



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 10 October 2016  
Volume 116, No 3

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Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)  
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Newton, Robin (Speaker)  
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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 October 2016

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Matter of the Day

### Humanitarian Crisis in Eastern Aleppo

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Alex Attwood has been given leave to make a statement on the humanitarian crisis in eastern Aleppo, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If Members wish to be called, they should rise in their places and continue to do so. Each Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has been completed.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank you, Mr Speaker, for permitting this matter to be discussed. Whilst it is the case that foreign affairs are not a devolved matter, issues in other places around the world are very much a concern of people in the Chamber, in Northern Ireland and on the island. We know how important it was in our own history that the spotlight was kept on our experience, and it is very important to keep the spotlight on the experience in other places in conflict and where there is humanitarian crisis.

Aleppo was, historically, a place of great commerce and culture. Part of the city was on the UNESCO world heritage list. It is a city with a history going back 9,000 years. Whilst the situation in the city is complex, especially in eastern Aleppo, where no one group is in charge and where the geopolitics are more and more demanding, some things are, nonetheless, straightforward and clear. Whatever the political situation, the humanitarian situation is clear for us all to see. Over the last two weeks, eastern Aleppo has experienced its heaviest bombardment in the last five and a half years of the Syrian war. We now have a situation in which a population of 275,000 in that part of the city has only 30 to 35 doctors, 20 or so ambulances, six hospitals, with two hospitals having been destroyed in recent weeks.

Three doctors and two nurses have been killed. Doctors and hospitals are required to recycle syringes, needles and bandages. Thirty-five thousand people — over 10% of the population — have been internally displaced. Last week, the UN special envoy to the area said in crystal clear words that we now had a situation where we had to divert this from being another Srebrenica or another Rwanda and that by Christmas eastern Aleppo could be destroyed. We are witnessing the slow death of its people. As one citizen put it, and I will conclude with these words:

*"This is a city that will die. The entire world is watching a city dying. Aleppo is the third oldest city in the world. It's 9000 years old. It has seen earthquakes and disasters, but now, in the 21st century, the city is being slaughtered and the entire world is watching."*

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Member for West Belfast for bringing this Matter of the Day this afternoon. Sadly, it is a matter not just for this day; it is a matter of gravest concern for hundreds and hundreds of days, as tens of thousands of people have lost their lives as a result of the Syrian and Russian bombing of the city of Aleppo. The misery being endured by the remaining 275,000 people in Aleppo is unimaginable, and 100,000 children are at the forefront of that misery. We need to stop and think about that: 100,000 children are suffering in this way. That is horrific, and we cannot help but be moved with compassion for those who are suffering.

The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, has said that what is happening in Aleppo is worse than "a slaughterhouse". Staffan de Mistura, the UN envoy in Syria, has said that, at the current rate of bombardment, the city will be completely destroyed by the end of this year. That is why it was very sad to see the UN resolutions last week, which called on the bombardment to stop, vetoed. That is shameful, and it only prolongs the suffering of the people there.

The pain and suffering in Aleppo are unquantifiable. However, there are medical professionals who are trying to help the wounded and dying and bring some comfort and relief. They are working in some of the most difficult and dangerous circumstances imaginable, and they should be the focus of aid efforts and relief, which is itself work that is even being hindered.

I thank Mr Attwood for bringing this matter to the Assembly. Although we are, obviously, very limited in what we can do in this place, it is right that our voices are heard, that we speak against this injustice and that we pray for the people of Aleppo and for peace there.

**Ms Ruane:** Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le Alex Attwood. I thank Alex Attwood for bringing this Matter of the Day to the Assembly.

We have heard and all know that what is happening in Syria is an absolute humanitarian disaster. Last week alone, there were 376 people killed, and half of them were children. We had 1,266 injured, hospitals were destroyed and medical personnel were killed. Civilians are besieged; they are under full military encirclement and are without humanitarian supplies or the freedom to leave many different areas. We are talking about Aleppo today and the 275,000 people, but equally, according to the United Nations, there are over 861,000 people in other parts of Syria in similar situations. The UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has said that the suspension of bilateral discussions between the two chairs, the United States and Russia, on a cessation of hostilities was a serious setback.

If we can learn anything about our peace process here in Ireland — I am not for one minute equating the two conflicts; every conflict is different — it is that there should be inclusive dialogue; it is that there should be a cessation of hostilities by all of the combatants. All sides need to bear responsibility for their actions. We need the hostilities to be brought to an immediate end, and all sides need to recognise a new ceasefire.

Urgent humanitarian aid needs to get to the people who are suffering in this terrible, terrible war. I pay tribute to the international aid workers, who are trying to do everything they can to get badly needed supplies into the worst-hit areas and save lives. We need urgent action now, and, while the Assembly does not have responsibility for international affairs, we have responsibility as international citizens to help end the conflict. We also have refugees who have come to all parts of Ireland, and we

can say to them, "Tá fáilte romhaibh, you are very welcome in our country, and we will do everything that we can to help you. We are very sorry about what is happening to your loved ones in your country." The biggest action that we can take is to apply international pressure by supporting the efforts of the UN, and we can support the people who have come to our shores looking for solidarity and support.

**Mr Beattie:** I thank Mr Attwood for bringing this to the Assembly. I think we have all seen the horrific pictures that are coming out of Aleppo. We have seen the injured, and we have seen the tragedy of the children who are suffering in a city that has been pounded to ruins and is now being pounded into dust. This is more than a tragedy; it is a stain on the international community for taking no action at all in the last four years-plus. What we have in Aleppo is the Al-Nusra Front, which is fighting against the Free Syrian Army, which is, in turn, fighting against Assad's forces, which are underpinned by the Russians. There is absolutely no doubt that we are seeing a proxy war in Aleppo between the United States and the Russians and between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the United Nations is absolutely impotent in trying to bring a cessation to this absolute catastrophe, this near genocide.

In the last few hours, the French have brought forward a motion for a permanent ceasefire, and, yet again, the Russians have vetoed it, which tells you that the system of the five permanent members in the UN Security Council does not work. Therefore, I call on the United Nations to take direct action to put humanitarian corridors into Aleppo to allow the wounded to be brought out, the non-combatants to be brought out and the children to be brought out. Then, the combatants can kill themselves all the more. What you find in any conflict — I am testimony to this — is that the people who suffer most are the innocent people: the men, women and children who live in what must be a hellish place. Again, I thank Mr Attwood for bringing this forward.

**Dr Farry:** I also thank Mr Attwood for bringing this important Matter of the Day to the Assembly. At the outset, I also make reference to the humanitarian situation in Haiti due to Hurricane Matthew and recognise the hundreds of people who have lost their life there and the thousands who are now homeless.

In some respects, we have a man-made hurricane affecting the people of Aleppo. Given our history and the fact that this year we mark the 100th anniversary of a number of major battles in the First World War, such as the

Somme and Verdun, we know the consequences when a long-term stalemate builds up.

The difference between those battles and the situation today is that so many civilians are bearing the brunt of the conflict; they are suffering daily, losing their lives, their homes, their livelihoods and their future.

**12.15 pm**

Aleppo is one of the oldest inhabited settlements in the world, and what is happening there is a tragedy in so many respects. It also reflects the much wider situation in Syria. As an Assembly, it is important that we speak out on what is happening beyond our borders. What is happening today in Syria is, I think, the defining conflict of our age. We should be defined by how we, as the international community, respond to that situation. It is important that we see humanitarian assistance and that we join in recognising the aid workers who risk their lives to bring assistance, and in particular the role played by the white helmets in trying to save and rescue lives.

We also have to recognise that it is not just about humanitarian aid and that we have wider responsibilities as an international community. It is not good enough to see the great powers intervening on different sides of the conflict and it becoming a kind of proxy war. Russia in particular stands out for international condemnation for its activities, namely the military support that it provides to the regime and its bolstering and protecting of Bashar al-Assad. Frankly, if that support was withdrawn, there may be some hope of a solution.

I fear that, at present, we are seeing a rolling stalemate centred around the city of Aleppo, and that is likely to continue unless we see a change in tack from the international community. What is needed is a genuinely united front and a recognition that the international community has a formal responsibility to protect, and to recognise that what happens within national borders is something that concerns us all.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank Mr Atwood for bringing the matter for discussion. The scenes in Aleppo over the last few weeks have been harrowing: kids being pulled from rubble, nobody knowing if they are alive or dead, 275,000 people cut off from water, food and medicine, and a hospital blown to bits. It is a crisis and a disaster, but one of political making. As the death toll rises day by day, we must remember that it is not just

ISIS and Assad who are killing civilians, but Russia. Russia's air forces are carpet-bombing Aleppo; Western forces, so-called allies, and the US are also bombing civilians.

In 2011, the Arab Spring, an uprising from below across the Middle East for democracy and social justice, began in Tunisia, spread to Egypt and across the Middle East. People in Syria also stood up for freedom and social justice, and Bashar al-Assad, who was, no doubt, wined and dined in Westminster, met the protesters with severe repression and brutality on a huge scale. Protesters were gunned down.

At the minute, the war hawks are swarming around Aleppo and Syria. If you live in Aleppo, Damascus or anywhere else in Syria, it does not really matter if the bombs being dropped were made in Washington, in Moscow or in London because the death, devastation and destruction will be seen for miles around, and the result will be the same. The imperial powers have brought nothing but misery to the people of the Middle East, Syria and Iraq. We should say, "Hands off Syria", and they should cease to engage in this terrorism from the sky.

