fully accept that there are soldiers who fought in wars that they may or may not have agreed with and that it is Governments and not armies that decide to go to war, I have to say that there are people here in the same situation who have been injured, bereaved or suffered trauma through the Troubles and through nothing to do with the Troubles. I think that everybody should be treated equally and on the same basis.

Mr Allen said that there were organisations there to help people to access benefits, and that is only right. My background is working in a Sinn Féin advice centre, where I helped people to access benefits. I helped everybody. I never asked anybody who came through the door what their background was. I did not ask them if they were in the armed forces or were a

soldier, a combatant, an IRA volunteer, the family of a killed IRA volunteer or had no connection to politics or any organisation whatever. I just helped everybody who came in through the door. That is where we need to focus.

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dillon: I will give way in a moment.

We need to give help to everybody on the same level. I agree with Naomi Long that equality does not mean giving equal treatment to everybody; I absolutely accept that. We need to look at targeted need, but people who suffer mental ill health suffer it regardless of why. It is regardless of whether it is trauma from something they have seen or something they have done or whether they have had an imbalance from the day they were born. All those people need to be able to access the same help and the same services. They need to be equally accessible to everybody who has the same difficulties. I understand where a number of people in the House are coming from today, but we need to give equal treatment.

Mr Allen: I thank the Member for giving way; indeed, I understand her comments about working in a constituency office and wanting to help everybody. This is an opportunity for those who serve and have served to be helped — not given preferential treatment but helped — and to allow there to be a voice on the covenant reference group. I will ask this again: will the Members abstain to allow the voice of the Northern Ireland service community to be heard?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Dillon: I will reiterate what Mr Kelly said: it is simply about equality. It is simply about everybody having the same access to services. If we are to take one group over and above another, we have to look at it. I do not pretend to be fully briefed on all the ins and outs of this, but we have to look at it on the basis of equality.

Mr Allister: I commend Mr Beattie for tabling the motion. It is an issue that has long been deserving of attention, because it is a scandal that this part of the United Kingdom is the only area that does not have representation in respect of those who have served in the armed forces. Of course, there is a very clear reason for that, which is that Sinn Féin has exercised a veto on Northern Ireland having such

representation; indeed, by the looks of it, Sinn Féin has also exercised a veto on there even being a Minister from the First Minister's office here today to deal with the issue, such is its antipathy on the matter. We know for a certainty that it is the exercise of the Sinn Féin veto that has denied representation because of evidence given to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 24 April 2013, referred to by Mrs Long, when the issue of why the Executive had not even responded to an invitation to send representation was raised. That was dealt with by two Ministers — Mr Poots and Mr McCausland — and both had to acknowledge that it had never been brought to the Executive table because Sinn Féin had blocked it.

Let us be under no illusion: the reason there is no representation for veterans in Northern Ireland at the centre of this matter is that bigoted, belligerent Sinn Féin veto, some evidence of which we have seen in today's debate. From Mr Kelly's lips came forth the real reason his party is not prepared to show due deference to military veterans: the pernicious equivalence that he and his party seek to establish between those who served the forces of law and order and those who served the forces of terrorism. He made it abundantly clear that, so long as others stand in the way of, for example, a pension for terrorists, Sinn Féin will belligerently block matters as just as this. It is that pernicious equivalence that Sinn Féin seeks to obtain between the soldier who served his country and the terrorist who shot civilians and soldiers — anyone they could find — in the back. The attempt to establish that equivalence lies at the heart of Sinn Féin belligerence and bigotry on the matter. That is the truth of it. It is, in fact, a badge of the failure of the system of government here that our veterans have been so badly let down. They have no representation because, under the system, a veto has been gifted to those who are on the side of the terrorists rather than on the side of the forces of law and order.

Let us be very plain: this is not about validating army actions internationally, nationally or any other way. It was not the ordinary soldier who decided that the United Kingdom armed forces should intervene in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else; it was government and Parliament and politicians. Why are we penalising the ordinary soldiers who did the only thing they could do, which was to fulfil their duties in their day job? Why are we penalising them, when they suffer as they have suffered? The only answer is that we are penalising them because of the bigotry and belligerence of Sinn Féin, which wants to equate those gallant men and women with the terrorists who are closest

to its heart and who set themselves up to do down the forces of law and order. Therein lies the scandal at the heart of this thing. It is the elevation of Sinn Féin's undying commitment to the terrorist cause that causes it to block doing the decent thing for the decent men and women who served in our armed forces.

Mr Nesbitt: Deputy Speaker, it was not my intention to speak. I apologise to the House for arriving late; I was travelling home from elsewhere on Committee business.

I would like to make some remarks in response to what Sinn Féin has said. Linda Dillon talked about mental health. She will know that I have campaigned passionately on the subject for a number of years; in fact, if she checks a speech that I made to the Ulster Unionist Party conference a couple of years ago, she will find that I made a clear reference to the fact that I wanted us to help everybody with poor mental health or well-being, no matter how they came by it. Not one of the 400 delegates in the room that day raised any objection to helping everybody, no matter how they came by poor mental health.

We all recognise equality, but, sometimes, there are groups that need bespoke measures. Sinn Féin accepts that; there is reference in section A of the Fresh Start Agreement to the reintegration of people who were involved in the Troubles and the issues they have with employability. As leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, I have met a group administered and set up by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — now the Executive Office — with representatives of paramilitary organisations. I have sat in a meeting room upstairs looking from left to right at representatives of the Official IRA, the UDA, the UVF, the Provisional IRA and the Red Hand Commando. They were all singing off the same hymn sheet; they all had the same agenda. They said, "We have issues with car insurance and home insurance. We have issues with our inability to obtain a visa to travel to the United States". They had a shopping list of issues that they were looking for cross-community and cross-party help with. That is fair enough. I say to Sinn Féin and to anybody else who is going to vote today that the Ulster Unionist Party has not stood in the way of that group seeking measures to address the obstacles in their lives. We understand that they are there and that they are intergenerational. When combatants — if that is the phraseology that Sinn Féin wants to use — pass away, the issues remain alive because they travel intergenerationally. We have not stood in the

way, so I ask Sinn Féin to reflect on whether it will stand in the way today.

Mr Aiken: Obviously, I support this important motion. Before I add my commentary on the valued contributions made by all Members to the discussion today, I will, as a veteran of far too many conflicts with many years of service to my country, add my comments on the need for us to nominate a Northern Ireland representative to the UK-wide Armed Forces Covenant reference group, along with representatives from other regional and national government for that vital role.

The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise from the nation that those who serve or have served in the armed forces and their families will be treated fairly. From those words, we may assume that our armed forces veterans and those who serve along with their families are treated with extra care and attention above that of the ordinary citizen; indeed, if we lived in any other country, that may be the case. US veterans have the benefit of the GI Bill for higher and further education, free healthcare through the veterans' administration, preferential employment opportunities through the civil service and a well-supported route to employment through many private companies. Many of us have witnessed the support given to US servicemen and servicewomen at airports, in shops and across the States. Veterans are valued citizens and employees who contribute greatly to civil society; indeed, they are the bedrock of many American communities.

That approach to the serviceman or servicewoman and, when they retire, support to their next of kin is replicated in France, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and even the Republic of Ireland. The story in the United Kingdom, until recently, was very different. The tradition of two world wars, Korea, the conflict here in Northern Ireland, the Falklands War and the seemingly never-ending Cold War skirmishes that few have heard about even to this day have resulted in a series of casualties, deaths and disrupted lives that have largely been left to the dedicated charity support of organisations like the excellent Royal British Legion, whose exemplary work to this day is so crucial to the well-being of so many, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA), the Royal Naval Association, the Royal Air Forces Association and the many regimental charities and support groups. There is little support from government, especially — speaking from personal experience — from the Ministry of Defence.

1.30 pm

Indeed, the Ministry of Defence support for serving personnel was especially inadequate, from substandard accommodation, poor resettlement training, limited educational opportunities for service children and a parsimonious attitude to everything from allowances to travel to, even on occasion, the provision of food. For those who were not directly in the front line or on operations, in many cases, it was not short of beggarly. Yet, those of us who served did it gladly, for the sense of doing something for the higher good and for the comradely attitude that service life built for us. All we ask for is equality with our fellow citizens.

Rather than fighting wars in the 21st century, our servicemen and women, of whom many thousands have come from and live in Northern Ireland or the Republic and continue to call them home — for long periods many more Irish citizens served proudly and loyally in the British armed services than ever served in the Irish defence forces — have become increasingly involved with conflicts of so-called choice.

Failures in foreign policy have resulted in our sailors, soldiers and airmen making up for our politicians' failure to effectively manage challenges to the international system. Rather than using the military as the last line of defence, it has, seemingly, been used as the first tool of power, often for highly disputed outcomes that, we must add, are not the result of the actions of those brave and committed members of our armed forces. They have had to bear the brunt of the conflict, with them and their families having to deal with the physical and mental aftermath and with a civilian society that, in many cases, treated them as an afterthought. It was in that spirit, and with a greater understanding of the sacrifice in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, that there was a realisation that that was not a case of benign neglect or unconscious discrimination, but, rather, that our nation should at least promote equality for our forces and their families — equality in healthcare, housing, education and opportunity. That is why the Armed Forces Covenant is so important.

You have heard that up to 93% of the covenant is being delivered in Northern Ireland and that, because of special circumstances, full recognition cannot be delivered. I, my party colleagues and thousands of serving personnel, veterans and our wider Northern Ireland armed forces family community dispute that. Indeed, a simple recognition by having the Executive appoint a representative to the Armed Forces

covenant reference group is a first step in taking a well-reasoned and mature approach to recognising that equality for our armed forces family — not special cases or special pleading but a recognition of objective need — is a laudable goal and one that I hope all Members can support.

I was going to sum up the excellent statements that we heard throughout the debate, and they have been excellent. However, I would like to put some particular points to Sinn Féin. I would like the Sinn Féin representatives to abstain rather than oppose the motion and show clearly that they understand that we are moving into a new era. By recognising equality for the 250,000-odd members of the Northern Ireland armed forces family by not opposing the appointment of a representative to the covenant reference group, they will send a clear message of reconciliation. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 58; Noes 20.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKee, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Smith, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Aiken and Mr Beattie

NOES

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuigan, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Archibald and Ms Dillon

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the need to deliver for the veterans' community in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Executive to nominate a Northern Ireland representative to the UK-wide Armed Forces covenant reference group, which will be responsible for ensuring that the Executive are kept updated of issues relating to the veterans' community in Northern Ireland.

1.45 pm

Mrs Hale: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask that the Speaker's Office review Mr McCann's contribution for relevance to the motion. I am disappointed that he was not guided by the motion, and we heard more about his opinion of the army's role in Londonderry. I ask that the matter be referred to the Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I am not sure whether that is a point of order, but, nonetheless, we will ask the Speaker to have a look at it.

Members, the next item of business in the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.48 pm and resumed at 2.00 pm.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Mr Speaker: We will start with listed questions.

Jobs: Retail Sector

1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for the Economy how his Department is creating jobs in the retail sector. (AQO 846/16-21)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): My number one priority is to help create the conditions for Northern Ireland to become a globally competitive economy. A key part of that is to create more and better jobs in Northern Ireland. My Department is developing a new economic strategy that sets out our

ambition to grow the size of the economy and create jobs across our country.

Wider policy responsibility for the retail sector is shared by a number of Departments. In job promotion, support from my Department is primarily aimed at assisting companies to trade outside Northern Ireland. That brings money into the economy, which has a multiplier effect and indirectly supports domestic-facing sectors such as retail. My Department and Invest Northern Ireland have worked closely with the full range of businesses across Northern Ireland, including those in the retail sector, and a wide range of initiatives are available that offer support and guidance to local retailers. For example, Invest NI's business support team and the NIBusinessInfo website provide a valuable source of business information and signposting to specialist advice for retailers. Invest NI has supported local councils to develop programmes that are open and accessible to retail businesses, and they can also avail themselves of Invest NI's wide range of workshops and seminars. I am particularly encouraged that some of our town centres are benefiting from recent exchange rate changes that have seen an increase in cross-border shopping, bringing more money into the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he advise us as to what additional, specific measures he intends to take to create jobs in the retail sector, particularly in the aftermath of the closure of Austins in Derry, BHS and a number of other high-profile businesses?

Mr Hamilton: As I pointed out to the Member in my initial response, policy has traditionally been, for very good reason, not to financially support businesses in the retail sector. They tend to be, by and large, locally facing and not generally export-focused; and there is concern around issues of "displacement", as it is called. Investment in a retail business, say for example in Omagh, could displace jobs or trade away from one in Strabane. Clearly, whilst that might benefit one business, it would have a knock-on negative effect elsewhere. Those are some of the reasons why we have not, and we will continue not to, support retail business in the way that we do other sectors, such as, say, manufacturing.

I pointed out some of the range of types of support and signposting that Invest NI can offer to retail businesses that are short of actual financial support, or support to create jobs or other areas of their business. An exception, I suppose, is online retail or wholesale distribution to retail. That would only be where

they have export opportunities and, if they were genuinely additional in job creation and sales, they could be considered for support by Invest Northern Ireland. That would be on a case-by-case basis. Examples of that do not come up very often but, if they do, they will be assessed on their merits. No matter where they are located in Northern Ireland, if they have an online retail element and they are selling outside the region, genuinely additional and perhaps working in wholesale to retail — and they fit all the various criteria that any application has to go through — they can be considered for support of a financial nature.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister agree with me that it is important to sustain existing retail jobs in current difficult trading circumstances? Are the Minister and the Executive committed to supporting small businesses in relation to rates review and finding ways to ease the bureaucratic burden on small businesses?