Haiti has been mentioned. We should also mention what is happening in the Yemen, where, in the last few days, 140 people were killed at a funeral. Saudi Arabia has been engaging in absolute brutality on the people of the Yemen. We have to do two things: we have to stand resolutely against the destruction and the bombs being dropped on the Middle East and say, "Not in our name". We also have to recognise the destruction that is taking place in Syria and how millions of innocent people are being turned into refugees.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

**Mr Carroll:** We have to say no to war, no to racism, and we should open up borders and let the refugees in.

**Mr Allister:** I do not suppose that anyone in the House is foolish enough to think that the contributions in this debate are going to change very much, but that does not mean that we should not speak up when we see unfolding before us unspeakable horror in different parts of the world. When we see on our television screens what are only snapshots of the terror and horror in Aleppo, you could not be human and not be moved by the horrendous circumstances prevailing. A ceasefire was negotiated and then breached by a grotesque

act of war by the Russians in the bombing of, of all things, a food convoy of humanitarian aid. That really underscores the depths of degradation to which that conflict has gone.

Western interventions in the Middle East, where many monsters and tyrants have been in charge, do not have a very good track record, but the situation created in Syria is one, as Mr Beattie said, that is crying out for effective international action. He is right: the UN is being exposed only for its impotence in this situation because, of course, of the Russian veto. If the United Nations is an organisation worth having, this is a moment when it needs to provide the humanitarian lead and the delivery to safety of the ultimate innocents: the children of Aleppo. What sort of human beings are we if the United Nations organisations, which are supposed to protect humanitarian interests in the world, cannot and will not take even that most basic of steps?

Today we join in the condemnation. Although we recognise the limitations of what we say, it is still right that we utterly condemn the carpet-bombing by the Russians and others of Aleppo and think of and pray for the innocents of that city.

**Mr E McCann:** There has been widespread comment on the supposed fact that there is a big disparity between the reaction of anti-war activists in the West, including in this country and across the water, to the Russian slaughter of people in Aleppo on the one hand and various atrocities perpetrated by the West, particularly by the United States, on the other. "Where are the protesters outside the Russian embassy?", it is asked. In the opinion of People Before Profit, that is a very good question. The suggestion made on the left is that there is no moral balance between the West and the Soviet Union. That is simply the mirror image of those — some are represented in the House — who are quite happy to protest against Russia; they stand up and denounce the barbarism of Russian bombing, but the same people have never protested against the genocidal slaughter of the Palestinian people by the Israelis using American- and British-supplied arms.

When we look at what is happening in the Middle East today in Syria, we see, of course, that the Russian forces are adopting the same tactics and attitudes as they adopted in relation to Chechnya some years ago.

It is because they got away with the slaughter of the Chechen people that they think they can get away with it in Aleppo and other parts of the world. It is not an accident that Chechnya, per

head of population, has supplied more fighters to Islamic State than any other country in the world. That was a direct result of the Soviet Union's and then Russia's suppression of the Chechen people.

What we see now in the Middle East is the use of Western arms, supplied mainly by the United States but also by the United Kingdom to Saudi Arabia to inflict horrendous slaughter. Some 4,000 civilians have been killed in Yemen, a substantial majority of them killed with Western arms supplied by companies such as BAE, Raytheon and the rest of them without any protest. I and People Before Profit call for the most vigorous protests outside Russian embassies and elsewhere against what is happening in Aleppo. We also call for a stepping-up of protests against the supply of arms to the sectarian, extremist state dictatorship of Saudi Arabia, which, incidentally, supplied 15 of the 19 September 11 bombers yet is still supplied with billions of pounds of lethal machinery to slaughter people in the Middle East.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

**Mr E McCann:** That disparity must end.

I will finish with this sentence, Mr Speaker. In People Before Profit, we believe that the Soviet Union was a state capitalist country, and we protested against the suppression in Czechoslovakia and so on and so forth —

**Mr Speaker:** Mr McCann, your time is up.

**Mr E McCann:** Today, we should have simultaneous demonstrations against the Russians and the Americans.

## Assembly Business

### Public Petition: Survival of General Practice in Northern Ireland

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Paula Bradley has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

**Ms P Bradley:** I welcome the opportunity to bring the petition to the House today.

General practice is one of the bedrocks of every community in Northern Ireland and the first point of contact for 90% of health and social

care-related needs. However, general practice is now in crisis owing to an excessive workload, a diminishing workforce and inadequate funding. The petition being submitted today has been signed by over 30,000 patients from across Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of Health to ensure the survival of general practice throughout Northern Ireland by investing 10% of the Northern Ireland healthcare budget in a safe, sustainable GP service for patients and funding for general practice, which is significantly reduced despite the growing demand.

Our population is increasing, with a greater proportion of people living longer and patients with more complex and lifelong conditions. Proper investment needs to be made if general practice is to survive. At present, we do not have enough GPs to service the population in Northern Ireland. The petition calls on the Minister to increase training numbers immediately to 111. The increase from 65 to 85 training places this year is very welcome but does not go far enough to meet the demand.

A quarter of Northern Ireland GPs are over 55 and are due to retire in the very near future, with not enough coming through to replace them. Inevitably, we already see practices collapsing. During the summer, we saw practices close not only in our rural communities — there are other reasons for that, as we cannot get GPs to go out as far as rural communities — but in our urban communities. Only in the summer, we saw a large practice in Bangor close as a result of having a lack of GPs. If that is allowed to continue, it will put pressure on surrounding practices and create the real threat that many people will be left without access to a GP.

The petition also calls for reduced bureaucracy and an improved IT system, because GPs want to spend as much time as possible caring and providing for their patients.

The petition comes after the release of BMA Northern Ireland's report on the crisis in primary care, which starkly illustrates the pressures on GPs. The report revealed that 74% of practices here say that they are struggling and nearly 10% are barely coping. Action needs to be taken immediately to address the issues.

*Ms P Bradley moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.*

**Mr Speaker:** I will forward a copy of the petition to the Minister of Health and the Health Committee.

12.30 pm

## Executive Committee Business

### Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

**Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities):** I beg to move

*That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill.*

As Members are aware from the memorandum that was laid in the Assembly on 5 September, I seek the Assembly's approval for a legislative consent motion (LCM) to enable Northern Ireland to be included in the UK Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill. The Bill is being proposed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and was introduced in Westminster on 19 May. It is expected to complete its passage in early 2017, although that is subject to change.

The Bill is designed to enable the UK to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its related protocols. The convention provides for a system of general and special protection of cultural property in situations of international and non-international armed conflict. Under the convention, cultural property designated for protection bears a white and royal blue shield symbol, which carries the same protective status as the red cross and red crescent. Securing a legislative consent motion for the Cultural Property Bill will permit the Westminster Government to confer a power on the local Minister with responsibility for culture and the historic environment in Northern Ireland — currently, me — to grant permission for the use of the protective emblem here. It will also enable me as Minister to designate individuals who are entitled to use the emblem as a means of identification in Northern Ireland.

Cultural property that may be protected is that deemed to be of great importance to cultural heritage generally. In Northern Ireland, it is likely to include historic monuments in state care, high-grade listed buildings, archives, art and other exhibits under the care of, amongst others, National Museums, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and the historic environment division. It can also include works

of art, archaeological sites, scientific collections and other significant materials. There is, however, no requirement that the emblem be displayed on all structures associated with the convention. It will be mandatory only in regard to structures given enhanced protection, and those are expected to be very few across the UK.

Criteria for the use of the emblem and the way the scheme operates are intended to be consistent across the United Kingdom. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has started to work through the details of what the exact policy and criteria will be for using the emblem on cultural property, as well as how it will come into operation. DCMS has confirmed that all the devolved Administrations and their relevant agencies and bodies will be fully involved in the development of the policy and related criteria, setting out exactly when the emblem should be used.

As Minister, I am strongly supportive of the scheme. I believe that it will help to provide additional protection for Northern Ireland's important and highly valued cultural and heritage assets, both now and into the future. I also welcome the wide definition of "cultural property" that forms part of the Hague convention and is recognised in the Bill.

If the Assembly does not approve the legislative consent motion, the Bill will proceed, and the Minister for Culture, Media and Sport in Westminster will retain all powers in relation to the use of the cultural emblem in Northern Ireland. Agreeing to approve the legislative consent motion will ensure that local interests are represented in the operation of the Cultural Property Bill. On that basis, I ask Members to support the proposal.

**Mr Eastwood (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** I thank the Minister for moving the motion. Subsequent to the end of the Second World War and the massive destruction across Europe that resulted, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted at The Hague in May 1954.

The aim of the convention was to seek to afford protection to immovable and movable cultural heritage. For example, architectural monuments, works of art, books, manuscripts and archaeological sites etc. The convention comprises two protocols. The first protocol, agreed in 1954, details the undertakings for the protection of cultural property in territory occupied during an armed conflict. The second protocol essentially enhances the protection

afforded to cultural heritage, establishes offences for violation of the protocol and provides clarification on obligations to the convention.

The British Government signed the convention in 1954, but despite committing to ratify it, successive British Governments have failed to do so. The Committee for Communities welcomes the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill, which is designed to enable the UK to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and accede to its two protocols. The Committee believes the Bill will be a positive development towards the protection of our cultural heritage. The impact of armed conflict on cultural property can be devastating, and the Committee recognises that the marking of cultural property with the distinctive emblem of the convention may afford some protection to these properties. The Committee therefore welcomes the British Government's decision to ratify the convention through the Bill.

To that extent, the Committee also welcomes the introduction of offences designed to protect cultural property in the event of an armed conflict, as well as those to deter misuse of the blue shield. The Committee notes that the wide definition of cultural property under article 1 of the convention is in the Westminster Bill. The Committee, having sought clarification from the Department, is satisfied with the rationale for using an LCM rather than an Assembly Bill. As well as cultural matters, the Westminster Bill contains provisions that mainly concern the import and export of cultural property to and from the UK. While those apply to Northern Ireland, they are not devolved matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and hence are outside the legislative competence of the Assembly. The Committee is content that it would not be possible, therefore, to bring forward the provisions by means of an Assembly Bill.

The Committee notes that the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Bill will ensure consistency and coherence across the UK, noting that Wales and Scotland have agreed the same approach. Should the Assembly not pass the LCM, the Bill would need to be amended to allow the British Minister to grant permission and make designations for the use of the emblem in Northern Ireland. The Committee agrees it is preferable that the Bill will confer powers for the Department for Communities here on the use of the emblem in Northern Ireland, and the local Minister will be able to be in a position to influence the

operation of the legislation as it relates to the North of Ireland.

The Committee is satisfied that the original consultation undertaken by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in 2008 is still relevant and applicable and is content with the assessment that the financial impact is expected to be minimal. The Committee is also satisfied with the Department for Communities's assessment that the extension to Northern Ireland of the relevant provisions in the Bill has no implications for equality of opportunity, nor will it have an impact on the cultural capital of Northern Ireland.

Crucially, the Committee notes that the British Government will need to develop criteria to identify cultural property within the meaning of article 1 of the convention. That is:

*"movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people".*

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has confirmed that all devolved Administrations will be fully involved in the development of criteria, and the Committee for Communities asks that the Minister keep it apprised of progress in that regard.

The Committee recommends that the Assembly endorse the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Cultural Property Bill.

**Mr Allen:** In the early 1990s, the Balkan wars in the former Yugoslavia saw events such as the destruction of the iconic Mostar bridge and the shelling of the historic old buildings of Dubrovnik. Those are a terrible reminder that the destruction of cultural heritage is a tactic of war that has not been consigned to history. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was the result, and, as of March 2016, it has been ratified by 127 states.

As somebody who served in the British armed forces and proudly so, I know only too well the duty of care, the professionalism and the training given to members of the armed forces to ensure that a duty of care is afforded to cultural property, and we do all we can to ensure they are not caught up in conflicts or destroyed. However, events throughout history tell us and prove that there are others who do not take such an approach. That is why we support this LCM to afford cultural protection to monuments, art and other items of cultural significance throughout Northern Ireland.

**Mr Stalford:** The Committee Chairman has given a very fair assessment of the position that the Committee has adopted. Earlier today, we talked about Syria. In Palmyra, in Syria, we have all seen a dreadful example of what can happen when significant cultural and architectural property is not afforded protection. Ruins of an ancient civilisation that had survived thousands of years and inspired awe and admiration among all who visited them, were destroyed in seconds by terrorists armed with explosives.

It is in that regard that the failure of successive Governments to implement the 1954 Hague convention should be addressed. I am glad that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has recognised the need for the preservation of our heritage. Whilst I agree with the Minister that there can only be certain circumstances in which the blue and white shield symbol can be deployed, I hope that, in time, when the Bill is passed and the system is rolled out, the possession of the blue and white shield on a facility will become a badge of honour. It says that this is something that the Government recognise as being significant and worthy of preservation.

Ultimately, of course, it is to be hoped that it is highly unlikely that Northern Ireland will ever again be affected by circumstances where our monuments, art and archives etc would be in a position to be threatened. I welcome the fact that, more than 60 years after the Hague convention, the Government at Westminster and our own Government are taking action to ensure its effective implementation. I support the legislative consent motion.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I, too, support this LCM. I declare an interest as one of the four or maybe five Ministers who tried to bring this forward. Many accusations are levelled at this place about things moving slowly, but we have waited since 1954, so this one was not on our watch, in fairness. There were attempts from 2007 through to 2008 to have the convention ratified. That is really important.

To be fair, the Chair summed up exactly what was discussed in Committee and laid out very clearly our understanding and acknowledgement of the need for this LCM to be brought forward. As has been mentioned, the definition of cultural property in article 1 is very wide, but I am delighted that the clarification that we sought has been granted and that all devolved Administrations and institutions will be responsible for its designation.

As the Minister said in his opening remarks, the Bill is passing through Westminster, and if any changes are made, I would anticipate that they will be brought to us. I would also expect — it is not in the Bill in any great detail, although the inference is there — that when cultural property is seized, it is returned. There have been instances where that has happened in the past. Indeed, it has also been a very important part of many conflict resolution processes to have property brought forward and granted.

The designation is really important, as is the symbol. It gives it equal status, as was mentioned previously, with the Red Cross and the Red Crescent. I believe that, as it goes through scrutiny, as we anticipate, in this mandate and mandates ahead, that will be brought to the attention of the Department for Communities. We support the LCM.

**12.45 pm**

**Mrs Long:** On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the opportunity to speak about the legislative consent motion.

As the Chair set out, the Committee welcomes the British Government's ratification of the 1954 Hague convention earlier this year and supports a legislative consent motion as being the most sensible way for us in Northern Ireland to deal with the matter and to allow some of those powers to be devolved to the Assembly so that our cultural heritage and property can be protected.

The Hague convention is broken into two protocols, the first emphasising the protection of cultural property in the territory occupied during an armed conflict; and the second strengthening the first by establishing offences for violations of the first protocol and clarifying obligations.

Cultural property is a very wide-ranging term. However, the Bill is not controversial in its aims or definitions of cultural items. It seeks to protect "immovable" and "movable" items that possess significant cultural heritage to an area and outlines that removing such items will be an offence. That can include architectural monuments, works of art, books, manuscripts and also the damage committed to archaeological sites, all of which can add value to a region and enrich it.

In a globalised world that is experiencing significant civil unrest and cultural violence, it is important that we are strong against the theft of cultural property from other nations. As others have reflected, having talked about Aleppo and

Syria today, we also think of Palmyra and the destruction of the relics of an ancient civilisation that have been there for many thousands of years. They were destroyed in the most wanton display of cultural destruction that we have seen in some considerable time.

It is good that, whilst we in the Chamber will be largely powerless in preventing such actions during a war, the Bill is a positive step in reducing the potential for items pillaged from places such as Palmyra being sold on the black market for profit. That is hugely important. It is also good in that it allows our local cultural heritage to be protected and recognised. Whilst we hope that Northern Ireland will never become a war zone under the Hague convention, it is a sensible precaution to identify those matters that are of cultural significance, not just for us regionally but internationally, and give them due protection, and not just from war, by giving them status on an international footing. The opportunity to do that is hugely important.

We are happy to support the Bill as a way of protecting artefacts and monuments that have special importance in the preservation of cultures, locally and globally. We live in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world, and, by supporting the Bill, we can support and develop a global community of different cultures for all people at a time when there is increasing instability around the world.

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Communities, its members and Members for their contributions this afternoon. A couple of points were raised. One was whether I would continue to keep the Committee apprised of developments, and I am happy to do that. The exact criteria for how this will apply in Northern Ireland are being developed by the DCMS. My Department has a role in that, and I am happy to keep Members informed as developments progress.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill.*

## Private Members' Business

### Housing Associations: Reclassification

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. An amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The amendment has been tabled by those who tabled the motion. The motion and the amendment will be proposed together and wound up on together, with 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech.

**Mr Allen:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the likelihood that the Office for National Statistics will reclassify Northern Ireland's 22 housing associations from independent social businesses to public bodies; that this may limit their ability to access private finance to build new homes; that the £1 billion of private debt already on their books could be added to the Executive's balance sheet, taking the Executive's total borrowing to levels that would reduce drastically their ability to borrow money for other initiatives across the Executive Departments; and calls on the Minister for Communities to prepare to bring forward urgent legislation to reverse the reclassification of Northern Ireland housing associations so that they can remain classified as independent social businesses.*

I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "notes" and insert*

*"the decision by the Office for National Statistics to reclassify Northern Ireland's 22 housing associations from independent social businesses to public bodies; recognises that this will have a significant impact on housing associations and their ability to provide new social and shared ownership homes; further notes that this decision will add nearly £1 billion of housing association debt to the Northern Ireland Executive's balance sheet, seriously impacting on the Executive's ability to borrow money for other initiatives across the Executive Departments; and calls on the Minister for Communities and Minister of Finance to expedite the steps necessary to reverse this reclassification; and agree quickly an interim derogation arrangement with HM Treasury to enable the sector to continue to function normally, to engage closely with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to agree a joined-up*

*approach, and to outline a clear and detailed timeline for specific action, including bringing forward legislation, within the time frame that any HM Treasury derogation allows, to ensure that Northern Ireland's housing associations can remain classified as independent social businesses."*

As Members will be aware, events have moved on somewhat since the motion was originally tabled, so an amendment is necessary to take account of the changed circumstances. The original motion was tabled in advance of the decision by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to reclassify Northern Ireland's housing associations as public bodies, which was announced on Thursday 29 September. What, on the face of it, might appear to be a relatively unimportant and technical change in accounting rules would actually have very serious implications indeed. This is a problem that needs to be rectified quickly, and we will give our help and support to the Executive, within reason, to help with the solution. We welcome the fact that the Executive have vowed to seek a reversal of the ONS decision to reclassify NI housing associations, including amending legislation where appropriate.

Our motion and amendment were tabled because we have two main areas of concern. The first is that housing associations could find it difficult to raise funding and, as a result, there would be a serious effect on their ability to build badly-needed social housing. Given that we are already in the midst of a housing crisis, anything that might contribute to uncertainty and jeopardise the social housing building programme should be avoided at all costs. Approximately 8,000 social housing starts are planned in the next four years, and these would obviously be under threat if there was any question over whether or not local housing associations were able to continue to borrow in the same manner as they can at present and raise much-needed private finances. There would also be major implications for the co-ownership scheme affecting roughly 700 to 800 homes each year. This scheme is funded via the financial transactions capital (FTC) money from the Treasury, and one of the primary conditions is that it can be lent only to private bodies.