Mr Hamilton: I am tempted to ask the Member for his view. He is a retailer of some experience. I used to work in retail myself, but I do not have the experience that the Member has.

The Executive have a proud record of supporting small businesses, which includes many retail businesses. I am personally very proud of the record that my party has in the Department of Finance and the introduction of the small business rate relief scheme, which grew in size over the years from a modest scheme to where it now offers £20 million worth of support, on an annual basis through rates relief, to thousands of businesses across Northern Ireland. I know from experience that many businesses credit the small business rate relief scheme with helping them to keep people in employment and, in some cases, helping them keep their business alive.

Nobody wants to prop up or artificially support any business in any sector but, given the challenges that retail has faced, particularly from the influx or rise in online sales over the last number of years, there is a need to provide some support. We have done that through the small business rate relief scheme and empty premises relief, for example, which I think the current Minister has rebranded. It has allowed over 500 new businesses to open up in what were previously vacant shops across Northern Ireland. So, we have a proud record. I know that the Minister is proposing changes to the rating system. I think that there is a need for an examination and reform of elements of the rating system but, as the current Minister is finding out, when you change one element it

has a knock-on effect elsewhere. I think that he needs to carefully consider this, and I am sure he intends to do so. Obviously, the Executive will take a final position in respect of his proposals when the consultation is over.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for his answers. Can he give his assessment of how important he sees the retail sector to the Northern Ireland economy and how our town centres are facing up to the ever-changing challenges?

Mr Hamilton: I accept and acknowledge — I think we all recognise — the range of challenges that the retail sector has been facing and continues to face. As I mentioned to Mr Chambers, we see a huge increase in the volume of trade being done online. It used to be in just a few small sectors, but it now seems that it is being done in even groceries and convenience goods in some areas. So, there is a huge challenge there.

Retail remains an important part of our economy. We may not be able to support it, for the reasons that I have outlined in the traditional sense of what we do with manufacturing, production or services, but it is a huge part of our economy, and I want to see a growing economy that benefits all sectors, including retail. It remains our largest employer. Around one in six of all jobs in Northern Ireland is in retail. The most recent figures, from 2015, show that the contribution that it makes to our economy through gross value added is down by around £240 million but its contribution in value to our economy still stands at around £4.8 billion, which is around a quarter of the total economy. About 10% of all Northern Ireland businesses are retail businesses and about 37% of the total turnover is in retail. So, it is a big part of our economy. Those figures are comparable with the UK average.

In terms of bearing up, I am very pleased that there has been a boost to many retailers across Northern Ireland, particularly in border regions, as a result of the fall in the value of sterling. InterTradeIreland does some work in analysing car registrations in car parks at shopping centres and supermarkets along the border region. In quarter 3 of 2016, it recorded that 56.8% of cars in border region shopping centres had Republic of Ireland registrations. That has grown from 33% in quarter 1 to 43% in quarter 2 and, as I said, is up to nearly 57% in quarter 3. So, there is a boost from the fall in the value of sterling, which is of much benefit to local retailers.

Broadband: Rural Areas

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any future plans for the delivery of broadband provision in rural areas. (AQO 847/16-21)

6. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on improving broadband provision in Newry and Armagh. (AQO 851/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 6 together.

Since 2008, my Department has channelled almost £64 million to encourage private sector upgrades to our telecoms networks, primarily in rural areas. Currently, 83% of households in Northern Ireland can access the Internet, compared with 86% across the UK. In Northern Ireland, 94% of premises can now access broadband services at 2 megabits per second or better. Across the UK, the figure is 98%. Broadband download speeds in Northern Ireland are continuing to increase. The average download speed now stands at 28.3 megabits per second, which is just below the UK average of 29 megabits per second. While there is no doubt that that investment has brought significant improvements for many rural dwellers, I recognise that more needs to be done. My Department's Northern Ireland broadband improvement project has already improved broadband access for over 46,000 premises. Within the Newry and Armagh constituency, almost 7,000 premises have seen improvements, 1,774, or 25%, of which have taken up new services.

The contract that was awarded to BT has a mechanism that requires BT to return funding for reinvestment when take-up of service exceeds a certain threshold. That will allow more premises to see improvements.

My Department is also managing the superfast roll-out programme, which, by 31 December 2017, will provide access to superfast broadband with speeds of at least 24 megabits per second to a further 38,000 premises across Northern Ireland. Again, those will primarily be in rural areas. It is important to recognise that, where fixed-line broadband is not viable, there are other technological alternatives available. Details of those can be found on my Department's website, and we intend to publish further information in respect of that. For those premises that continue to have access to services of less than 2 megabits per second, my Department offers assistance with the cost

of installing a basic broadband service using satellite or wireless technology.

In recognising the importance of access to faster broadband, the Executive's draft Programme for Government includes an indicator to improve Internet connectivity.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate the Minister's answer, but he knows that people are crying out for fixed-line broadband. Will he give us any more detail on how he will address those areas, especially those in rural Newry and Armagh? Does he not feel that, with the national broadband plan in the South, businesses here will be under threat because, if fixed-line broadband is installed in the South, more customers will go there?

Mr Hamilton: I am aware of the investment in the Republic of Ireland that the Member mentioned. They have similar problems to the ones that we have with rurality except on a much greater scale, and they have a very challenging job to get more fixed line and more fibre to premises.

As I mentioned to the Member in response to the substantive question, I have a good track record from making over £60 million of investment over the last number of years, which has unlocked similar figures of investment by the private sector. So, in excess of about £100 million has been invested. That has produced improvements for people, including those in the Member's constituency, where there is 62% superfast broadband availability, although not everybody has taken that up. Average download speeds, as I mentioned, are 21 megabits per second, which are well in excess of the 10 megabits per second that the UK Government want to set as a universal service obligation.

I will not deny that there are some who still do not have satisfactory speeds of broadband. I answered some questions the last time about Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and the same pattern is replicated in other constituencies in Northern Ireland. About 12% of people in Newry and Armagh have speeds of less than 2 megabits per second. That is not acceptable; in this day and age, we aspire to having fewer people in that position. The Member will appreciate that there are always individual circumstances that mean that you cannot get the very fast speeds to absolutely everybody, and 28% of people in his constituency have speeds of more than 30 megabits per second. So, around a third of the constituency have the fastest available speeds. We need to work on the 12% who have less than 2 megabits per

second by whatever means — superfast roll-out, the broadband improvement scheme or alternative technologies — to make sure that they get a satisfactory broadband speed.

Mr Kennedy: The Minister will know of my interest in this issue. Is he in a position to state the level of commitment required to provide an adequate and effective system of broadband in Newry and Armagh, and can he indicate how much money has been earmarked for that in the immediate future?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have the figure for the exact investment, but I am happy to provide that in more detail to the Member. I have the headline figures, which I can repeat. The Northern Ireland broadband improvement project has improved broadband access for over 46,000 premises across the whole of Northern Ireland. When you break that down on a constituency basis, for Newry and Armagh, which is the Member's constituency, around 7,000 premises have seen improvements. Of those 7,000, 25% have taken up the availability of those services. So, a further 75% have been enabled to have superfast broadband but have not availed themselves of it.

As I said in response to Mr Boylan, that is not where we see this finishing by any means; we want to roll-out better speeds to people right across Newry and Armagh and the whole of Northern Ireland. There are, as I have pointed out in the House before, alternative technologies available, so people who struggle to get fibre into their premises, and will be some way down the line in getting it, can avail themselves of the rapidly improving technologies of wireless and satellite. I encourage the Member to mention those when people in his constituency are asking about speeds. Instead of just looking at fibre and fixed line, they should also look at the alternative technologies. My Department can assist in the funding of that to ensure that everybody gets access to a reasonably affordable and satisfactory speed of broadband.

2.15 pm

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his replies thus far. Given the issue and the problems with the speed of broadband in remote rural areas, does the Minister have any plans to bid for more funding in next year's Budget?

Mr Hamilton: It all ultimately comes down to money and the availability of resources. We have made improvements, and I accept that we still have work to do. Not all parts of Northern

Ireland have benefited from the investments. The £60 million investment that we have made over the last number of years has improved our broadband speeds to the point where we are around the UK average. I want to be better than the UK average; I want to be at the top. I want Northern Ireland to have the competitive advantage that comes from having access to superfast broadband for businesses and companies wherever they are in Northern Ireland.

I very much welcome the Chancellor's pledge to invest £1 billion for better broadband in the UK. We are looking at the ramifications of that for Northern Ireland, how Northern Ireland might avail itself of that funding and how that is distributed. In the meantime, we have been developing an ambitious plan that would significantly improve speeds across Northern Ireland, particularly in rural areas. That will be costly and will take some time to develop, but it is something that I want to discuss in more detail with the Finance Minister during Budget discussions.

It is incredibly important that we all support ambitious and visionary plans to improve broadband. As Members from all constituencies have said to me over the past six months in Question Times, this is seen as a critical issue in all areas, and it is incredibly important for improving and enhancing the competitiveness of our economy.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, as you said, a number of people across Northern Ireland do not have access to fixed-line broadband. There is an upcoming auction by Ofcom of mobile spectrum. Is there anything you can do ensure that there will be an equitable distribution of spectrum to ensure a genuine choice of provider for rural dwellers?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question. Her point is a good one: we are somewhat transfixed by getting fibre to premises. I do not want to say that that is not what I want to do — my ambition is to get fibre to as many premises as we can to get the fastest speeds available — but alternative technologies are available. I mentioned wireless and satellite, which maybe had a bad reputation but are fast improving. The Member makes the point around 5G. There is an opportunity, with the eventual opening up of the 5G spectrum, to use that. It will not be a direct alternative for fixed-line fibre broadband, but it may provide the opportunity to have a decent speed of access to the Internet for individuals and businesses, particularly in remote rural areas.

It is something that I am very mindful of. I have had discussions with Ofcom about that and a range of issues. I have had discussions with some mobile providers. Some are keen to ensure that their footprint and infrastructure in Northern Ireland are enhanced and improved. Acknowledging that it is a regulated industry, I am keen to continue to monitor and work with the various mobile operators not just to enhance 4G but to seize the opportunities that 5G will present.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his answers to date. Can he assure me that future schemes will prioritise rural border communities like Cullyhanna, Cullaville, Altnamackin, Armaghbreague, Derrynoose, Madden, Collegelands and Blackwatertown? Will he give me an assurance that BT will be held to account for delivering fixed-line broadband to a specific number of rural homes and businesses?

Mr Hamilton: There is the statement for the local press already written.

When you look at the data for broadband availability for Belfast, for example, you will see that 100% of premises are able to receive five megabytes or more and 97% can receive 30 megabytes per second — really fast speeds. We have done well in investing in cities such as Belfast and towns across Northern Ireland. I am not saying that there are not pockets in towns and cities where there is a problem, but it is almost entirely a rural problem. That is where the investments have been made. The broadband improvement project has been investing most of its money in rural areas, and I expect that any future scheme will do that. I am not happy with having very good figures just in Belfast, Londonderry or other urban areas. I want to see the same standard of figures spread across Northern Ireland and everybody benefiting from good Internet access. As I say, that will help competitiveness in the economy. As the Member knows from his constituency, there are a lot of good businesses in rural parts of Northern Ireland for which good Internet access is now an absolutely essential requirement. Many do not have good enough access as it is. I want to see us invest more. I look forward to the Member's support for more funding in the Budget for broadband investment, which will help people in his constituency and elsewhere.

Boiler Installations: RHI Scheme

3. **Mr Mullan** asked the Minister for the Economy what action he has taken to claw

back money paid for illegitimate boiler installations through the renewable heat incentive scheme. (AQO 848/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: As the Member will be aware, shortly after taking up post, I commissioned an independent review of allegations of abuse in the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme. It has identified cases of possible gaming and non-compliance. I can confirm that work is ongoing to investigate the potential to take enforcement action where there is evidence that there has been non-compliance with the eligibility requirements. Advice has been sought from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, and discussions are ongoing with Ofgem, as the scheme administrator.

Mr Mullan: Does the Minister have any sense of responsibility for identifying both those who approved and those who have drawn down money from the initiative?

Mr Hamilton: As the Member and the House will be aware, the issue is subject to a live PAC investigation. I am sure that the Member and other Members would not wish me or themselves to do anything that would compromise a successful outcome to that investigation.

These are serious issues that I am very seized of the importance of. I am dealing with the matter on an ongoing basis to try to find a resolution to many of the issues that have flowed from the allegations and the concerns that there have been about the renewable heat incentive. My Department is developing a proposal for changes to the renewable heat incentive that, if accepted, will lead to a significant reduction in future costs to the Northern Ireland Executive. That requires further detailed discussion, including legal advice and further engagement with the European Commission, given that the scheme received approval within the state aid regime. I plan to bring a proposal to the Assembly in due course and issue a consultation document as early as I can in the new year. We are also pursuing stronger enforcement of the existing regulations through Ofgem so that abuses of the scheme are addressed as effectively as possible and any possible fraud cases dealt with rigorously.

Mr Smith: Will the investigation initiated by the Minister be able to distinguish between maladministration and illegitimate installations — in other words, fraud? Are the police currently investigating this?

Mr Hamilton: As I pointed out in my answer to Mr Mullan, the very serious allegations of fraud and abuse that were received have been given the due serious attention. That is why we have commenced and carried out the investigations that we have. I am absolutely adamant that, where there is proof and evidence of abuse of the scheme — the important bit of this is that there has to be proof and evidence — all appropriate actions should be taken, including, if required, criminal proceedings against anybody who has abused or sought to defraud the scheme.

Mr Murphy: The Minister has rightly pointed out that the PAC is doing a piece of work on the financial accountability for the scheme. Its recommendations and report will come to his Department and my Committee. He said in a previous response that he is bringing forward a new scheme that will hopefully be more robust. Regarding management of the scheme, what lessons have been learnt in his Department? What new system will be put in place? This is not simply about a suspicion of fraud; this is about the management of a scheme in the old Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Hamilton: I accept the points that the Member has made. I am sure that, in his role as Chair of the Committee, he will ensure that we learn lessons. That is absolutely critical, and that is what we have been doing through a range of investigations that the Member and his Committee are very familiar with. We must not only learn those lessons but implement the recommendations. We have to manage the scheme moving forward, and new arrangements and a specific team have been put in place to do that and to give it the attention that it deserves. We have to learn those lessons from RHI and apply them to other projects not just in my Department but across government and the whole Executive.

Mr Lyons: It is clear that the Minister understands the seriousness of the RHI situation. Will he update the House on the actions that he has taken about accusations that RHI was subject to fraud and abuse?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I take the issue extremely seriously. All Ministers take accusations of fraud and abuse exceptionally seriously. That is why, in July, shortly after taking up post, I commissioned an independent investigation of those very accusations. The review has been examining a sizeable number of installations across Northern Ireland and has identified

significant weaknesses in the scheme. Those findings will be used to inform the next steps. Clearly, we will include consideration of recovering payments from any participants found not to be complying with their obligations under the scheme.

Mr Allister: It might cost him his job, but does the Minister agree that at least one of his predecessors, particularly Mrs Foster, was asleep at the wheel in failing to exercise ministerial supervision and ensure that adequate cost controls were in place? Will he give us an update on how much this squander made in Stormont will cost us in the future?

Mr Hamilton: The Member describes it as "squander": I did not see him refer to it as squander when he wrote to me a few weeks ago pleading for a constituent of his to be included in the scheme. *[Laughter.]* It seems that it is squander when it suits the Member.

I do not agree at all with the beginning of the Member's question; I was going to say that it was a statement rather than a question. The Member is long enough in the tooth and, if reports are right, may even be departing this place very soon, so he will know that policy experts — so-called policy experts, perhaps — in the Department devise policy. In this case, independent consultants were employed. They have come before the PAC and said that they got it wrong and that the advice given to the Minister at the time by those external consultants and by the policy experts in the Department was wrong. It is clear to me that the Ministers followed all the advice given to them and that, because that advice was wrong and was based on bad grounds, the scheme was badly designed. Nobody, least of all me, has denied that this is shocking, that there are problems here and that we need to deal with them, but my focus now is on tackling the serious allegations of fraud, developing a plan of action to deal with the financial implications of RHI and, as soon as possible, examining the ways in which we can mitigate and start to reduce the cost of the scheme.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Patsy McGlone, I advise him that he may not get a supplementary.

Infrastructure Projects

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions he has held with the Minister for Infrastructure to prioritise projects that will deliver an effective economic return. (AQO 849/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Executive have made and continue to make significant investment in Northern Ireland's infrastructure. As a member of the Executive, I have regular and ongoing discussions with all my ministerial colleagues, including the Minister for Infrastructure. Between 2011 and 2016, there has been £354 million of investment by the former Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning in capital infrastructure projects. The Minister for Infrastructure and I recognise the importance of targeted investment in our infrastructure as an enabler and driver of economic growth. Physical and digital connectivity is important in supporting our future economic competitiveness and social well-being. The Department for Infrastructure is engaged with my officials in the development of the draft economic strategy, which, together with the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland, will set out in more detail the Executive's priority areas for investment in the years ahead. Investment in our infrastructure requires long-term planning and a sustained focus on delivery to meet the anticipated needs of today's generation as well as future generations.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

Tourism Ireland: NI Support

T1. **Mrs Palmer** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any discussions he has had with Tourism Ireland about investing support in Northern Ireland tourism. (AQT 616/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I have had discussions with the chief executive of Tourism Ireland on a casual basis and more formal discussions with the chair of Tourism Ireland. I am due to meet the chief executive of Tourism Ireland at the tail end of this week, and I look forward to a, hopefully, positive discussion on my priorities for tourism and its development in Northern Ireland, and on how we can align the work of Tourism Ireland with what the sector here, including Tourism Northern Ireland, is doing to develop and improve our tourism product.

Mrs Palmer: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he ask Tourism Ireland to support the promotion of our excellent airports, as opposed to just Dublin Airport?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question. She will know that this is an issue

that I have been very interested in, for a range of reasons, since taking office. I noted recent comments, similar to the question that the Member has just asked, by the chief executive of the International Airport. I agree with those comments on the need for the better promotion of our airports, not just the International Airport but the City of Derry Airport and Belfast City Airport. We all accept, including me, that Dublin is a very different place: it is much bigger; it has a bigger economy than ours; and it has one bigger airport that is better developed and serves a city population of around 1.5 million. As such, it will always have certain advantages over a region such as ours, given our scale and the fact that we have three airports serving a small region. That does not, however, take away from a point that the Member will, I am sure, echo: entering Northern Ireland from other parts of the world is as easy and simple as flying into Dublin. That is why I want, as I have said, to establish an air routes task force in order, first, to identify key routes and then to develop policies and interventions that can attract airlines to those key routes so that Northern Ireland is better served by air connectivity.

I welcome last week's announcement that Icelandair is to fly into Belfast City Airport from next week. People might not see Iceland as a big marketplace or a destination that will attract inward tourism, but there are, I think, 16 or 17 entry points into North America via Reykjavik Airport. It is a bit of a hub airport that expands our wider reach. Sometimes, that is the way in which a region such as ours develops its air connectivity — through another hub airport — which is why I suspect that it will be among the recommendations of the task force.

Wind Farms/Wind Turbines

T2. Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions he has had with NIE Networks about the capacity of the grid to cope with approved and planned wind farms or single wind turbines. (AQT 617/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I have had extensive discussions with not just NIE Networks but other key players in the energy sector about the grid infrastructure in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Member will appreciate that it is not always viewed like this by some, but our grid is a scarce and precious resource and, as such, needs to be handled carefully. As the Member is aware, there are pressures on the grid and a need for further investment in it. That issue is handled through the regulator and NIE working together on their price determination. I think

that they are in the process of doing that, and I look forward to a positive outcome.

I want investment in our grid, for a host of reasons, particularly because, as I travel around Northern Ireland, I regularly see many businesses that want to expand, but not only is there a sometimes a cost to get on to the grid, it can take a long time for them to do so. I have noticed that particularly on my travels in the west of the Province, so I want to ensure that the lack of cost-efficient and time-efficient access to the grid is not an inhibitor of the growth of companies in Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: Minister, an answer to a question for written answer from my colleague Andy Allen stated that some 2,423 planning applications for wind turbines and farms were approved between May 2007 and March 2016. Can the Minister give me an assurance that those that have been built are all connected to the grid?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have that information. I would need to speak to NIE and others to make sure that those that are built are all connected. In fact, I was at a business with Mr William Irwin last week that had a turbine erected but was not yet connected. That was all going through the process. There is a process that has to be dealt with. We have to be careful and mindful that there is a lot of demand on the grid and that, with the grid that we currently have, it is difficult to meet all that demand, particularly with renewables, which the Member mentioned. I want to point out to the House, as I have done before, that, at present, around 900 megawatts of electricity is connected to the grid. Offers for approximately 700 more megawatts are already out there, and there is another 200 or so megawatts to be offered. That will get us to a position where, when all those are onto the grid, we will be able to meet our 40% electricity consumption target by 2020. This is an issue that I am very mindful of and very aware of, and I expect it to be raised later this week when I am with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to give evidence as part of its ongoing inquiry into electricity supply in Northern Ireland. It is an issue that has far and wide interest, not least in my office, and I want to make sure that energy is not an inhibiting factor in any way, shape or form to the future growth and competitiveness of our economy.

Export Performance

T3. Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on how exports from

Northern Ireland are performing. (AQT 618/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The latest data on exports, as measured by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, was released this morning. These are figures for the year ending quarter 3 of this year. Again, it is very good news for Northern Ireland business. Northern Ireland exports are up to £7.4 billion in the last year, and that represents a 6% increase in exports. The significance of the 6% increase is that that is the highest percentage increase in the whole of the United Kingdom. This is another really strong performance by Northern Ireland exporters, and I pay tribute to all the companies that have been working hard over the last year to improve their sales outside Northern Ireland. As we all know, in a small region like ours, if we want to grow our economy, we have to sell outside our region and sell more to the rest of the United Kingdom and also to the rest of the world. I am really pleased that it is the manufacturing sector and the life sciences sector that have posted a 24% increase in their sales over the last year, and I am also pleased that markets outside Europe are the ones that are driving this growth, with a nearly 30% increase in exports to the United States over the last year. The performance of Northern Ireland exporters has been excellent, and I hope that that continues to be the case.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for that answer. I very much welcome the continued success of Northern Ireland's exporters. Could the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to build on that success for Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: It is important, as the Member suggests, that we do not just rest on our laurels, sit back and pat ourselves on the back for a job well done. We have to build on the success that we have experienced over the past year in the sense that the last quarterly results show that we were the only UK region to increase exports in that time. It shows that we have the highest increase of any UK region, so that is a really successful performance for a small economy like Northern Ireland's. We must build on that and that is why I have been bringing a focus to exports over the last few months.

The Member will know that I introduced a trade accelerator plan, which is particularly focused on first-time exporters and encouraging them to look at markets outside Northern Ireland. I have introduced a package of enhanced support for accommodation and travel to Great Britain and also for travel to the Republic of Ireland. There have been various market

introduction programmes and more in-market trade advisory support. I also recently announced a new international trade plan, which will see the creation of a new trade advisory board, made up of many of Northern Ireland's best and most successful exporters, to advise me and Invest Northern Ireland on the policies that we should be developing to seize more trade opportunities. We will appoint a series of Northern Ireland trade ambassadors with the aim of utilising the power and strength of our diaspora, which is spread right around the world.

We will also increase the Invest NI presence, with a particular focus and emphasis on trade, by up to 10 new destinations before the end of next year. We are examining the potential to create new trade, investment and innovation hubs in key markets. There has been and will continue to be a relentless focus on trade as a key driver of growth in our economy.

EMAG Report: Recommendations

T4. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy when he will formally respond to the recommendations in the Energy and Manufacturing Advisory Group's (EMAG) report. (AQT 619/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: EMAG produced its recommendations earlier this year. I have been carefully considering those recommendations, and I will use them — there are many good recommendations in the EMAG report — to advise me and to help shape future energy policy in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Member appreciates already from his time on the Economy Committee that the whole issue of energy is very intricate and interlinked, and that taking a decision in respect of one recommendation from EMAG will have consequences elsewhere in the energy system. What I am attempting to do, in what is a very complex and often very technical area, is to take cognisance of all the issues, whether around renewables, manufacturing and affordability, or security of supply, and to come forward with a comprehensive energy policy that will stand Northern Ireland in good stead, not just in the short term but for many years to come.

Mr Chambers: I understand that the Minister has perhaps queried the figures quoted in the EMAG report that large energy users here face electricity prices almost 60% higher than the EU 2015 median. Does that mean he is rejecting, at this point, recommendation 2 of the report?

Mr Hamilton: I am happy to go back and look in Hansard at what I said in response to a motion proposed by him and Mr Aiken a few weeks ago. I accept that there is a price differential: I am not arguing that large and very large businesses in Northern Ireland are paying more than the EU median. However, when you take on pence per kWh, I worked out that there was about a 30% difference. That is still a significant difference — I do not dispute that — but there is no argument over substance. There is not even an argument, it is an issue of figure work rather than one of substance about the policy. The Member will know that the powers I have as Minister to improve affordability are limited, but rest assured that I will do everything I can to keep the price of electricity as low as possible for all consumers in Northern Ireland.

Apprenticeship Levy

T5. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on his plans for the apprenticeship levy. (AQT 620/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I am on record as saying that I am not a fan of the apprenticeship levy, which is a tax being introduced from next year on businesses right across the United Kingdom. Businesses with an annual salary bill of over £3 million will be charged 0.5% tax on that. It will hit many businesses in Northern Ireland and right across the UK, so I am not a fan of it; I think it is a very bad example of Government taxing on an issue where the policy responsibility resides with the devolved Administrations, including ours. The Finance Minister and I are both on record as saying that this will be of no benefit, in a monetary sense, to Northern Ireland.

I recently launched a short, sharp, focused consultation to take the temperature of the business community, and particularly those businesses and sectors that will be most affected by the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. What I want to see coming from the consultation is, first, a better sense of the impact that the apprenticeship levy will have on businesses and, secondly, some ideas coming forward from businesses as to what they would like to see us as the Government, and as a provider of skills training for businesses, do in response to this tax on their businesses and on the public sector.