The second concern is that, as a result of this reclassification, the approximately £1 billion worth of borrowing currently on local housing associations' books would be transferred to the Executive's balance sheet. This would obviously have a potentially devastating effect on the Executive's finances.

As I stated, our original motion was tabled prior to both the ONS announcement that Northern Ireland housing associations would be reclassified as public bodies and the statements by the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance. As a result, my party, working with its SDLP Opposition colleagues, has brought forward the amendment. The amendment takes account of the changed circumstances, and we are confident that it will command support across the House.

The ONS did not just pronounce on the reclassification of Northern Ireland housing associations as public bodies. It also reclassified their counterparts in Scotland and Wales. We are of the view that, as Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all been set exactly the same challenge at exactly the same time, if the Executive are serious about being focused on delivery, we need to act at least as swiftly as the Scottish and the Welsh. Stormont has often been accused of inertia and being slow to act. This simply cannot be allowed to happen here. ONS has said:

*"We will assess at the impact of these classification decisions and will update the affected statistics at the earliest opportunity."*

We have concerns as to what the implications might be for Northern Ireland should there be any delay. We need to see a coordinated approach by the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance to the very real dangers that we face. We need to get an appropriate derogation agreed with the Treasury, and then we need to ensure that the derogation is of a sufficient length of time. The legislative process in the House can seem rather torturous. It should go without saying that we need to ensure that we get the relevant legislation through the House without delay and certainly well within the time frame of the derogation.

Even if legislation were being drafted today, we could face a very tight timetable to get a Treasury derogation, given that it can take 18 to 24 months for legislation to pass through the House so that all the required stages receive full scrutiny. We want to see joined-up, concerted action between the devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The three devolved Administrations need to agree a joint endeavour on the matter to deal with the Treasury on the derogation and to get a deal on the interim arrangements. In short, we need an appropriate derogation with a realistic time frame.

We therefore need a commitment from the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance that we will get the legislation through the House not just in a timely manner but at least as quickly as the Administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff. That is a very important point, because, as the ONS has ruled on housing associations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland at the same time, it is more than logical to assume that it will reconsider their status at the same time. As stated earlier, it said that it would assess the impact of the classification decisions and update the affected statistics at the earliest opportunity. There is a real danger that Northern Ireland could get left behind and the derogation could run out. We want to avoid that at all costs, given the serious difficulties that it would cause for housing associations' ability to deliver new-build housing and for the borrowing ability of the Executive.

Given the most recent figures, from June 2016, of 37,347 households on the housing waiting list, 22,986 deemed to be in housing stress and 15,747 deemed to be statutorily homeless, it is imperative that we act swiftly. I therefore call on either the Minister for Communities or the Minister of Finance to set out a clear timeline for what action they intend to take. The Opposition are ready and willing to work with the relevant Ministers to the benefit of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Stalford:** As someone who represents South Belfast, I am painfully aware of the shortages in social housing. All Members who represent Belfast constituencies — not only Belfast, of course, but beyond — have found that there is a need for more social housing. The previous Executive met their target on social housing, and this Executive have set an ambitious target of 8,000 houses, as the Member for East Belfast Mr Allen said.

I think that Members can be assured of the commitment of the Government to achieving a reversal in the Office for National Statistics' decision, not only because of the statements from the Minister on the issue but because of the statements from the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance and the Minister for Communities took the issue to the Northern Ireland Executive on the very afternoon that the decision was announced, in order to secure the agreement of the Executive to address it. There is a recognition at the heart of government of the need to secure the derogation. That has been evidenced by my colleague the Minister for Communities and by the Minister of Finance. Officials in the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance are working together to

achieve an effective derogation that will allow the time that is needed for all the actions to ensure a successful reversal of the Office for National Statistics' decision.

It is important in the debate to note that Ministers in a devolved Government have no control over the Office for National Statistics. The ONS is the United Kingdom's largest independent producer of official statistics and is the recognised national statistical institution for the United Kingdom. Its responsibilities, as Members will know, include collecting and publishing statistics related to the economy, population and society at national, regional and local level. The Office for National Statistics independently determines classification decisions strictly in accordance with agreed rules set out in established systems. It is important to remember that when we approach the issue.

#### 1.00 pm

The Northern Ireland Executive are committed to delivering on their housing target, and we are committed to dealing with the issues that have been raised here. The one thing I would say, having read the motion, is that I welcome the fact that it has been acknowledged that the Executive are doing what has been called for. The motion calls for actions that are already being undertaken by the Executive. In an ordinary system — perhaps in a more parliamentary system — it is supposed to be the Opposition who lead the Government, but, in this instance, the Government are leading the Opposition. Read the content of what has been presented to the House: it calls on the Government to undertake actions that are already being undertaken. I do not want to add further discomfort for our friends at the bottom of the Chamber, but it might be worth considering more detailed discussions with Ministers before rushing in motions that demand actions that are already being carried out by those in positions of —

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for giving way. He, of course, makes a valid point. Government ought to be ahead of the curve on the issue because it was predictable. Do you not agree that it might have been an opportunity for the Minister to make a statement to the House and clarify what exactly he was doing in the last 11 days so that Members could be fully informed?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Stalford:** I thank the lady for her point. There are few better informed in the House than her, and she makes her point well. It is important, however, to note that the actions that are being called for are being undertaken.

One issue that has been raised is, of course, the implications that the determination has on public spending and our capacity to borrow money. That has implications that go way beyond matters of housing, and I suspect that the universities in my constituency, in particular, will look closely at the content of the debate and the subsequent resolution of the issues that have been raised.

I think that we can be confident that the changes that the Department will bring forward will allow us to achieve a reversal of the ONS position. There are, of course, no certainties, but I believe that that is the reason why officials in the Department will closely examine the issue with the Office for National Statistics. We can be as sure as anything can be in life and confident that every effort will be made to ensure that the decision is reversed, and I believe that that is what everyone — Government and Opposition — wants to happen.

**Mr F McCann:** I will speak to the motion tabled in the name of the Ulster Unionists and to the amendment in the name of the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. When I first read the motion, it seemed that the Ulster Unionists had not only jumped the gun in tabling the motion, which is rushed and out of date, but had asked for steps to be taken that the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Communities had been working towards. In fact, I have raised those issues with both Ministers and have been assured that all that could be done was being done in the run-up to the decision of the Office for National Statistics to reclassify housing associations across the North from independent social enterprises to public finance bodies.

The amendment is also now redundant, given the decision of the Executive last Thursday when they approved a joint paper from Ministers Ó Muilleoir and Givan to seek a reversal of the ONS decision to reclassify housing associations in the North, including amending legislation where appropriate. They said:

*"The Executive is committed to providing suitable homes for all and we will now work together to find the best way forward to allow investment to continue."*

The Minister of Finance added:

*"Having a secure and stable social housing sector is a ... cornerstone of our civic society."*

He went on to say:

*"We need to take all measures necessary to ensure that the sector has [the ability] to invest and grow."*

The decision by the Office for National Statistics, if left unaddressed by the Executive, would have changed the budgeting rules and could have resulted in an annual shortfall of £100 million for social and affordable housing.

That is why, he said:

*"we plan to seek a derogation to prevent this".*

That clearly shows that the Ministers and the Executive, who are clued-in to the difficulties —

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr F McCann:** No. I have only a couple of minutes.

That clearly shows that the Ministers and the Executive, who are clued-in to the difficulties of the decision the ONS has made, have been proactive in putting out the message that they will seek a derogation. It is also my understanding that the Minister of Finance has been in touch with his equivalents in Scotland and Wales to ensure there is joined-up thinking and that a solution to reclassification can be found. In a statement, the chief executive of NIFHA, Cameron Watt, in response to the Office for National Statistics' reclassification of housing associations, said that he "warmly welcomes" the decision of the Executive to seek a reversal of the decision and their commitment to amend legislation if appropriate. He went on to say that he was:

*"delighted that the NI Executive has acted ... decisively to seek a reversal of the ONS decision",*

saying that it:

*"is vitally important in sustaining this successful partnership."*

He went on to say:

*"We are grateful to Communities Minister ... and Finance Minister Máirtín Ó Muilleoir ...*

*for their immediate and effective response to the ONS decision. Both Ministers have recognised the crucial role of housing associations in delivering much-needed homes."*

The decision in October 2015 by the Office for National Statistics to reclassify housing associations in England from private financial corporations to public non-financial corporations sent shock waves through housing circles across the North, not least because of the impact of reclassification on housing associations here. Now that it has happened, it is crucial that we leave nothing to chance. It is important also to build the partnership Cameron Watt spoke of not only to move to obtain derogation but to plot out a strategy for housebuilding in the social housing sector. I understand what my colleague across the Chamber said about the commitment to 8,000 houses, but we should take that as a minimum rather than a maximum target. It needs to include developing ways to give the power of new build back to the Housing Executive. The fact that a housing provider is sitting on stock of 88,000 houses it cannot use to lever in much-needed finance is madness. Just imagine what a game changer that could be for new build as we work towards a solution to the reclassification problems. We also need to work to make the changes necessary to bring the Housing Executive back into play. We need to look at how we bring the thousands of empty homes back into use —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

**Mr F McCann:** Chair, I would like to mention, because this has not been taken up, the significance of today being World Homeless Day and World Mental Health Day, which are two issues that cross paths and need our urgent attention.

**Ms Mallon:** It is not only important but essential that the motion was brought to the House today. It is essential because of the profound financial, economic and societal impact of the reclassification by the Office for National Statistics of Northern Ireland's 22 housing associations from independent social businesses to public bodies on housing associations' ability to access finance to build critical and much-needed new homes and the potential to add £1 billion debt to the Executive's balance sheet, as the motion points out, with all the serious implications and consequences that will have for Executive

investment in education, health and economic initiatives, among other things.

Yet, despite the significant ramifications of the reclassification, there has been little to no detail of what plans the Communities Minister and Finance Minister had in place in preparation for it — we knew in all likelihood it was coming down the track — and nothing, beyond headlines, of what actions the Ministers had actually taken since the reclassification was announced. In truth, the motion contains more detail than anything forthcoming to date from the Executive or either Minister. In fact, the Minister for Communities and his counterpart in the Department of Finance clearly did not deem the issue important enough to come before this democratic Chamber to make a statement on the matter, give some reassurance to the House and to the people who elected us, give reassurance to each of the 22 housing associations affected and, most importantly, give reassurance to the 37,000 people on the social housing waiting list and the 15,474 deemed homeless and desperately waiting and waiting for a home. Perhaps the Minister will share with us today the rationale for taking this approach. In fact, apart from a joint press release that talked in vague terms of an approved Executive paper seeking a non-detailed reversal of the ONS decision, including amending unspecified legislation and plans to seek a derogation, the House has been provided with no concrete detail of what both Ministers are doing. The Member for South Belfast referred to multiple statements from each Minister: I do not know where those statements are.

This leaves questions to which we seek answers. What level of deregulation will be implemented? Will it have empowerment of the tenant at its core? What consultation has taken place and will take place to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the right response? What discussions have both Ministers had with their counterparts in Scotland and Wales to deliver a joined-up approach and ensure that Northern Ireland is not left behind? What is the Minister's clear and detailed timeline for specific action? What amended legislation is being proposed? At what stage is that legislation? When will it be enacted? Will it be within the time frame that any Treasury derogation allows? If it falls outside the derogation period granted, what safeguards will both Ministers provide? How advanced are derogation negotiations with the Treasury?

I tried to obtain some of that information through a question for written answer tabled on 26 September, but, interestingly, the answer

has been embargoed until today. Perhaps the Minister can explain why the embargo was put in place. Hopefully, today, the Minister will provide answers to these questions and others posed by Members across the Chamber or, at least, follow them up in writing if it is not possible to provide definitive answers today.

Before I conclude, I would like to touch on another point. I firmly believe that with change comes great opportunity. We have here a real opportunity not to freely deregulate but to ensure that we deliver sensible, modernised regulation with empowerment of the tenant at its core. Within this, there is also the opportunity, I would argue, to revisit the recommendation of the PricewaterhouseCoopers strategic review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which was supported by the Housing Executive and widely across the housing sector, to establish an independent regulator of social housing.

Prior to the move to reclassify housing associations by the Office for National Statistics, good regulation and effective regulatory infrastructures have been a popular theme in policy development over the last two decades. We are often asked to look —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member conclude her remarks?

**Ms Mallon:** — to Scotland for best practice. On this, I urge the Minister to look to Scotland with regard to the independence of the regulator and to ensure that, in moving swiftly to address budgetary pressures, he does not store up a series of problems for the longer term.

**Mrs Long:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and the amendment. Obviously, as others have said, the context has now moved on because the expected decision by the Office for National Statistics to reclassify the housing associations as public bodies has now been announced.

Mr Speaker, you know that, last week, I raised this matter as a point of order because I am of the belief that the announcement is so significant that it required a ministerial statement to the House rather than simply a press release. Whilst the move was expected, its impact and the Executive's response and preparedness to address it are matters of public and political importance and ones that should have been brought to the Chamber. It is all very well to criticise people for tabling motions to bring Ministers to the House on this: Ministers could opt to come to the House of

their own volition and give the information to reassure the public. I therefore welcome the opportunity that has been provided by the motion to seek that clarity, but I would like Ministers to make the effort to do that of their own volition rather than deliver lectures to the rest of us about how we should go about our work.

A highly significant change, it will not only have ramifications for important economic and social rights to housing but will impact on the wider financial situation in Departments. Housing associations have always been somewhat different from the Housing Executive in how they have approached these matters. Until now, they have been able to operate as industrial and provident societies. That means that they could benefit from both government funding and private finance to allow them to build more homes and perform essential upkeep of their current stock, should they so wish.

It is commonly through commercial banks, the Housing Finance Corporation and, more recently, the European Investment Bank.

### 1.15 pm

The Housing Executive provides around 90,000 homes, and housing associations make up around 40,000 properties, so, all in all, we are talking about 100,000 individuals and families across Northern Ireland. It is also important to remember that many of those are families that are vulnerable, facing hardship and struggling to find employment. The ONS decision impacts on all of them in terms of access to funding for maintenance and upgrades available for their properties. In addition, it also impacts directly on the 40,000 people on the waiting lists for suitable housing and who are in housing stress, as the ability to leverage private funds is crucial in allowing housing associations to develop new stock. It is inconceivable that the Executive could afford to make up the shortfall, even in the interim, without a serious negative impact on the plans and budgets of other Departments.

In June, for example, the European Investment Bank gave £280 million towards social housing in Northern Ireland; that amount of money could not have been sourced if these rules had been in place. It was rightly welcomed at the time, but it is important, if we are to get the construction of 4,700 new social homes over the next five years, alongside the improvement of existing stock, that further opportunities like that are not now put at risk. Therefore, it is important that housing associations are clearly advised about certainty in their funding

opportunities. The Minister briefed the Committee and advised that he reckons that, over the next 30 years, about £6.5 billion will need to be injected into housing if accommodation is to meet the significant demand for both social and affordable housing. However, without the additional leverage that we get from housing associations, that simply will not be possible.

In addition, the existing borrowing of housing associations has now essentially been converted into public borrowing — a move that has wide-ranging implications for the cost and accessibility of borrowing for the Executive. During his briefing with the Committee, the Minister indicated that the Department was alert to the possibility of reclassification and that Ministers were ready for the challenge, which we welcome. When similar ONS rulings were made in regard to England, Scotland and Wales, Ministers had a case to present to the Treasury regarding emergency legislation to restructure housing associations in light of the judgement and to meet the requirements for their governance arrangements and allow them to be revisited in due course.

That allowed a temporary derogation to be offered by the Treasury. I ask the Minister whether such emergency legislation has been developed by his Department and what the time frame for tabling it in the Assembly will be. What, if any, reassurance has he had from Treasury that such legislation that he has proposed, and other proposals that he has developed, will meet its requirements for a temporary derogation? Within what time frame does he expect such a derogation to be secured, and how long does he expect it to last? In respect of seeking a reversal of the ONS decision —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

**Mrs Long:** — what clarity can the Minister provide with respect to the likely effectiveness of the measures proposed in meeting those requirements?

I support the motion and the amendment, and I look forward to supporting the Ministers in what they do to ensure that the issues are adequately addressed.

**Mr Girvan:** I too support both the motion and the amendment, although I see this as people trying to make themselves seem relevant by putting down a motion on something that the

Executive have already made a move to address.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Girvan:** No, I will not; I have only started. To be honest, the attitude is that the Opposition are just jumping over issues. We are wasting another hour and a half today discussing something that we have already dealt with.

**Mr Allen:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Girvan:** I have already said that I am not giving way, OK? The point of the matter is —

**Mrs Long:** Do the Executive have legislation for us?

**Mr Girvan:** We have — Members — Mr Speaker —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask Members not to speak from sedentary positions.

**Mr Girvan:** Thank you.

I support the motion in the way that it is coming forward. I think that the Executive have made a sensible decision in asking for a derogation in relation to this matter. The ONS report that was submitted, on the back of what it is bringing forward, will create and would have created a major problem, both financially for the Executive and in the opportunity for further borrowing for capital projects that could be of great benefit. I do think that some of the housing associations are not without blame, because I do not believe that they have necessarily delivered in the past. I do not think that they have always been successful in delivering everything that was supposed to have been done by them. There has been a certain amount of — I will not use the word "culling" — consolidation of housing associations in that a number of them have come together and pooled resources.

I appreciate that we are talking about £1 billion of debt associated with these housing associations. There is a massive asset and they are quite asset rich, so, on the back of that, we have to realise that the days of the Housing Executive as it stands are probably numbered. There is the difficulty of onward maintenance and delivery of that maintenance within the housing stock.

I, too, representing the south Antrim area, know those people who come to my door. Quite a heavy load of the office work —

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Girvan:** I will indeed, yes. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He is, obviously, very selective and wise in who he gives way to.

The Member will have heard from various sources a demand for more information in terms of the detail. The Office for National Statistics has not even published the detail of its ruling yet.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Girvan:** Thank you. I appreciate the Member's intervention and the information that we do not have the detail in that report.

The Housing Executive is having some difficulty. In fact, it is wanting to engage in a transfer of assets to housing associations over the next number of years of properties requiring investment, upgrade and improvement. The Housing Executive says that the mechanism is no longer there for it to be able to fund that through the current process, and, as a consequence, it has no alternative but to allow housing associations to do that.

On the back of that, they do have the model —

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he not accept that the inability of the Housing Executive to make those improvements was a political decision made by DUP Ministers?

**Mr Girvan:** If you go back historically, it was long before the DUP took control of those Departments when such a rule existed in relation to the funding mechanism for the Housing Executive and how it has accessed the funding. So, putting that message forward is a ruse. It is totally wrong and that does not tie in with any decision by a DUP Minister.

As it stands, the housing associations do have the mechanism to draw down the money to deliver the social housing in the areas that we need it. I appreciate and welcome the Executive's early intervention — within hours of receiving the ONS report — in dealing with this matter, and not waiting until they could just get a sound bite and try to make themselves seem relevant.