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

2.45 pm

Education

Schools: Maintenance Budget

1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Education whether he will increase the budget for maintenance for schools this year. (AQO 860/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. School maintenance is an area of the budget that is always under pressure due to the ageing schools estate. That is partly why there needs to be an overall assessment of the schools estate. While there is a significant capital programme under way involving new builds, school enhancement projects and minor works, a significant number of schools require maintenance. That is funded from the resource budget. The budget for school maintenance is just one of the budgetary pressures faced by the Education Authority (EA). The budget position for Education as a whole remains challenging.

As in the previous year, an initial £14 million was allocated for maintenance for the 2016-17 financial year. I note that the Member asked about the budgets for this year; I am not quite sure whether he is referring to the remainder of 2016-17, which is about three months, or whether he is looking ahead. The £14 million was allocated for maintenance to enable the EA to undertake statutory and emergency response maintenance and address urgent health and safety issues. An additional £950,000 was allocated to the EA following the October monitoring round, which boosts it up to approximately £15 million. I will continue to highlight pressures in the maintenance budgets in monitoring rounds but, obviously, there will then be the question of where we are potentially for next year. Obviously, the focus, given the constraints of the budget, is still very much on urgent maintenance activities to address health and safety issues.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Will he tell me whether there is a backlog in maintenance? If so, how much? Has he bid for additional resources in the monitoring rounds to clear that backlog?

Mr Weir: Some of these things depend on where you draw the line. One description of a maintenance backlog for the school estate could be estimated at just under £300 million. I am sure that the Member realises that this is a little bit beyond the scope of a monitoring

round. The definition of a maintenance backlog is to make good the costs that are necessary to bring school buildings back to the condition they were in when they were built. In many cases, you are talking about a degree of transformation. The argument for many buildings would be that, if you are trying to restore them to the position they were in on day 1, the level of expenditure required would be prohibitive. In many cases, a school enhancement programme (SEP), a new school build or even minor works would be a much more cost-effective solution. Obviously, those are outside the direct remit of the maintenance budget.

It is something that will be kept under review. To be perfectly honest, considering where we are in terms of the overall Budget position at present with the Executive, is there likely to be a great deal of money available in the next monitoring round? It is highly unlikely, but we will continue to have discussions in relation to that.

Mrs Dobson: The Minister recently sent a letter to schools requesting responses on how they can have better control of their own budgets. Will he detail whether, at this stage, he has any plans or proposals to put to schools? If not, are they at least in development?

Mr Weir: The point was to have something relatively open-ended. There is no point in saying to schools, governors or school principals, "What autonomy do you want? We'll actually tell you what autonomy you're getting as part of that". It is an open-ended situation.

An issue around maintenance and procurement has been raised regularly with me as I have been out around schools. It was also raised with me before I became Minister. It is a very pertinent issue. It is an area that I intend to look at particularly closely if we look at autonomy, but the burdens in that regard go wider than that. There may be, at times, a slight element of urban myth about some of that stuff as well. I sometimes get responses from various school principals that outline a degree of frustration in terms of procurement and some of the blockages in that regard. While one wants to ensure that we have an open and transparent process, we should not have a situation where, in terms of getting some relatively minor maintenance done, it takes twice the time — possibly at a greater cost — than it would if there were a level of autonomy locally.

From that point of view, whereas no decisions have been taken about additional autonomy for schools, that would be a very live area within that. When we look at issues of autonomy, we should look at the expertise on the ground, particularly among school principals. That is just one of the aspects that is looked at, but I do not come with a prejudged opinion in that regard; that is why I am seeking the information directly from schools.

Lord Morrow: My question is not dissimilar from the one that Mrs Dobson asked. Does the Minister accept that there is merit in considering delegating funding to schools for their maintenance projects? Surely there is some merit in that. Would he be prepared to consider that in future?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. I would certainly be prepared to consider that. It is part of the wider consultation — it is, effectively, a pre-consultation — on greater autonomy. There is a feeling in terms of what is known on the ground that there is a range of issues, and maintenance is one obvious example where school principals know the best way to do things. They should, sometimes, have a degree of autonomy over what they prioritise within that. Balanced against that, there are economies of scale. You have to balance that out to make sure that you get the best possible value for money. If you are looking at issues around public procurement, there is a good argument, because the maintenance that is done directly in schools tends to be at a lower level, that a lot of that can be done with a budget delegated directly to schools. Nobody is talking about giving a school the money to build a new school or for an SEP or anything of that nature, but, if we are talking about day-to-day maintenance, there is good sense in looking at that closely.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answers. Continuing the theme of a certain autonomy for schools to carry out maintenance, is it the reality that there is no point in having autonomy if they do not have the budget and the resources to do that? Is this not in reality putting an additional burden on already overburdened school principals, who will now have to procure small works for their schools? Is this not and should this not be the work of the Education Authority?

Mr Weir: I have indicated that these are issues for consideration, so it is not a done deal. It is about trying to work out where the dividing lines should be. I mentioned the figure of £14 million. If there was movement towards that

low-level maintenance being dealt with at school level, the budget would have to follow the function. There is no point in doing otherwise.

On the other side of the coin — again, there are compelling cases in relation to that — if there is going to be greater level of autonomy and responsibility, that creates a certain level of burden. That said, on the other part of the consultation, we also need to look at the unnecessary bureaucratic burdens that we place on schools. Sometimes, schools will react and will say, "We do not want this" or "Why on earth are we being asked for that?". It may well be that, depending on the nature of things, there are good reasons why the Education Authority, the Department or an external body would seek that particular piece of information, but I am also concerned that we do not get a situation where there is simply a level of duplication. Sometimes, when issues have been raised with schools, it has been about the weight of the paper load that is there. Consequently, if we can create a situation in which there is sensible removal, where we can, within that, in many ways that goes to the other side of the coin in looking at greater autonomy. As with anything in life, if you take bigger decisions, there will be bigger levels of responsibility on you.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Christopher Stalford, I have to inform the House that question 4 has been withdrawn.

Teachers: Full-time Jobs

2. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Education to outline how his Department is assisting newly qualified teachers in obtaining a full-time job in education. (AQO 861/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. Directly speaking, the Department is not the employer of teachers and, therefore, is not directly responsible for the appointment of teachers. Individual teachers in a school setting are employed by the board of governors, with the recruitment, selection and appointment of teachers carried out in conjunction with the employing authority, such as the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) or, in the case of a voluntary grammar school or grant-maintained integrated school, by the individual board of governors.

I acknowledge that, in the current economic climate, it can be difficult for many teachers to find employment in schools. The same can be said of graduates in a wide range of

professions. My Department and the employing authorities have put in place a number of policies and practices that encourage the employment of newly or recently qualified teachers when filling vacancies. It includes recommending that employers should consider the newly qualified teachers or experienced, non-retired teachers seeking to return to employment when filling vacancies, including those of a temporary nature.

The Investing in the Teaching Workforce scheme passed through the Executive during the summer and was formally launched on 5 September. The primary aim of the scheme is to refresh the teaching workforce whilst providing job opportunities for those recently qualified teachers who have experienced the greatest difficulty in securing meaningful employment.

Mr Stalford: The Minister mentioned the Investing in the Teaching Workforce scheme: can he detail for the House the range of impacts he expects the scheme to have and the targets that have been set to increase opportunities in the profession?

Mr Weir: As indicated, the scheme was launched on 5 September. For 2016-17 it is a pilot scheme. Members may remember from the previous mandate a scheme that was mooted for a larger number of teachers all in one year. The feeling was that, irrespective of the merits of that scheme, those numbers would not be achievable within one year. The primary aim of the scheme, as indicated, is to refresh and re-profile the teaching workforce whilst providing job opportunities for those teachers who have experienced the greatest difficulty in securing meaningful employment.

Not unreasonably, perhaps, those who are most recently qualified will have a higher unemployment rate in terms of permanent jobs than those who have been out for some time. The scheme bid for £8 million from the public sector transformation fund to enable 120 teachers aged 55 and over to avail themselves of it. That was the projected figure. Therefore, the aim was not simply to give an opportunity for early retirement — it needed to be driven by an application from the individual teacher — but the condition of accessing the fund was the provision of job opportunities for a corresponding number of teachers who qualified from 2012 up to and including 2016. That process is in place, and it is hoped that the posts will be advertised in the spring of 2017. Without the scheme, those opportunities would simply not exist. That will, I think, see teachers being secured for release by 31 March 2017.

Ms S Bradley: Does the Minister accept there are many young, vibrant, very good, well-qualified teachers who are excluded from the Investing in the Teaching Workforce scheme? Will he consider lifting the maximum profile which means that teachers with more experience cannot apply for these jobs?

Mr Weir: The scheme is already out there. I accept there are vibrant, young teachers who fall outside the scheme. The scheme is designed to re-profile the workforce. If we simply lift the requirements, where do we set them? We will be left facing one of two situations. If it is completely open-ended, in theory, a teacher who has been qualified for 30 or 35 years could replace someone who has less experience or is younger. I am not sure how that would re-profile the workforce. Alternately, you could draw an arbitrary line elsewhere, and again you will have people who qualify and those who do not.

To qualify for funding from the public sector transformation fund, the economic projections of what would be saved in the school's budgets are required to at least match the investment from the initial amount. The reality is that, if a business case were to be put forward for a completely open-ended scheme, the Department would not qualify for the public sector transformation fund, in which case the Department would have to fund it from its own very tight resources — and it is not fundable at present.

It is a requirement of qualifying for the fund. I understand that there is a degree of frustration about that.

I should also say that the scheme was suggested by the teacher unions. I know that the teacher unions and I are not always on the same page, but we are on this. Every single teacher union that I met prior to it being launched said that they supported the scheme and the fact that it was being done on that basis. The reality is that, without the cap, the scheme would not be doable, and no newly or recently qualified teachers would be able to avail themselves of it.

3.00 pm

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

Mr McElduff: I empathise to some degree with those who are qualified longer needing to secure posts, and I encourage the Minister to look creatively at that in the future, if he can. Is

there any possibility of introducing or exploring the possibility of a scheme to refresh the head teacher workforce in our schools?

Mr Weir: I understand where the Member is coming from. First, on his point about stretching the scheme, I was mindful of that. I appreciate that the previous Minister mooted a scheme with a similar motivation. The previous scheme was a bit more restricted, but I was able to stretch it from three years to five years. That was the limit to which it could be stretched while still qualifying for the funding, however.

The Member asked about head teachers. The scheme is essentially designed to provide a like-for-like replacement. A senior teacher who has been there for some time may fit on the scale by way of a replacement for a head teacher. If a maths or history teacher or a P6 teacher decides to retire, however, there is nothing to stop a very new or recently qualified teacher taking his or her place. I do not think that it is realistic to say that you can simply take out school principals and replace them with like-for-like replacements. If any schemes are proposed in the future, I will always be happy to examine them. However, when we talk about school principals, we are not talking about like-for-like replacements.

Mr Beggs: I understand that, in June 2015, only a third of newly qualified teachers gained employment after one year. All newly qualified teachers will have incurred significant student debt. Has the Minister considered altering the number of places for teacher training at our universities in Northern Ireland, rather than having to introduce one-off schemes that are not sustainable in the long term?

Mr Weir: This is a pilot scheme, so it may be sustainable. We should remember that about 750 vacancies become available each year, so there is some degree of throughput and change. There are a couple of issues. If you were to make changes to the overall intake of teacher-training students and there was then a further restriction on the numbers here, you would leave yourself open to a situation in which people would simply qualify elsewhere and then try to come back, in which case you would be left with a different problem. Even if a decision were taken today to reduce dramatically the number of teachers being trained, it would be at least four or five years down the line before that would have any particular impact on the workforce. The reality is that we need to take action now, and that is why the Department and I support the investing

in the teaching workforce scheme, which tries to have some impact on the current situation.

There is a wider issue that the Assembly would have to deal with. If we were to reduce dramatically the number of teachers being trained, Stranmillis and St Mary's would not both be sustainable. I know that that has been looked at in the past, but there would need to be a degree of consensus on how we dealt with that and whether we went for a completely different system. From the point of view of economies of scale, you could not simply reduce the numbers and expect both institutions to be sustainable.

Mr Lyttle: The programme for international student assessment (PISA) 2015 has identified a gap of over two school years' attainment between the 25% most advantaged and 25% most disadvantaged 15-year-olds in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister not accept, therefore, that that is further evidence of the need for fundamental educational reform, including immediate action to address the oversupply of teachers?

Mr Weir: That was a good opportunity to shoehorn the last bit on teacher education into a wider question on PISA. I admire the Member. The PISA figures show that we are, again, slightly above average in the OECD figures. The PISA tests are not as compatible with the Northern Ireland curriculum to the extent that, for instance, the trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) tests are. Last week, there was a situation in which, because of the learning issues and the way in which the curriculum is established, they were not comparing like with like. On the overall situation, it was interesting that some of the PISA figures indicated that the gaps between those who are achieving the most and those who are achieving the least had narrowed considerably, and we were one of the best OECD countries in getting results across the board, if you like.

A range of education issues need reform, and I am trying to progress those. It is not simply a question of standing still. I know that the Member has discussed a number of those issues, and they have been the subject of debate in the House. That suggests that, while there has been some success in education in Northern Ireland — to paraphrase the inspector's report, we have much to be proud of with our results — we need to improve on other areas. That is why there is a need for overall reform in education.

Social Media

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps taken in schools to highlight to pupils the risks associated with social media and the promotion of responsible usage. (AQO 862/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. As I am sure you are aware, in 2015, the Executive commissioned the development of an e-safety strategy and action plan for Northern Ireland. That was a recognition of the rising concerns of parents, carers, professionals and broader society for the safety of children and young people when using the Internet and engaging with social media. My Department is represented on the strategy cross-departmental project board and has contributed throughout the drafting process to ensure that the strategy includes as an aim the embedding of a culture of e-safety in schools and other educational settings. It is intended that the draft strategy will issue for public consultation early in the new year.

Alongside the contribution to the draft strategy, my Department has also issued guidance to schools on a number of occasions to provide the entire school community with advice on e-safety and how to use electronic devices safely. That guidance is available from the departmental website and includes links to other organisations that provide specialist information and advice on the subject.

Boards of governors have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils, and, in fulfilling this duty, schools are required to have an e-safety policy in place. Schools have been provided with guidance on what should be included in that policy, and further updated guidance is scheduled to be issued in the near future. A number of courses and resources that deal with various aspects of safety are aimed specifically at Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 pupils.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. What will an e-safety strategy mean for schools?

Mr Weir: The vision of the strategy is for all children and young people to make the best use of the educational, social and economic benefits of the online world while staying safe from potential harm online. Subject to Executive approval, the draft strategy will issue for public consultation early in the new year.

There are specific aims in the strategy that are applicable to schools. Those include developing a consistent approach to e-safety in schools through strong departmental direction and technical provision; the education of our children and young people and those who work with them; the development of a consistent approach to e-safety messages for children, young people, parents, carers and practitioners; the embedding of a culture of e-safety in schools, colleges, youth services and organisations; and the skilling up of practitioners who work with children, young people and families. It is not simply a question of creating of a strategy. Once agreed, the strategy will be implemented through a three-year delivery plan.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for that update, although I am sure that he shares my frustration that we are still waiting for the consultation to come out next year, four years after such a strategy was agreed. I thought that that was due to happen around the time of the election.

Will the Minister ensure that the strategy is live? Technology changes constantly, and we need to make sure that such a strategy keeps up to date.

Mr Weir: That is a very valid point. As I said, the strategy is due to be launched early in the new year. If we all take a step back, we can see the speed at which technology is changing. When we think of our own schooldays — if we can think back that far — we know the difficulties. I appreciate that the journey is shorter for some in the House than for others. We have to realise that what is relevant now has changed from what was relevant two or three years ago. That is why it is critical not just to create a strategy but to have an overall implementation plan that is live and has the flexibility to ensure that, whatever the changes in technology or the broad cultural changes — sometimes, it is less about the technology and more about how it is adapted and used — there can be a fairly quick response to the changing environment. That is a critical issue.

Ms Archibald: Will the Minister outline the extent of cyberbullying and other forms of bullying that are affecting our children and young people?

Mr Weir: Towards the end of the last mandate, we passed anti-bullying legislation. As it is implemented by schools, part of that will be not simply to record the bullying but to find out its methodology and cause. When I was Chair of

the Committee, we wrestled with how best that could be implemented. One thing was to try to ensure the accurate capture of all that information without running the risk of creating what would, effectively, become a league table showing where the greatest levels of bullying were and were not. There was a danger of stigmatising schools or that schools would not take bullying seriously enough and try to dismiss it.

The Bill, which received Royal Assent on 12 May this year, recognises cyberbullying as a key aspect. It is a complex legal issue, and cyberbullying is an area in which it is hard to differentiate. Schools have a clear remit, and that includes a provision for policies to be developed by boards of governors. However, it is very difficult also to capture where the cyberbullying is happening outwith the school, including at weekends or during the summer holidays. That is why it is not just a question for the Department of Education; it is a question for the Safeguarding Board. We have been trying to work in conjunction with other Departments. It is evil, and we have seen in some extreme cases not just the damaging effect that it can have on people's lives but that some young people in particular have been driven to suicide by cyberbullying or bullying. It is pernicious, and we need to take every possible step that we can to obliterate it from our society.

Ms Armstrong: I commend the Minister. Tonight, I am attending a social media workshop for parents with the PSNI at Strangford Integrated College, so the question is very timely. Given that many social media organisations have offices on the island of Ireland, how is he involving them in his programme?

Mr Weir: That is also part of the remit of the Safeguarding Board. There will need to be liaison with those organisations. Part of the issue is the question of finding where we can apply pressure on social media organisations and trying to find the root of the issue. Part of the problem, as we have seen in a general sense with a lot of Internet problems, is that it is multinational in nature. That makes it a lot more difficult to control, and it is why our minds need to be more agile when thinking about what actions we can take.

The stereotype that many of us remember from years ago is of one child hanging around outside the school gate, waiting for another child to emerge and then assault or threaten them. That still happens, but bullying has also moved well beyond that. We need to ensure that we have a flexible approach, and it is

important that we see what links can be built with social media organisations to try to control that. Some steps have been taken, but a lot of them have been a bit slow at times to react. Hopefully, there is a bit of catch-up happening now.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Teachers' Pay Dispute

T1. **Mr Mullan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the teachers' pay dispute and resulting strike action, given that he will have concerns that the education system is approaching crisis stage. (AQT 626/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the right honourable member for the constituency of NASUWT for his question. [*Laughter.*] It has been made abundantly clear that a call has gone out from the managing authorities to try to sit down and see where we can provide long-term solutions to this. The reality is that, in the 2015-16 and 2016-17 budgets, there is not the money to pay. At times, there have been some issues raised in relation to parity, yet, when an offer was made by management side that was greater than parity, the teachers' unions said no to it. What has been put in place for 2015-16 and 2016-17 was, ultimately, within the current constraints, a fair offer. I appreciate that not everyone will agree with that, but the important thing is that people try to move on from this position. Mr McCann said on a previous occasion that he would be on the barricades with the teachers. Wherever barricades were erected, I think that Mr McCann would be there. Let us remember that, on this direct issue, industrial disputes with teachers have been arising since 2011 onwards. That is not directly related to pay.

On the other issue with this, if we are sitting down, let us see what we can do across the board. I think that this is where there is a degree of common interest. As I mentioned earlier, if one of the arguments that is being used is around conditions to do with the pressures that are put on teachers with the requirements of additional paperwork, I am keen to see that discussed between management and the trade unions. We should explore where we can lift more bureaucracy out of the system, particularly where it is unnecessary. I urge the unions to take up the offer of sitting down with the management team

to look at where we can get to from 2017 and beyond.

Mr Mullan: Regardless of what the Minister may think, I do not speak for the NASUWT; I represent the children. Can the Minister enlighten me on whether he has engaged with the Finance Minister or any other Executive colleagues concerning the future of teachers' pay?

Mr Weir: The position on the two-year pay deal was signed off by the Department of Finance as part of an overall package. Let us remember that increments were built in to 2015-16 and 2016-17. You can compare that with what happens across the water, where automatic increments were abolished in 2013. Again, if you are comparing, you have to compare like with like. The reality is that, as was highlighted in the monitoring round and, indeed, in a wider context, there is not any additional money. There is not any money in the budget, so a certain reality needs to be faced up to. Given where school budgets are at present, the reality is that, if you inject additional pay costs beyond what is there at present, I think that it is only likely to lead to a greater level of staff redundancies. I also have to be careful to try to protect teachers' jobs. My key concern is about protecting that school budget, particularly for the children.

Childcare Costs

T2. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Education how he will address the increasing cost of childcare, particularly in the light of the recent publication of Employers for Childcare's childcare cost survey 2016. (AQT 627/16-21)

Mr Weir: A childcare strategy is being prepared for the Executive, and we need to see how that can be best implemented. I think that there has been an acceptance of a level of support, and I want to see that increased. We will need to ensure that what we are getting is financially viable in the current circumstances. I am happy to engage — indeed, I have done at times — with various childcare organisations to see how we can best take this forward. They were, I think, fairly actively involved in the design work and, indeed, discussions around the development of that childcare strategy. I think that that will be coming fairly soon to the Executive.

Mrs Dobson: I think that a good starting point in this process would be to finally publish the childcare strategy. Since May, Minister, you have repeatedly stated in your written answers

that you will be presenting the childcare strategy to the Executive in the coming months, and you are not much clearer today either in your answer. Can you confirm exactly when or in what month that will be?

Mr Weir: I am not in a position to give an exact date and, obviously, my duty is to get it onto the Executive's schedule, have it debated by the Executive and then, hopefully, have it passed. From that point of view, while I appreciate that I am directly responsible to the House, I am also directly responsible, in the first instance, to provide papers to the Executive. I hope that that will be reasonably soon. Depending upon what is agreed, we will have to look at the implementation of it.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr William Irwin.

Mr Irwin: Is it a topical question? OK.

Battlefields Project

T3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the battlefields project. (AQT 628/16-21)

Mr Weir: The battlefields project was launched today by me and Minister Givan. It has been available in other parts of the United Kingdom, but it was not embraced here. It occasionally happened that the odd school was doing things off its own bat until now. This will now be available. It is jointly funded by my Department and the Department of Communities. It will be available from summer 2017, essentially for year 10 students. There will be representatives from every school.

It is particularly looking at the contribution and sacrifice that was made on the First World War battlefields. That was something that happened across the community. Sometimes, people tend to forget that, and pigeonhole it in some shape or form. As such, the offer will be made to all post-primary schools. No school is obliged to take it, but I encourage schools from across the community to take advantage of it and to, if you like, help to make history real, not just from the syllabus, but to highlight some of the great sacrifices that were made to allow us all the freedoms we have today.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister give us any idea of the longevity of the project in future years?

Mr Weir: I see it as something that could be mainstreamed. Initially, in the broad CSR

period, it will be for the next three years. However, I do not see any cap on the time in that. Again, within the confines of the overall Budget, it is a relatively small amount of money compared to some other costs that lie within my Department or others. I hope that it will gain traction. It has been very successful in other parts of the United Kingdom. I think that there is a particular resonance as we move towards some of the most historic anniversaries. Obviously, this year marks the 100th anniversary of the Somme. Looking ahead, next year it will be 100 years since Passchendaele. The year after that will be the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War. This is an important time for that opportunity to be given; it is available, and letters will be going out to every post-primary school in Northern Ireland.

Voluntary Youth Clubs: Governance

T4. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister of Education what governance structures are in place in voluntary youth clubs in Northern Ireland to ensure accountability in areas such as child protection and financial management and to state who in his Department is responsible for carrying out that work. (AQT 629/16-21)

Mr Weir: On the details of the particular person, I will be happy to write to the Member — I do not have the name off the top of my head. I pay tribute to a lot of the work that is happening through voluntary youth organisations. Obviously, there are Access NI checks to be done for child protection. That is something that lies outside my Department. I know that, at times, there can be frustration at the length of time they take. From that point of view, it is important that we pay tribute to all the good work that is happening in whatever organisation provides voluntary youth work. It fills the gap from what is there from the statutory sector. People give very willingly of their time to provide that service.

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he confident that the current arrangements in place, especially those involving child protection issues, are sufficient in the operation of those voluntary youth clubs?

Mr Weir: Broadly speaking, I am content. However, if the Member has any particular concerns in relation to that which he is keen for the Department to probe, I am very happy to receive those. I am happy to respond to whatever the Member raises. Generally speaking, things have worked fairly well. We

have secure checks in place. Nothing in life can ever be 100% watertight, and that is always the danger that we have to try to avoid, where possible. However, I have a general level of contentment. If the Member has specific concerns and writes to me about them, I will look into those for him.

Strule Shared Education Campus: Cost

T5. Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education why the estimated cost of the Strule shared education campus in Omagh has gone up by nearly £20 million in a matter of months. (AQT 630/16-21)

Mr Chambers: Can the Minister outline the reasons why the estimated cost of the Strule shared education campus in Omagh has gone up by nearly £20 million in a matter of months?

Mr Weir: The short answer is that it has not. Again, a couple of figures have been bandied about in that regard. The issue is whether you count the straight figure as the direct cost, but most major capital projects have an optimism bias added to the cost. So, the figure quoted, which, I think, was referenced to be about £140 million, was £137 million without the optimism bias, which is effectively to ensure that there is some degree of protection for contingencies. When the optimism bias is added, the figure is £159 million. So, it is about which figure you are looking at. From that point of view, the figure has not changed in the last couple of months. There have been alterations since the initial estimate a number of years ago. That has been through a range of additional pressures. For example, there was an issue in Omagh relating to road transport that had to be covered. However, the figures have not changed in the last couple of months.

Mr Chambers: Certainly, Minister, the figures that I am looking at are from your Department. If the project is not going to be completed until September 2020, as indicated by you in answers to written questions, do we have any reason to believe that the cost of the project will not continue to spiral out of control over the next three and a half years?

Mr Weir: Sorry, with respect, they are not spiralling out of control. If you are comparing figures, you have to compare like with like. As I indicated, if you do not add an optimism bias, the figure is £137 million; with the optimism bias, it is £159 million. That has been the position for the last number of months. If I were

buying something in the Member's shop, he could add VAT to it or not, and the money that the Member would get in his pocket would be different from the price on the shelf. It is a question of comparing like with like. I am not in a position to be able to knock down prices to provide a cheaper alternative. I commend anyone from the Groomsport area to Mr Chambers's shop. He provides a very good service. You will not get stuff being given away, like Santa's grotto, but the Member will provide a good service. The reality is that the amount has not changed but, as with any capital project, there is always likely to be some level of fluctuation.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr McCann, I inform him that he may not get a supplementary.