This is one of the areas where in opposition is where you will be, and that is exactly where you should stay.

**Ms Gildernew:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Other Members have pointed out that this motion is retrospectively debating an issue that has already happened and that, when the ONS acted to reclassify housing associations, the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance brought a paper to the Executive immediately seeking that derogation.

The point has already been made here as well that the difficulty we have is that there is a shortage in social housing, not just in Belfast or Derry but right across the North. I am currently representing a wide range of applicants, from families to single men, to access a home in my constituency. The big issue is that there are not enough units — enough homes — and there is not enough social housing. The nub of the issue is that the body charged with the provision of housing — the Housing Executive — is no longer in a position to build units. My colleague Fra McCann has covered that. I believe that this is something that we will want to rectify during this mandate. Until this situation is rectified, we will still be playing catch-up.

There are differences of opinion on how many units of social housing we need across the mandate. We have not taken into consideration that there are hundreds of adults living at home with ageing parents because there is not enough supported housing or independent living for them. I am talking about adults who are learning-disabled or have more complex needs, and we do not have adequate housing for them.

As a result, there are ageing parents who are deeply concerned about how their child is going to manage when they are no longer able to look after them. We have to take a proper look at the figures and ensure that those people are dealt with when we are considering the number of housing units needed. While today's debate has been lively enough, there is a fairly high level of consensus around the Chamber. The SDLP amendment is something that we can support, and we will be seeking to do that. I make the point, however, that what is laid out in the amendment is work that is already happening. We are talking about something that has happened, that is happening and that the Minister —

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Gildernew:** I notice that Mr Beggs has tried to interrupt a number of Members. Maybe he should put his name down to make a speech rather than continually interrupt.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Gildernew:** This is an important issue. Housing is at the very heart of what I got involved in politics for. As Fra said, today is World Mental Health Day and World Homeless Day. A proper home and a roof over your head is not a privilege but a human right, and everybody should be able to enjoy that right. We should do more to build more houses, and I will support the Minister in his endeavours to do that. It is essential, however, that we establish new housing units right across the North, as this is not just a Belfast problem.

**Lord Morrow:** This is a debate that never needed to take place. When we look at the Opposition Benches today, we can see that the Opposition now agree that it should never have taken place. Of the parties that are co-signatories to the amendment, the Ulster Unionists can manage five Members and the SDLP one. Even they realise that this is a bit of a non-event.

**Mrs Long:** More than you managed last week.

**Lord Morrow:** Mrs Long continually fires from a sedentary position, but whenever she is up talking, she has not that much to say, at least not that much that is worth —

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Lord Morrow:** Hold on a moment. *[Laughter.]* We have heard you parroting off all afternoon. What you want to say must be very important. Well, there is the Speaker up there, so go up and get your name down. For goodness' sake, you are up and down there like a jack-in-the-box. Some of your colleagues will give way. They will be up in a few minutes telling a great story about a non-event.

It is unfortunate that the Opposition on the first occasion that they decide that maybe there is something we can unite on here then unite around nothing. What they are asking to be done is already being done. I found it absolutely amazing that Mrs Long said that the Minister should have been telling us all. I suspect that Mrs Long is not much different from me, in that she walks past the Minister's door maybe a dozen times a day. It would not be hard for her to call in and ask, "Can you tell

me about this? I am so anxious about this particular issue".

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for giving way. To be clear, it is not that I should personally be told. That is largely irrelevant. It is that the House should be told, as statements were made in the Chamber in Scotland, Wales and England when similar measures were taken.

**Lord Morrow:** I knew that it was a mistake to give way, but there you go.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Lord Morrow:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

There is no one in the House, particularly among those of us who have served for some years on councils and elsewhere, who is not very aware of the importance of social-sector housing. We are also very aware of the waiting lists that exist, but we are also waiting for some blue-sky thinking from those who seem to have all the answers on how to deal with a chronic waiting list in Northern Ireland. It is not a simple one. There is not one Member in the House — not one going right around — who is not anxious about this particular issue. Those who brought the motion to the House today have not done anything to push the issue forward. Maybe what they are really doing is endorsing what the Executive and the Minister are already doing. If there is something positive to take from it, I suppose that we can take that.

**Ms Mallon:** Will the Member give way?

**Lord Morrow:** Yes. Come on.

**1.30 pm**

**Ms Mallon:** The Member will be aware that I posed a series of questions about what the Ministers and Executive were doing. Is the Member in a position to answer those? Is all of that information in the public domain?

**Lord Morrow:** Yes. From statements made by the Minister, I know that much, if not all, of the information, is already available. I know that you would be a good researcher, and you or your staff could research all of that information; or, I suspect that, if you contact the Department, it might be able to assist you and send you all the information that you want. As one who has gone through it, I can tell you that the Department's research department is very effective and will assist you. I do not say that to

you belligerently; I hope that my tone comes across.

The Opposition need to realise that, if they stopped setting up straw men and knocking them down, maybe we could get things done in this place. Someone mentioned the amount of time that it takes for legislation to go through. I know, as someone who pioneered private legislation in the past, that it took something in the region of three years from start to finish. I do not underestimate the journey that legislation has to take, but the Opposition could have done a greater service by not pushing a motion such as the one that is before us today. It is a motion on something that the Executive have already applied themselves to and the Minister is already working on. He has pushed it down the road, and he, too, sees it as important. If anything good has come out of today's debate, it is that the decision that the Minister took some time ago has been reinforced. What we are saying to you, Minister, is, "You are doing the right thing. Just get on with it".

**Mr Beggs:** It is a rather sad event in a debating chamber when none of the Government Back-Benchers are prepared to give way to allow debate. I am lucky that I had my name down to speak, but I could have interacted and, hopefully, contributed to the discussion and debate had those Members allowed it, but, obviously, they did not feel confident enough in themselves to do so.

I support the motion tabled by my colleagues Andy Allen, Jenny Palmer and Philip Smith, and, indeed, the amendment in the name of my colleagues and the SDLP, which has supported the motion as well. It is important that this area is urgently addressed, and I will highlight why I have a degree of concern because of past inaction. It needs to be in the public domain, and there needs to be pressure on movement in this area because there are concerns from the past.

The decision by the Office for National Statistics to reclassify Northern Ireland's housing associations should not have been a problem. A year ago, when it did so in England, what happened? Earlier this year, the Housing and Planning Act 2016 addressed the issue so that English housing associations could be reclassified again as private bodies. Nobody should be surprised by what has happened. Given that knowledge, I am concerned by the cost that might fall to the Executive or our housing associations as a result of the reclassification. Will there be delays? I have not yet heard when the legislation will come

forward, so I hope that the Minister will address that when he gets to his feet later. The Finance Minister has indicated that this will cost an ongoing £100 million a year. Is there a charge this year? On top of that, of course, is the issue that my colleague Andy Allen highlighted, of access to the financial transaction capital, which is also very important for housing associations, particularly for the co-ownership scheme that allows many people who might otherwise be homeless and in need of social housing, to find a home of their own.

We need to address this with a degree of urgency. It was quickly addressed in England, and Scotland's First Minister has already said that a Bill will be introduced. When I listen to the Government Back-Benchers in the Chamber, I am confused: are they all supporting the motion as amended? I picked up a degree of discontent.

**Mr Frew:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** Yes, unlike you and your colleagues, I will give way.

**Mr Givan:** I thought this would be an appropriate time to indicate this to the House: given that your amendment is doing exactly what I want to do and the Executive have already agreed, let me reassure you that I will be supporting the amendment.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Beggs:** The issue is that new legislation will be required. That is very obvious when you see what had to happen in England and what has been planned elsewhere. That has been not coming out very clearly in what has been said to date. To think that you can just ask for derogation is living in cloud cuckoo land. It had to be amended in other parts of the UK and therefore would likely have to be amended here as well.

The other area of concern I had was when I heard Mr McCann speak. His solution was to give the powers back to the Housing Executive. Can the Minister advise, when he gets to his feet, whether that would solve our problem, or would it have additional costs still being incurred where we would not be able to build as many social houses? I would like to see clarity from the Government Benches — the DUP and Sinn Féin Benches — about that. Is that what the plan is? Are we going to simply put the ability to build houses back into the Housing Executive and suffer huge financial costs and

be able to build fewer homes? It would be helpful if the Minister would clarify that.

The other area I have a degree of concern about is other aspects of our public sector in Northern Ireland. While researching this issue for the debate, I looked at the FE colleges. There was a similar assessment done in 2010 for FE colleges that is applicable to Northern Ireland as well. In England, they brought the Education Act 2011 to address the issue so that they could remain independent, avoid costs and be included in public-sector expenditure. My understanding is that that is not the case in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, our FE colleges continue to be included, and that limits what they can do. It limits what the Executive can do with their limited borrowing. Bear in mind that that is some five years ago, so I do not want this issue to be still trundling on for five years. As I indicated, very obvious delays happened in the past, and I seek reassurance from the Minister that we will not face similar delays with this issue. When we delay the ability to build new houses, disadvantaged members of our community do not get homes. Families in need do not get a roof over their head. It is vital that there are not undue delays. It is also vital that we do not incur financial penalties as a result of indecision from our Government.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member conclude his remarks?

**Mr Beggs:** I only hope that, in future, debate will be allowed in the House.

**Dr Farry:** I will pick up from Mr Beggs on further education to say that there is no clamour in the FE sector for a reclassification away from being a non-departmental public body. The situation for FE in Northern Ireland is much healthier than in England where there have been quite significant funding cuts, which have been cut out from a lot of the narrative on investment in skills and education. Consideration was given to a potential public consultation on changing the governance for FE to allow ONS to reclassify it away from NDPBs. In light of our own difficulties with budgets and the fact that the Executive put in place end-year flexibility that allowed surpluses to be transferred from one year to another, there is now consensus that the status quo is the best way forward. So that is not an appropriate line to go down.

I want to make a number of brief comments on this situation. The key issue of debate that has emerged in the Chamber today is on process

and how the Opposition are somehow out of order in bringing up something that the Executive, in their infinite wisdom, are on top of. Almost building upon the theme of last week's business, we are again seeing the problems in openness and transparency in what the Executive are doing. It is almost as though we have a privilege in sometimes being told what the Executive are actually up to. We should have open and transparent government where decisions are explained, questions are answered on time and Ministers are proactive in bringing information to the Assembly rather than putting the onus on everyone else to go around and find out.

It is not just a matter of us receiving the information as poor MLAs in the Opposition parties; this is something that actually affects the public of Northern Ireland, who have an interest in hearing what is being said as well. That is the case in particular for the housing associations and our wider policy objectives of being able to make sure the resources available in Northern Ireland can be stretched to their maximum outcome. Obviously, the reclassification potential will severely curtail that in many respects.

A lot of this could have been avoided if the Minister had been proactive in bringing a statement to the Assembly. That, in turn, allows MLAs, on behalf of their constituents, to pose questions to the Minister. I hope that we can avoid this situation in future. It is an important issue that goes to the heart of the resources available to us and what we can do to make a difference.

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Farry:** Yes.

**Mr Stalford:** Does the Member not agree that it sounds a tad silly to stand up and say that it is the Minister's fault that you have brought forward a motion about an issue that the Minister has dealt with?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Dr Farry:** Thank you. It is not silly in the slightest. It goes to the heart of the debate. There is, as there should be, a duty on Ministers in the ministerial code — they should follow through on it — to be open around decisions. There is clearly precedent in other jurisdictions that, where there are matters of major public interest, a Minister is proactive in bringing information forward and having

scrutiny. When I was the Minister, I did it routinely, as did others.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for giving way. There seems to be much kerfuffle in the corner because people dared to amend the motion. Does the Member agree that that is largely to do with timing and when the wording of motions has to be set down, which is much further in advance of what would be expected in any other Chamber in these islands?

**Dr Farry:** In concurring with my colleague, I also recall many instances on which the DUP and Sinn Féin, as the two parties of government, did exactly the same thing with motions that had to be tabled where the circumstances had moved on after the original tabling of the motion. It also shows that —

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Member for giving way. Mrs Long should get it into her head that it was not so much about amending the motion; the motion should have been withdrawn altogether.

**Dr Farry:** For better or worse, this is the only opportunity that the Assembly has had to discuss the issues. If we had what should have been the process in the Chamber of a ministerial statement, we could have done this in a much more structured way, akin to what is happening in Cardiff and Edinburgh, which have shown the way forward in that regard. Lest the current Minister thinks that we are picking on him, although this is the current example, it is a trend across the board. He is not the only one who is falling into the situation of not having the proper mechanisms of accountability. We are having the debate today, and we are able to raise the issues of process and the substance.

My final point is that there are issues in other parts of government where the way that ONS works and how we treat parts of the public sector allow or constrain the ability to borrow and raise money. I encourage the Executive to have a wider look across the piece in that regard. In doing so, we may find, particularly in these very straitened economic times, that there are resources available to us without having to raise revenue directly from the hard-pressed householders across Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

**Dr Farry:** We can make our resources stretch that bit further in investing in public services and our infrastructure.

**Mr Agnew:** When I looked ahead to the debate, I anticipated quite a boring debate. This is a crucial issue that speaks to millions of pounds of public spending and potentially having to rewrite budgets if we do not get the derogation that has been talked about. It is a vital issue but a fairly technical one. It is fairly dull issue on which, as is clear from the fact that the Executive parties are supporting a motion and amendment from the official Opposition, there is consensus. We are having a row about something that we agree on. It speaks to an Executive who are insecure about the idea of an Opposition — *[Interruption.]* — and debate.

It is not unreasonable that we should seek to speak on something whose impact would be, as I say, over £100 million on our annual block grant.

**Mr Speaker:** I remind Members not to speak from a sedentary position. The Member needs to be heard.

**1.45 pm**

**Mr Agnew:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. The issue has not come to the Assembly Floor except through questions for oral answer, which I have raised, and we ran out of time before one was even discussed. So, to the best of my knowledge, and apologies if others have asked questions, one response and supplementary from the Finance Minister is all that we have had to debate an issue that massively impacts on public spending. Today should be boring, it should be informative, but it has got caught up in heat, and that heat has been generated by an Executive that seem to be playing opposition for opposition's sake.

To get to the issue —

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Agnew:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr Stalford:** The Member accuses the Executive of playing opposition for opposition's sake. Is he playing government for government's sake by supporting what the Government are doing today?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Member for his question. The point is this: how can we know what the Government are doing if no statement has been made to the House? As Ms Mallon pointed out, there has been one public

statement on the issue that lacked detail. This is a very complex issue; we are talking about the deregulation of our housing associations; we are talking about a derogation from Treasury and negotiations for such; and we are talking about an ONS reclassification. As I said, it is all very technical and should be all very boring, but we need detail. That is why the debate is taking place today. I do not think that that is unreasonable. Had there not been a motion, we would have been told that we were not on top of our brief. It is one of the biggest things that is happening in governance in Northern Ireland, and we are not even raising it. So, I think that this is an Executive playing opposition for opposition's sake.

To get to the issue, if we can take it as read — I am yet to be completely assured that we will get our derogation and that we will have a deregulation Bill of housing associations — I would like to know the specifics of that because I think that there is both fear and opportunity in this, and what I look for from the Minister is to allay the fears and to ask him to seize the opportunities. Will he outline in any legislation that may come forward to the House, what impact it may have on strategic planning for house building programmes and how much control we can realistically expect to retain regarding stock levels? Will he also give detail, as we seek a reversal of the decision and a derogation, on the status of public finances and what discussions he has had with the Treasury on that point?

I said that there was opportunity because I think that there is. One of the consequences of the deregulation of housing associations is that they would be brought out of the right-to-buy scheme. That is something that I would welcome, and I would like the Minister's views on that. We have a significantly reduced social housing stock. If we go back to the 70s, we had 155,000 Housing Executive houses; we are now down to 88,000, plus the 40,000 housing association houses. That is not all down to the right to buy, but it has been one aspect of it. Given the figures that have been outlined by others in the debate about stress on our housing waiting lists, that is one thing that should be looked at.

There is further opportunity because, as we look to the governance of our housing associations, we can look again at the governance of the Housing Executive. I am one of those who would like to see an amendment of the rules to allow the Housing Executive to build social homes again —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

**Mr Agnew:** — and to make capital investments. My final point is that, whilst Mr Girvan pointed out that it was not the DUP's decision to change the rules about Housing Executive capital spend, every DUP Minister has upheld that decision.

**Mr Carroll:** It is clear from the comments made in the Chamber and from the statistics that we have a housing crisis. Some 43,000 people are on the housing waiting list. That includes our homeless, people with disabilities who need tailored accommodation, people who are being intimidated, people who need to move elsewhere to be closer to family, and people who have been stuck in hostels for years.

The issue of housing waiting lists, in my constituency and across the North, is fundamentally linked to economic class. Working-class people do not have the ability to get an extra few thousand pounds to purchase a house. Some, who have been able to save over the years, are able to get a mortgage, but it is only through strict saving that they are able to do that, and this is not an option for everyone. Public housing should exist as a right for everyone.

As has been mentioned, there are 87,107 housing units managed by the Housing Executive. A number almost double that is managed by housing associations. In the motion and the amendment, there is no mention of the Housing Executive. I think that it is essential that the Housing Executive be mentioned in this debate.

For years, there have been calls to allow the Housing Executive to borrow. It has more than enough assets to borrow, and this is something that needs to be addressed and looked at seriously. The Executive have continually lobbied Westminster for corporation tax to be lowered. I ask whether they have once put pressure on the Treasury to allow the Housing Executive to borrow so that it can build.

The main issue in the motion is that the housing associations should be allowed to borrow and that this ONS reclassification will not allow them to do so. It is our view that housing associations — public bodies — should be allowed to borrow, and the Housing Executive needs to address that. If we could take action to allow the Housing Executive to borrow, we could fund a crash course of housebuilding. We could alleviate problems, get rid of the issue

of housing waiting lists and get rid of the housing crisis.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, as Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the Minister will reply to the debate.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair)*

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Health

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before we start, I remind Members to continue to rise in their place if they wish to ask a supplementary question. Otherwise, I will assume that they no longer wish to ask their question.

### Dental Treatment: Waiting Lists

1. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health how she plans to reduce dental waiting lists. (AQO 409/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health):** My Department is working closely with the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) in developing an elective care plan to arrest the decline in elective waiting times and deliver sustainable improvements in the medium to longer term across all specialities. As well as maximising the number of patients who can be treated in the community, the plan will ensure that existing funded capacity in the health service is fully maximised and targets new and recurrent investment to expand the health service's capacity to meet patient demand. However, it will require significant additional funding to deliver this. I will continue to engage with my Executive colleagues to secure the additional investment necessary to transform the delivery of services.

As with all specialities, trusts are continuing to work with the Health and Social Care Board to minimise dental waiting times within the resources available. Patients are treated on the basis of clinical urgency, with patients of equal clinical priority being seen in chronological order. The board is also working with trusts and referring practitioners to finalise the roll-out

of referral guidelines that aim to reduce the number of unnecessary referrals for consultant-led dental treatment and thereby allow clinicians to focus on patients who require treatment.