Teachers' Pay Dispute

T6. Mr E McCann asked the Minister of Education, given that he will be aware of the recent strike by members of the NASUWT, over which he has taken a rather obdurate position, and the fact that the other three teacher unions are balloting for strike action, whether he agrees that the best strategy that teachers might adopt in order to shift him from his present position would be for all four unions to strike together. (AQT 631/16-21)

Mr Weir: No, I would not. I am not going to take a lecture from the Member on being obdurate. I suspect he has not changed his position in about the last half century. What needs to happen —

Mr E McCann: There is consistency.

Mr Weir: Yes, to be fair, whatever other criticism I would make, like Castro, you have been consistent in your position for the last half century. I will not criticise the Member for inconsistency on that basis. As a Member who spoke previously alluded to, my main concern is the children. I think that it is highly irresponsible of the Member to encourage people to go out on strike, particularly in circumstances in which there is not additional money. It is not a question of obduracy; it is a question of there not being money in the budget to be able to provide for this issue. The Member is trailblazing with the red flag down the path of no return in relation to this, because there will not be, and cannot be, additional money for that period.

There have been long-term issues in relation to the teaching workforce. I believe that there can

be constructive dialogue around those. It is not about how we look backwards, whether it is storming the Winter Palace or, if you like, the jungles of Havana; it is about looking forward to where we can move in the future, from 2017 onwards. That is the encouragement that I would give, rather than taking the irresponsible attitude of encouraging strike action to deprive our children of their education.

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up. That concludes —

3.30 pm

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Question Time, the Economy Minister said that I had written to him, pleading for a constituent to be included in the RHI scheme. In view of that distortion, may I correct the record? In September and October of this year, I wrote to the Minister on behalf of two separate constituents who had applied to the scheme back in February and who had heard nothing. I did what any other constituency Member would have done: I wrote to ask, "Why have these people not heard about their applications?".

Mr Speaker: You have placed your concerns on the record, and no doubt the Minister will be aware of them, Mr Allister.

That concludes Question Time. I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre: Proposed Closure

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Mr Philip McGuigan to raise the matter of the proposed closure of Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre. The proposer of the topic will have up to 15 minutes.

Mr McGuigan: I am glad to have the opportunity to raise this subject and to show my support for Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre in the Assembly today. I thank the Minister for

being present to listen to the arguments. I also welcome the elected councillors, members of staff and members of the public from in and around Bushmills who are in the Public Gallery to listen to the debate.

I am aware that there was a similar debate last week, so the Minister will be well versed in all the arguments. Perhaps, with a week's reflection since the last debate behind him and the Christmas break in front of him, he may be minded to end the 2016 Assembly term with a good news story for us all and announce the retention of the Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre.

I listened to the debate last week and support the arguments made for the retention of all the centres earmarked for closure. Obviously, I will mostly concentrate my remarks this afternoon on the specific case of Bushmills, which rests in my constituency of North Antrim. I do not apologise for repeating some of the very good arguments that were made last week: this is such an important issue, and the arguments need to be repeated and reinforced.

The Minister and other MLAs will say that this is not an issue for him and instead is one for the Education Authority. That is quite true and I understand that, but I also understand that it is true that the Minister is not powerless either and can act or use his influence. Sinn Féin's two appointees on the Education Authority board have expressed their concern about the closures.

The proposal for the closure of Bushmills and the other outdoor centres and the resulting consultation document, which I will come back to later, have come on the back of a review of residential and outdoor education. The document is 84 pages long, but, for me, the key sentence is on page 3 in the executive summary. It states:

"Throughout the review it was apparent that Residential and Outdoor Education is highly valued by all those who use the service, with regard to the quality of provision, the overall outdoor experience, the calibre and experience of staff and its value for money."

Those sentiments, which are contained in the Education Authority's own document, will run through everything that I say here today, because those sentiments and that sentence have been relayed to me time and time again over the past few weeks in relation to the Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for taking the intervention. Will the representatives of his party on the Education Authority board oppose any closure of the centres? Perhaps it would be helpful if other Members whose parties have representatives on the Education Authority board could indicate how they will vote when it comes to the closure of these centres.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I said that the two Members have expressed concern. We are in the consultation process. I do not want to pre-empt what they are going to do. Hopefully, we may not need the Education Authority to do anything. That is the purpose of this debate.

People have relayed to me their sentiments about Bushmills. They have been relayed by principals of primary and secondary schools, teachers, pupils, the parents of pupils, community groups, church groups and people who went to Bushmills in years gone by and had such a positive experience that they took the time to call, email and text to show their support.

I am not sure whether the Minister has seen the online 'Save Bushmills' petition, which I think has now well over 2,000 signatories. If he has not, could I ask that he gets an official to let him see some of the testimonies on it from people sharing their story of staying at the Bushmills centre and the impact that it had on them. That is why I share the frustration of those in the Gallery and in the local community about this proposed closure.

Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre provides experiences for young people. In an age of Xbox and iPhone, when too many of our children are spending less time outdoors, the special experience that Bushmills and the other centres are providing becomes even more important. Education is about more than exams and books. Not everybody wants to follow an academic path, and even those who do need to be exposed to other life experiences. Children may discover talents that they would otherwise have had no opportunity to discover or develop.

These centres are also seen as hubs, where schools and children from different backgrounds and communities can come together in a safe environment and share and learn. A number of MLAs, including myself, were invited to the Bushmills centre recently by Knockloughrim and St Brigid's, Mayogall primary schools to witness at first hand how those two schools have been using the Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre for the past 15 years for a shared residential. Anyone

who saw and heard the principals and children from the different schools talk about their experiences whilst staying in Bushmills will know that you cannot give it a monetary value.

I know that the Minister is going to say that his budget is finite and decreasing, and I understand that. In fact, I empathise with him on that. That said, any saving from the closure of Bushmills would be miniscule in his overall budget. It would be a false economy in the value to education and in what Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre can save other services in the short, medium and long term.

As I said, I have been contacted and lobbied by numerous schools and teachers in North Antrim, but also beyond, in the rest of County Antrim and Derry, and by even the Principals' Association in Mid-Ulster. I note that Members from other constituencies have stayed behind to take part in the debate.

Those who use Bushmills know its value. They also know that children can go to Bushmills and have a first-class experience at a fraction of the cost of similar places in the private sector or other types of school trips. That is something I hope the Minister understands: the potential pressure put on parents and families who may not have a place like Bushmills to go to and the possible division that that can place within classes between those who can afford trips and those who cannot.

I know that Bushmills is not the only outdoor education centre proposed for closure, but I have no doubt that the Minister will know its location in comparison with the other centres. I have no doubt that he will know that Bushmills is the only residential outdoor education centre in North Antrim, in County Antrim and, indeed, in the north-east. If it closes, it is not just that schools that currently use it will go to another centre; geography and distance will dictate that. It is also true that, if Bushmills had to turn away 40 groups last year because of being over-booked, which it did, then, even if geography and distance were not the deciding factors, the availability of other centres would be. In my opinion, the loss of Bushmills cannot be subsumed into the rest of the outdoor education sector. Therefore, future generations of children will lose out on vital life-learning skills and experiences. That is a sad reality.

Who are the children who will lose out? A very small percentage of the Minister's budget to ensure the survival of Bushmills would allow 240 schools and youth groups to visit, adding up to over 8,500 children, as was the case in 2014-15. In 2015-16, even with enforced staff

reduction, there were still 190 groups — 58 schools, 54 youth and church groups, as well as 78 day groups — that used the centre. That means that, overall, there were 7,500 overnight stays and 30,000 activity sessions last year. The planned closure of all the centres will remove 60% to 70% of our residential places. It is important that we compare the proposed reduction with acceptable standards elsewhere. Local education authority centres provide a ratio of 1:4,500 beds per head of population, while here in the North the ratio is currently 1:3,500. If the proposed changes take place, our ratio will decrease to 1:12,000. That is an unacceptable reduction.

I also want to highlight the implications of the range of proposals to reduce the remaining four to five centres from a seven-day-week service to a five-day-week service. The losers in that arrangement will be youth organisations, which will no longer be able to use the centres for weekend residential or day visits. Those are non-formal-education youth services, such as local youth clubs and projects dealing with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in our society. Currently, those young people can access the centres 48 weeks a year. That will now be reduced to eight summer weeks only. The centres are also providing youth skills training for part-time staff and outdoor leadership courses for our youth workers and teachers. They are delivering award programmes and accredited training courses for young people, providing them with alternative routes to achievement.

Minister, if the Programme for Government is serious about all the things that it contains about children, education and poverty, and if we are serious about outdoor education and having fully trained staff in a safe environment at a cost that parents and schools can afford, we need to look again at the proposals. Some 150,000 children across the North benefit from outdoor education every year. In my view, that service is well worth funding at its current level. The consultation process is flawed. I know that that was touched on a lot in last week's debate. It is flawed, and it is based on flawed information. Conspiracy theorists could easily make arguments about the whys and why nots of that. I want to believe that people, and the Minister in particular, are coming at this with an open mind.

I will not even get into the use of SurveyMonkey nor the misleading and closed questions contained in the consultation. I want to talk about the information in the review that was used to take us to the point at which Bushmills could be considered for closure. In the first instance, it was stated that any savings accrued

from the review outcome will be directed towards front-line services, yet Bushmills and other front-line services are being closed or proposed for closure. That makes no sense. The review concentrated on over-provision and included voluntary centres funded by the Department of Education. That argument is used to justify the closure of the three centres in County Down. I disagree with it there, but, as I said earlier, there are no other centres around Bushmills.

In all the facts and figures presented about the low capacity, never once highlighted was the one factor that controls capacity; namely, the number of staff available to work with groups. The more staff that there are available, the more groups that you can work with and the greater the capacity of the centres, yet staff capacity has been cut by the Education Authority. That is a very important point. The centres should be allowed more staff and to maximise capacity rather than be closed.

Most confusing of all, however, is the fact that, in the initial review, Bushmills ranked third, and only three centres were earmarked for closure. Somehow, Bushmills is now ranked fifth and four to five centres are earmarked for closure. There appear to be no other options presented by the review or the Education Authority to avoid the closure of these valuable centres. It could be argued that minor changes to charges, staffing and resources could address the Minister's concerns about savings. Additionally, the centres can be and are used for teacher and part-time youth work training, and that will be totally lost if the planned closures go ahead. Who will the Education Authority pay to run all these courses? Will the same standards of safety apply? Will they be more expensive in the commercial world, as is the case with mountain centre courses?

Minister, given all of that, all that you heard last week, all that you are likely to hear today and all that you will hear in the remainder of the consultation process period, I urge you to rethink the proposed outcomes, halt the progress and instigate a working group to develop options to retain and develop the service.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I advise the House that this debate is not only well-attended but potentially oversubscribed with Members who wish to speak. I am prepared to allocate constituency Members up to five minutes. They will be taken first. Non-constituency Members will be allocated a maximum of three minutes. No additional time

will be allocated for any interventions. I seek your cooperation.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. A number of points need to be made at the start that underline the importance of what we are debating tonight. Some years ago, Edward Lappin wrote a book about outdoor education, in which he said:

"Outdoor education enables students and teachers to interact in an environment free from the limitations of the classroom."

The 'Review of Residential and Outdoor Education' gives us all the reasons why there should be a focus on the retention of these services. It states:

"Since their inception in the 1970s, Residential and Outdoor Education Centres have made a significant and valued contribution to the development of young people and society. They have operated across school and youth sectors in both formal and informal settings. This level of involvement has placed the centres in a unique position from which to influence the lives of young people throughout and beyond their formal educational experience."

We need to keep the focus on that. It is the reason why I attended the debate in the House last week. The issue has implications for colleagues in other constituencies. We need to ask how we got to this place. What we have before us did not happen as a result of a decision taken primarily because of budget constraints, even though it is interesting that the Education Authority's document states that there have been savings of £1.3 million. Where are the savings in the following years? It does not add up.

We need to go back to 2013 and the policy document, 'Priorities for Youth: Improving Young People's Lives through Youth Work', because that is when the problem arose. That led to the regional youth development plan in 2015-16, which has brought us to the point that we are at today. I do not believe that we can say that this happened because of budgetary constraints alone. A decision was made by whomever in the Department or the Education Authority that certain places had to go. Why these facilities? Why a facility like Bushmills in our North Antrim constituency? These are not places that are just open, with cobwebs gathering in corners and a few small groups coming now and again. It can be clearly demonstrated that, in 2014-15, these places

were used: 240 school and youth groups involving over 8,500 individuals, 73% from schools and youth services, and 27% adults.

The Member mentioned the following, but I want to expand on it a wee bit: was there a deliberate attempt by the Education Authority and the former North Eastern Education and Library Board to run down this service? The figures for 2015-16 show a reduction of part-time staff from 14 to three, so how would you expect an organisation, when it is audited, looked at and put under the microscope, to come up with figures that say that this is the reason why the provision should be retained? We then have to look at where these children and young people would go. If the Education Authority were to get its way and close the facility, where would they go? Would they go to Woodhall residential centre in Kilrea? It cannot take them because it is full. They would have to travel many miles to get comparable — not just another type of — provision. The Minister needs to grasp that point. It is vital.

I ask the Minister to have a serious look at the Education Authority. Does it have the capacity to deal appropriately with the issue? Is it now time for the consultation to be suspended until we are satisfied that a proper assessment has been carried out that gives us the facts, based on reality, as opposed to what may be the assumption of the Education Authority?

Mr Swann: I will start where the last Member finished, by calling on the Minister to suspend the consultation because of the facts pointed out to him today by Philip McGuigan and the points rehearsed in last week's Adjournment debate. The information from the Education Authority has been misunderstood, or possibly misconstrued. All North Antrim MLAs will be well used to that from our experience of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. We have seen how they managed other consultations to achieve their desired outcome.

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that he will appreciate that not just Members from North Antrim but Members from South Antrim, East Antrim and East Londonderry will be aware of that.

Mr Swann: It is a point well taken, and that, I think, is why we are so well represented in the House today.

As Mr McGuigan referred to earlier, a number of us were invited to Bushmills Education Centre a couple of Fridays ago. I was pleased that we had representation from four parties.

Knockloughrim Primary School and St Brigid's Primary School, Mayogall handled the invitation and tour of the facility well. They brought down a pupil from each school to guide us round in groups of two. They showed us round and really relayed to us their experiences and how worthwhile their time at the centre has been. The young people told us, for example, "This centre has touched our hearts", and, "This centre has stretched my boundaries". It was very much a real life experience, and Mr Burns, Mr Bradley and Mr McGuigan will all reinforce the points made on that day.

It is the ethos of the centre itself that is important and crucial, and that came through very clearly in a point made by one of its former employees, Dr Robin Rodduck. He said that outdoor centres are not just about fresh air and running about; they are about the whole concept of outdoor education, what it means to our young people and how that develops team building, sharing and an understanding of the world at large. What really struck me on that visit was that the Bushmills Education Centre was delivering shared education long before "shared" was a buzzword in the Education Authority, the North Eastern Education and Library Board or even in the Department itself. That is its strength. What concerns all of us who were there on that day is this: if Bushmills is to close, even temporarily, in five years' time, some great educationalist sitting in the Education Authority will dream up the concept of a residential education centre and have to start from scratch. By that stage, the personnel, the experience and the quality of provision currently at Bushmills will have been lost to generations.

When we were interacting with the pupils and the teachers there, we were struck by the ability of the trainers to truly engage with schools and youth groups in order to ensure that their three- or four-day programmes were fit for their purpose. It is not some bland voluntary education centre where they offer the same programme this week, next week and the following week, meaning that the young people have to fit into that box. The centre provides a bespoke service to each one of the young people attending. Also, because it is part of the Education Authority, the centre can look at how its activities interact with the curriculum. It can ensure that it offers a bespoke, specific service.

One of the truly remarkable things that was pointed out to us on that day, almost as an aside, was that Bushmills and associated centres are inclusive and, for the young people who go there, affordable. A concern shared by teachers and parents is that this will price

young people out of going to outdoor centres. A centre run by the Education Authority can make allowances and provisions for those entitled to free school meals, whereas other educational centres cannot. That support alone is worth some of the savings that the proposed consultation will talk about.

I will finish very briefly on the £1.3 million saving proposed by the Education Authority. If the Minister does not stop this consultation now, there are so many other avenues where that money could be found, such as through shared educational programmes, T:BUC and the summer camps.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Swann: The Executive already run summer camps and are looking for ideal situations and places to run them —

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

Mr Swann: In Bushmills, we have a place that you are denying the voluntary and community sector access to.

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

Mr Logan: I thank the Member for bringing this debate to the Chamber today. It is a great opportunity to discuss the outdoor education centre at Bushmills and all the benefits that it brings to young people. Let me echo what has been said already in the Chamber. I fully agree with those words.

Let me say two things at the outset. First, these closures are a disappointment for me, not only the one at Bushmills but the other outdoor education centres. I attended the debate last week on the others. I have spoken directly to people affected by the proposals, including staff and the schools. I apologise that I was not able to make the event that was organised. I had other constituency-related matters that day that I could not change, but I am happy enough to visit at another time, of course. I have spoken directly to people affected by that, including schools that make use of the services. The other day, I received — I am sure that other Members did, too — a letter from the Scripture Union, which praised these services and said that it will be directly impacted by any potential closures. It is my belief, and research shows, that a large amount of what a young person learns happens outside the classroom, mainly, I

believe, at home. Parents have a huge responsibility for a child's education through being their chief educator, but these outdoor education centres play a huge part in the education of our young people and contribute to the social aspect of their education and, of course, to their physical well-being.

The other point that I want to make is to highlight the failure of the Education Authority to be straight about these proposed closures. We spoke extensively to the Education Authority in a Committee meeting and were told directly that this decision was not financial but is the best for our young people and is all about delivering a better service for them. While I do not doubt the Education Authority's goal and mission of delivering a sustainable and viable service that benefits all young people, I find it strange that the centres that are earmarked for proposed closure are the ones with the highest maintenance bill. It seems to be an attempt to save money, hidden behind a disguised message. If the Education Authority is aiming to save money with these closures, be upfront and tell us about that. Do not try to hide it behind a mask that it is supposedly meant to be best for our young people, because we have heard very clearly that it will affect young people directly. In reality, the Education Authority has a responsibility to live within its budget, and we have to accept — the Member who brought the debate has to, as a Member from an Executive party — that we are living in changing times and that we have tough decisions to make.

We have an education system, as the Education Authority said, that is built on historic structures. For example, we are funding an Irish-medium sector that, in primary alone, has 895 empty desks. We, as a party in government, will have tough choices and tough decisions to make, and discussing closures is not something that I get —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Logan: I am happy to give way, yes.

Mr Swann: Sorry, I was making a point when I was coming to a close, and I will take this opportunity. The Member has been talking about savings. There are other avenues in the Executive to find that £1.3 million, should it be through T:BUC or shared education, because the provision in Bushmills education centre is meeting those other Executive needs. That money is already there and can be drawn down from elsewhere.

Mr Logan: I accept the Member's point on that and also agree with my colleague Mervyn Storey's points on the future savings that this will bring, but I do not believe that they are there, and I do not think that the Education Authority has proved those potential savings to be there in the long run.

As I was saying, I do not get excited about getting out of my bed in the morning to talk about potential closures. No one would run to come to the House for that. I do not envy the Minister's position at all. He asks the Education Authority to live within its budget, and, when it makes proposals to do that and to reduce its costs, we ask him to go back and say, "Actually, we do not want you to do that at all". I understand that, but I ask him to intervene on this, because I think that people will be greatly affected by those decisions. Let me make it clear though that it is an Education Authority proposal. It is out for consultation and that consultation will end on 6 February. I put this to Members and stakeholders: respond to that consultation with alternatives. Most parties in the Chamber have political representation on the Education Authority board. I ask them to lobby those people and ask them to find alternatives, because we need to put up suggestions.

We need to put up ideas and alternatives.

4.00 pm

In conclusion, it is simply not good enough to bury our head. If the Minister buries his head, it will be totally irresponsible for the long-term delivery of the education system in this part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Allister: I must say, I do not understand why the powers that be want to destroy a success story. That is what Bushmills is and has been for generations. Of particular concern — it raises my suspicions — is the manner of the process deployed here. First, there is a supposed review, and Bushmills is fifth on the list, and, because that seems to put three County Down centres at the top of the list, it is suddenly rejigged, and Bushmills is third.

What is even more concerning is that, during this process, no one even troubled themselves to visit the centre. No one went down to meet the excellent, dedicated staff, to talk it through with them and to see what they do day and daily. Some desktop operation was established, whereby it was decided, "Oh, well. Let's close Bushmills." That is an appalling decision. The first contact from those making

the proposition in the Education Authority was four weeks ago, when they went down to the centre and broke the news that they were going to close it. That is no way to treat anyone, least of all a centre that has been a roaring success for many years.

I think of the squander by this Executive — we will hear something more about that tonight on BBC 'Spotlight' — and then I read that £1.3 million will be saved by this project. But will it? In fact, the £1.3 million will simply be redirected within the Youth Service. This will not save one penny of the Minister's overall budget. The money will be redirected. It is quite clear to me, from the underhand way in which this has been done, that it is serving another agenda. The agenda is to cull and disengage the statutory sector, if I can put it like that, from these education facilities and to hand them over to the voluntary sector. What does that mean for the kids of north Antrim? There is no alternative voluntary capacity or opportunity there. I think the nearest centre is in Bangor.

That brings me to a critical point. Who have been the key beneficiaries of the scheme? Some of the most deprived kids in our schools, who are low in self-esteem and self-worth. They get a weekend or a few days at a centre such as this and suddenly they discover that they, who feel that they have always been put down, have got an interest. There is something good that they can do. There are things that they are good at. They leave those centres believing in themselves. That is worth far more than £1.3 million, yet that is the balance in which we are putting that achievement. For some kids, an outdoor activity venture is their parents paying huge amounts of money for them to go on a ski trip. However, many more parents are very glad of this affordable outlet, whereby they can give their kids the advantage of this scheme. It is those kids that we are putting down. Shame on the Education Authority for even thinking in those terms.

Let us not forget that Bushmills is much more than an outdoor education centre in one of the most beautiful parts of our country. It provides critical adult training for those who deliver things such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Where will that now be delivered? The Minister needs to get a grip on this. I invite him to come to Bushmills and visit the centre when it is in full operation. I visited it last Friday. Others have also visited it. I would like him to see —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member —

Mr Allister: — feel and experience the commitment, dedication and output before he is a party —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member's time is up. Thank you.

Mr Allister: — to the closure of such a marvellous venture.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I remind Members that, from now on, they will be allocated three minutes.

Mr Mullan: Because of the time constraints that have been placed on me, I will cut to the chase. I echo the sentiments that have been expressed by practically everybody in the House today. It is very concerning that the path to getting to where we are today has been one of deception and dishonesty from the Education Authority. Unless you, Minister, use your good offices to bring this despicable process to a halt, you will stand accused of being complicit in it. I urge you to do what you can to prevent that from happening.

When we look at the ranking of all the outdoor education centres in the review document supplied, we see that Bushmills is fifth, as has already been said, and at risk of closure. However, the conditional report has Bushmills ranked third. Can the Minister explain that? What methodology was used in the review document that differed significantly from the conditional report? What were the definitional terms used? Will he give a commitment to publishing the conditional report?

Despite many promises, staff at Bushmills have not been consulted, and neither have service users: the children. They are supposed to respond to a very complex consultation document. It does not make sense. How is that fair? How is it open? How is it transparent? The consultation document contains only predetermined decisions. That is disingenuous to all those who use and work at Bushmills Outdoor Education Centre.

The Education Authority has stressed that there is duplication of services across the North. The closest centre to Bushmills is Woodhall in Kilrea in my constituency, which is 20 miles away. That education centre has maximised capacity; it is oversubscribed, as others have said. It is crystal clear that demand heavily outweighs supply in that area. It means one thing: thousands of children will lose out. That is a fatal flaw in the consultation exercise.

Occupancy rates are highlighted in the consultation document. I will set the record straight: Bushmills has gone from catering for 5,000 children in 2012-13 to 3,000 last year, but that is not evidence of a lack of uptake. The Minister and the Education Authority have failed to state that, during that time, they have cut part-time staff at the centre from 24 to eight while full-time staff have not been replaced, which has dramatically impacted —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Mullan: — on the service provided.

Nowhere in the review is staffing mentioned. I urge the Minister to do what he can.

Mr Dickson: I thank all the Members who have spoken in the debate. I particularly thank Philip McGuigan for bringing the debate to the Chamber.

We have heard many Members — I reiterate the words — saying that the outdoor education centre in Bushmills strengthens, reinforces and builds on the knowledge of all the children, young people and others who use the centre. I will quote very quickly from one of the primary schools in east Antrim that uses the centre; it is the reason why I am speaking here today. The principal of Glynn Primary School said:

"The children learn so much about teamwork, consideration, empathy, determination and achievement on their trip; the list of what they learn is really endless. Bushmills is the only Outdoor Education Centre in the northern half of our county. My Primary 7 children talk the whole year about what we'll do and what it'll be like at Bushmills, having heard from their predecessors, but it still always far exceeds their expectations. It has several times been described as the best holiday ever!"

That comes from those families for whom this is a holiday — a genuine learning experience for children.

Other Members talked about the experiences of children from St Brigid's Primary School and Knockloughrim Primary School, and I want to reiterate what they have been telling me as well:

"For over 15 years, our schools have worked together in class and in our community, but, at Bushmills, we learn so much more by being together. We enjoy

what we do and realise what it is to be part of the community. We are really sad to hear of the current consultation process that may close the education centre in Bushmills in August 2017".

I want to nail a few of the lies around the facts in all this. There are 40 schools that, quite simply, have been told that there is no room at the inn for them in Bushmills. They are not getting in. They have made applications, as they have done in previous years, but there is no facility for them. Those are just examples of the depth of feeling for Bushmills and the value that it is deemed to deliver for the education sector.

As I said, I commend those who have spoken in the debate. I re-emphasise and reiterate the comment that I made earlier: there are those in the Chamber today who are represented on the Education Authority and could commit to saying that they will keep Bushmills open.

Mr K Buchanan: First, I thank the Member for bringing the issue to the Chamber today. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the proposed closure of Bushmills Education Centre. As we all know, the centre is a fully staffed multi-purpose centre and is advertised on the Education Authority's website as one of the best equipped residential centres in Northern Ireland. I will repeat that: it is now one of the best equipped residential centres in Northern Ireland. The centre's mission statement is as follows:

"To provide a residential facility where a variety of curriculum related programmes and resources are offered, primarily in the field of outdoor education, designed to meet the needs of both young people and adults."

Bushmills outdoor centre can provide residential and day courses to visitors and uses the resources of the outdoor environment to achieve educational objectives and experiences for our young people. It provides important learning experiences for young people, especially when it comes to their health and physical activity. The instructors are all qualified teachers with additional specialist qualifications in many activities.

Primary and secondary schools from my constituency of Mid Ulster, including, as other Members mentioned, Knockloughrim Primary School and St Brigid's Primary School, use the facilities on an annual basis. Principals, teachers, parents and pupils are concerned that this is the last year that they will be able to access the excellent facilities.

Some rural schools in my constituency, such as Knockloughrim Primary School and St Brigid's Primary School, have worked together and have been fully involved in the Save Bushmills campaign. While I understand the need to meet the expectations of the Priorities for Youth policy and to address the overprovision of services, I urge the Education Authority to consider how the closure would not only be a loss to schools and youth organisations but will affect the lives of those employed in the centre and their families. There will be a direct impact on local people employed there, the local community and the schools and community groups that utilise the centre. Should the closure go ahead, it will have an impact on children from poorer and more disadvantaged backgrounds who have little or no other opportunities to visit facilities of this nature. The centre provides protective clothing and specialist equipment to visitors, and that is a vital tool, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who would not otherwise have the means or finance to provide them for themselves. I urge the Education Authority to consider other options regarding the sustainability of the centre, including opening the service to tourists and other groups.

In conclusion, I stress the importance of Bushmills Education Centre and the excellent service that it provides to schools in my constituency of Mid Ulster and those in North Antrim, South Antrim, East Londonderry and further afield. I urge all in our community to respond to the consultation. As my colleague said, the consultation closes on 6 February 2017, and it is important that people make their voice heard.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate this afternoon. The centre at Bushmills is the one most used by schools in the Mid Ulster constituency. My three children have all been there at least twice with their primary school. They travel there with other local rural primary schools and use it as an opportunity to get to know children in the neighbouring areas. As has been mentioned, Knockloughrim Primary School and St Brigid's Primary School are in the Mid Ulster constituency and their use of the centre for shared education is second to none. In fact, Knockloughrim and St Brigid's said that shared education becomes easier after they have been to Bushmills, as spending time together helps to break down the barriers, so that really is a benefit.

4.15 pm

I support the calls by my colleague and by the Member for North Antrim Mervyn Storey to suspend the consultation. There are a number of points about the consultation that cause me concern. The statistics have already been well rehearsed. When I consider the high demand for Bushmills, I do not understand why it has been targeted for closure. I share the concern that there is no real strategy for outdoor education centres. The Education Committee was told that the £1.3 million of savings was the instigation for the decision, yet there is no overall strategy for outdoor education centres. As my colleague Robin Swann has stated, there are funds available elsewhere that could plug the gap from sources such as shared education and T:BUC, and I support that call. I support what other Members have said about the consultation: it seems to be flawed, and it is suggested that it has predetermined outcomes.

Stephen Moss, a British natural historian who talked about shared education said:

"So children who learn outdoors know more, understand more, feel better, behave better, work more cooperatively and are physically healthier. Not a bad result from simply changing the location where they are being taught. Importantly, this is not just for able and motivated pupils: under-achievers also do better in a natural environment, especially when exposed to high-quality, stimulating activities."

That is something that needs to be brought to the debate: in these environments our young people find they have talents that, in a classroom, they do not realise they have. They must be given the opportunity to continue that at Bushmills.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Member for bringing the debate to the Chamber. I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the valuable contribution made by outdoor activity centres like Bushmills to the development of our young people and children across Northern Ireland.

The news of the consultation has caused concern not just in North Antrim but in East Londonderry, and, as we have heard tonight, in all other constituencies. I stress that I am not placing any criticism on the Education Minister; I know that he is fully committed to delivering for young people. The consultation and the proposals have come from the Education Authority, and I stress this is a consultation process — a consultation process that I believe to be flawed. While it is easy for some to blame

the Minister, this recommendation is from the Education Authority, and I encourage as many users and supporters as possible to take part in the consultation by using the comments box.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr M Bradley: I will.

Mr Swann: I appreciate the Member's contribution. If he believes the consultation is flawed, will he not, like his party colleague Mervyn Storey, call on the Minister to suspend the consultation while they get it right?

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. He has stolen my thunder and taken my last paragraph. *[Laughter.]* I will not hold it against him.

I have completed the survey online, and I have used both comment boxes to register my opinion on the proposed closure as opposed to answering the questions. One question makes reference to the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and it says, "Where deemed appropriate". There is no guarantee that anything will be guaranteed.

Understandably, when we think of education, we think of schools, given the role they play. However, we must also acknowledge that education ought to take many forms and include the vital contributions that the Youth Service and outdoor education make. Outdoor education provision accounts for only a small portion of the overall education budget, but it provides unique learning opportunities and skills development for around 150,000 children and young people every year. If this centre closes, the nearest centre is Woodhall at Kilrea, over 30 miles away. It has only 40 beds available and, I believe, is fully booked, so where is the overprovision?

Indeed, the Bushmills centre has had to turn away bookings during peak periods.

The centre in Bushmills offers a broad range of services. It is capable of generating income at weekends, but it is not permitted to do so. Groups wanting to avail themselves of its activities would have to travel over 100 miles to the nearest equivalent centre, which is in Newcastle, County Down. Therefore, there is no duplication of services in the area at all. The centre not only provides positive educational experiences for organisations but plays a vital role in training youth workers and teachers in a wide range of outdoor activities, providing positive educational experiences and

opportunities to develop interpersonal and practical skills.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr M Bradley: In closing, I stress the importance of the centre. It has helped young people to open their mind and stretch their personal horizons far and wide. It is a shared educational facility, meeting the criteria to enjoy shared education from learning in a cross-community setting. If we can play together —

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

Mr M Bradley: — we can live together. I support the suspension of the consultation until there is further clarity.

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

Mr M Bradley: Thank you for your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker.

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

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate, which is similar to the one that we had last week. I do not wish to rehearse what was said last week, because the points were well made by everybody. It was one of those rare occasions when each and every side of the House was in agreement about the situation that we find ourselves in. Hearing the same remarks today reiterates the point that we made last week that this process needs to be paused, and I welcome hearing those remarks. There were two or three things that, I feel, were not said last week, and I will bring them into today's debate, because they are as relevant to Bushmills as they are to the three County Down centres.

The first issue that I want to discuss is the criteria. One of the variables used was the location of the centre and its proximity to other voluntary centres. What that means is that, if you remove a statutory centre, groups can simply trot up the road and go to the next one. That is fictitious on several grounds. First, it makes the massive assumption that the voluntary centres are empty, and they are not. There may be some capacity in them, and I am happy that that capacity be utilised fully, but I am somewhat disappointed that that will be achieved by closing down the statutory centres

and then creating an over-demand scenario in the voluntary sector. Secondly, I am a little bit concerned, because I am not entirely sure what we mean when we use the term "voluntary sector". Many of the centres and provisions that will end up having to be used will be in the private sector. We know what that means: we are talking about increased prices to be able to achieve and drive more profits. Even the voluntary centres now charge more than the statutory centres. I hope that when the decision is taken — I say "when" because I have no faith in the consultation decision — that will be considered.

I want to accept the assertion that the Minister made last week that this decision is being taken by the Education Authority, but I know that the Minister understands my view on this because I have said it many times before. The Minister is the decision maker when it comes to education in Northern Ireland. It is therefore eventually up to you to overturn the decision, if it is made. I am sure that you, like any other Minister, past or present, would be happy to turn up for a good-news story by an arm's-length body. If you are able to share ownership of those stories, you can share ownership of the bad-news stories as well.

You told us that the Education Authority is made up of political representatives. You are correct: eight of the 20 members on the board are political representatives. Four of them belong to the DUP, and I hope, Minister, that you will lobby them as well to make the right decision on this closure scenario.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr McGrath: Certainly. We must stop this decision being taken on Bushmills and the other centres. We have to stop being biased against them because they are good at their job, are competitively priced, are located in the right place and are overwhelming loved by the children who attend them.

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

Mr McGrath: It is a bad decision. Please make the right one, Minister.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Like last week, I thank the Member for bringing forward the issue. I also acknowledge the contribution made by all Members, who spoke passionately and articulately about where we are with this. Somebody mentioned last week that the focus

is always on schools. I will be honest: schools and, indeed, the delivery of education to children through schools have always been and will continue to be my first priority and that of the Department.

Beyond that, there is a key commitment to youth in the Department, and approximately £34 million of resource and about £9 million of direct capital has been spent in that area. It is undoubtedly the case that there is a very passionate debate about the issue. We saw that last week with how it has affected the South Down area, and we have seen that today with Bushmills. One of the indications of that is the high attendance in the Public Gallery, which I acknowledge. That is ultimately why decisions will need to be taken responsibly.

As we look ahead, there are a lot of issues. No one is decrying the fact that outdoor education is important or that good work has been done in Bushmills and the other centres; mention was made of the centres in South Down and others. From that point of view, any closure or change in the system is not being driven because a bad service is being provided; nobody is making that argument.

There are two issues. There is the matter of an appropriate balance of provision throughout Northern Ireland. While a clear decision has to be made and put forward by the Education Authority, it is critical that, whatever emerges from the process — we are in a consultation process, and decisions have not been finalised — it has to be fit for purpose for our young people. It will be critical to ensure that that is the case. Inadequate provision will simply not be stood over against whatever constraints there are. As mentioned by Members, it is also wrong to believe that it is simply about the level of provision. Previously, statutory outdoor centres were maintained by five education boards, and we now have one body in the Education Authority. Without being prejudicial to any decision that might be made, it is critical that we look at what is available and appropriate for Northern Ireland as a whole and try to deliver on that basis. That is without prejudice to any discussions taking place. Undoubtedly, there is also a financial element. Indeed, in education and other aspects, decisions that come across my desk are not, generally speaking, between good and bad services. They are sometimes about which good service we maintain and which good service we cut. From that point of view, whatever decisions are made on this and other issues, good things will be cut; I am not denying that. The bottom line is that we move ahead. I appreciate that suggestions have been made

today. It is important that people build on those proposals.

Finance is undoubtedly a key factor in where we are with education. Some of this might be a bit repetitive of last week's debate, but this year's education budget — not in real terms but in actual terms — was down by £52 million against a backdrop of about £100 million of pressures. To be fair to the Executive, some things that emerged simply happened by way of life, such as pay pressures, but other things have been imposed nationally and have nothing to do with the Northern Ireland Executive or anyone in the House. In this year's budget — it is ongoing — some £40 million of additional employers' National Insurance contributions will have to be paid. In health, that figure is probably in the region of £100 million. That is part of the hidden cost of our block grant settlement. As we look ahead to next year and wait to see what emerges in the budget, there is not a great deal of hope that things will suddenly get a lot better. Investment from the Executive in education is needed across the board. A number of Departments face a key challenge with the amount of money that is available overall.

Unless there is a degree of change, we will face very difficult decisions; indeed, unless there is an increase in the education budget, cuts may well have to be made that are more painful even than the cuts that are proposed today. I add that caveat. I appreciate that people —

4.30 pm

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister bring clarity to the situation? It is said that £1.3 million can be saved by closing the centres, but it is not a saving to the Minister because the money will be redirected within the Youth Service. Is that not correct? Therefore, it is not a question of where it is best spent.

Mr Weir: That is not the reality. It may well be that it is redirected to plug another gap, but the Youth Service cannot be exempt from the pressures. If there have to be savings across the board, EA in particular will probably face a lot of the pressures because the principal responsibility is to protect front-line services in the aggregated schools budget as much as possible. There will be gaps. It can be dressed up as being redirected, but gaps will be plugged. From that point of view, if £1.3 million

is not saved in one area, it will have to be saved elsewhere. That is the economic reality of the situation.

I appreciate that there will always be paranoia about how any consultation is conducted, who is conducting it and what the motivations are: I understand that entirely. What I will say is that those who will take the final decision or, at least, the decision from the EA's point of view will be those sitting on the board. Mr McGrath mentioned that, of a total of 20, eight come from a political background and others represent different sectors. Having spoken to some of those people, I do not believe that they have a doctrinaire position and an agenda of closure. From that point of view, there is an opportunity there. Some ideas of how to formulate an alternative — a plan B — were mentioned today. If people feel that they are restricted by a consultation, there is nothing to stop them writing directly to the members of the Education Authority, and suggestions can be put together. If there is an alternative way forward and a better way of providing outdoor education provision, it will, I suspect, require some change. If there is a belief that the ranking of centres is wrong and that there should be a different configuration of the services, the Education Authority members will, I think, be entirely open to that. Nobody is coming at this from a doctrinaire position. I will simply say that people have to put a viable alternative — a plan B. If, for instance, the argument is that, within the Education Authority, £1.3 million should not be saved here and another part of its budget should be cut, people should have the courage to make that argument.

I will simply say that, as with all these things, there are caveats. There will be limited money in the Department of Education and limited money available from the Education Authority. Consequently, if the response is simply a blanket, "No, this should not happen", I do not think that that would be good enough to persuade people into an alternative course of action. The opportunities are there, and there is a challenge there. I do not believe that members of the Education Authority board have a doctrinaire or set view of what should happen. I urge people who feel constrained by the way in which the consultation has been done to avail themselves of the opportunities and to make sure that, if there is an alternative, they put it forward. If there is something rational that, from a financial point of view, produces the same result, that will, I think, be embraced, but there is no doubt that we are in tough times, and people should not delude themselves that it is otherwise.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): That concludes the debate. I thank those who contributed and those who attended.

Adjourned at 4.34 pm.

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