**Mr Stalford:** I thank the Minister for her response. In the vein that prevention is better than cure, will she outline what collaborative efforts are being made between her Department and, perhaps, the Department of Education or other Departments to educate our young people in particular about the need to protect their teeth in order that, hopefully, they do not have to avail themselves of dentistry as much as is the case at present?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I absolutely agree with the Member that prevention is better than cure. We need to do more to prevent tooth decay from happening in the first place, because that would be the ideal scenario. We have a regional preschool prevention programme called "Happy Smiles" for children in nurseries. All trusts deliver programmes similar to the tooth-brushing challenge, which is delivered in the Belfast Trust from primary 4 onwards. Evidence is growing that, where prevention programmes are targeted on young children, a reduction of up to 30% in disease levels can be reached. I want our children to be the beneficiaries of all these successful prevention programmes.

My Department has also provided funding for tooth decay prevention campaigns over the years — for example, since 2005, £100,000 has been provided to trusts to target children in deprived areas. It is important that we continue to do more of that preventative work. Looking to the future, I want to focus on prevention, not just for tooth decay but right across the piece. It is important that we prevent people from getting to the point at which they need to use hospital services. Prevention is one of my key priorities.

**Mr Mullan:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The case of young Connla Quinn is very distressing and has been widely reported in the media recently. Has the Minister considered providing undergraduate training in dental studies at Ulster University in Coleraine to alleviate the problem of staff shortages in the Western Trust and reduce ever-increasing locum costs on dentists?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not have any information about the Western Trust specifically; I am happy to provide that to the Member in writing. Obviously, there are challenges for the Western

Trust, but there are challenges for many trusts with workforce issues and being able to recruit people. We have an over-reliance on locums, and that is not the place that we want to be. We need to transform Health and Social Care, and we need a real and meaningful workforce plan that allows us to recruit staff. It is difficult to recruit staff. Quite often, trusts go out to recruitment but cannot fill posts. We need to do more to change that picture. I do not have specific information about the Western Trust, but I will write to the Member.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The current problems in dental waiting lists would, of course, be significantly worse were it not for the pre-emptive actions of Michael McGimpsey in 2009. It is just unfortunate that similar attention was not shown by his successors. Will the Minister confirm how many of the dentistry graduates who applied for work in Northern Ireland last year were able to find training posts here?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am sure Michael will be glad to hear you are still singing his praises after he has left the House. I do not have the figures with me, but I am happy to respond to the Member in writing with the stats on the number of people who were successful in the recruitment.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, Minister, for the answers to your questions thus far. Given the evidence that fluoride is one of the major contributors to improvements in dental health and hygiene, what action are you taking to ensure that it could be placed in our public water supply?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is one of those issues that are quite emotive and topical. Some people do not want to be forced to have fluoride in their water, and I think that is a legitimate and genuine concern. It is something we keep under review. Any decisions I take will be based on a clinical assessment of whether something is the right thing to do for people's outcomes. I will always be guided by that, and it is the same scenario for fluoride in water.

## **Desertcreat: Update**

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on progress at the Desertcreat site. (AQO 410/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** On 28 September, I announced the appointment of the design team for the early works at Desertcreat. That is a positive step

forward in the development of a much-needed new Fire and Rescue Service training facility. Early works on the ground at Desertcreat are expected to commence in spring 2017. The total forecast capital investment is approximately £45 million, and the main design includes a fire station, teaching accommodation, a multipurpose training warehouse, a hothouse and swift-water and skidpan facilities at Desertcreat. The main capital works are expected to commence by late 2018.

The training centre, once completed and operational, will provide a facility in which our firefighters can learn the skills they need to keep the public and themselves safe. Training opportunities will include addressing fires in confined spaces and intense smoke, working with rapid water, as in flood rescues, and dealing with the outcome of road traffic accidents.

The local community in mid-Ulster will be fully engaged during the development of Desertcreat, and I have written to the chief executive of Mid Ulster council offering to meet him and all elected members regarding this important investment.

**Mr Sheehan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Will she give us a timeline for the completion of Desertcreat?

**Mrs O'Neill:** With the design team in place since last month, it has been tasked with undertaking necessary design work to progress the approved works. We hope that early works will start in spring 2017, and the approval of the main works, through the approval of an outline business case, is planned for the first half of 2018. Main construction works are planned to commence in late 2018, and it is estimated they will take just over two years to complete, in 2020-21.

**Mrs Overend:** I thank the Minister for that information. The so-called Community Safety College that was to be built at Desertcreat was to be finished last year. It was supposed to bring between 1,500 and 2,000 jobs in construction. Unfortunately, that all fell through, and mid-Ulster has been left very sore about the Desertcreat project. Can the Minister provide similar figures for this project in terms of construction? How does she feel it will benefit mid-Ulster?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I can confirm that it will be an investment in mid-Ulster of £45 million. I am

very aware, as the Member is, of the concerns over the years about the project and whether it was going to come to mid-Ulster at all. We have finalised the case, and I can say categorically, without any doubt, that the project will go ahead. We have appointed the design team, the works will be delivered, and we hope to have staff training and working there from the 2020-21 financial year.

It is a £45 million investment for mid-Ulster, and it is something I know the council has been lobbying very strongly on. As I said, I will talk to the council to give assurances that the project will go ahead. The people of mid-Ulster deserve, want and crave confirmation that the project will go ahead, and I am certainly committed to delivering it in this mandate.

### **askmyGP Pilot Scheme**

**3. Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Health for her assessment of the askmyGP pilot at the Abbey and Aberfoyle GP practices. (AQO 411/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** AskmyGP is a telephone- and web-based patient triage system, and it is being piloted in four GP practices here, including Abbey and Aberfoyle. Patients contacting their GP practice for an appointment are asked to provide responses to a series of questions about their condition either over the telephone or online. The responses are then passed to the GP, who makes a decision about the most appropriate course of action to respond to that patient's needs. For some patients, that might mean referral to another healthcare professional for advice or treatment, ensuring that patients who do not need to be seen by a GP can be seen quickly.

The initial results from the pilot exercise are extremely positive. Patients using the askmyGP app have received a callback from their GP or other care professional in around 30 to 40 minutes and often much sooner. In cases where a patient needs to be seen, they are being seen on the same day. Across the GP pilot practices, 94% of patients using askmyGP were satisfied or very satisfied with the service. GPs have also been extremely positive about the impact of the new service on their ability to meet patient demand and the reduced pressure on their working day. Work has now commenced to extend the pilot to a further 30 GP practices.

**Mr McCartney:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome this initiative and the

positivity that surrounds it. Can the Minister outline what other investment there will be in general practice alongside this initiative?

**Mrs O'Neill:** In 2015-16, an investment package of up to £5.1 million was agreed for general medical services (GMS), including additional funding of £3.1 million to build capacity in GP out of hours services, up to £1.2 million to increase the skills mix in general practice and help meet the demand for blood tests and other diagnostic work, and up to £300,000 to recruit and retain GPs. Further non-recurrent funding was also provided last year to pilot a phone and online triage system, which we have just discussed.

In December last year, a five-year initiative was launched to place up to 300 pharmacists in GP practices by 2021, with an associated total investment rising up to £14 million per year. This will mean that, where appropriate, patients can be given advice and assistance directly by a pharmacist, with GP time freed up for the patients who most need to see them. The first wave of pharmacists has been recruited. Over 35 whole-time equivalent posts have been filled, with staff starting to take up posts from mid-September. The second wave of recruitment is under way, with wave 3 being planned.

In January, investment of £1.2 million per year was secured to increase the number of GP training places each year from 65 to 85. As part of the GMS contract settlement for 2016-17, up to a further £7 million will be invested in general practice, including £2 million to meet the additional demand for GP services, £1.7 million to continue to roll out the practice-based pharmacists programme and £160,000 to develop online booking and repeat prescribing systems. These systems will be available to every GP practice that wishes to adopt them and will mean that people can access their GP surgery online at a time that is convenient for them.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. I also very much welcome this scheme and many of the Minister's initiatives, as outlined, that will alleviate pressure on our GPs. On the issue of recruitment and retention of GPs, does the Minister see that a new medical school in the north-west could go some way to increasing the number of people coming into and remaining in general practice?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There are obvious challenges in recruiting GPs, and rural GP practices are having particular challenges. The GP-led care

working group has reported back to me, and I am very keen to take forward a number of that group's recommendations, particularly those looking at the recruitment and retention of GPs. There are particular challenges in the north-west. In answer to a previous question, I talked about the challenges in relation to dental services and recruiting dentists. However, it is the same right across the piece. Recruitment is difficult in the Western Trust area. Would a medical school in that area help? I think that it would, and I am very keen to progress that. I have had some discussions with the university about taking that forward. I am very keen that that happens. It would really help with the workforce challenges that we have in that area.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for the schemes that she has announced. They will be very welcome, particularly the askmyGP scheme. You mentioned that it will be extended to 30 other practices. How long do you foresee the pilots lasting? When will a roll-out right across the Province be possible?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The feedback has been so positive. As I said, 94% of people said that they were satisfied or very satisfied. The pilot is available to any GP practice that wants to avail itself of it. We have actually put some funding in place to support that. That funding allows GPs to adapt and bring in something that could be difficult to bed in at the start. I am very keen that we roll it out right across the piece if we can. GPs are very keen to do that. They want to see the people who need to be seen and they want to see them on the same day, if necessary. The askmyGP scheme has shown that it does work and that it allows GPs to free up their time to see people. I am very keen to roll it out across the board, and GPs are keen for that to happen, too.

2.15 pm

**Ms Bradshaw:** I want to continue on that last point. You said that you have put out a call for the roll-out to the next 30 GP practices. If you are oversubscribed, how do you plan to decide which ones will get the roll-out at the next stage?

**Mrs O'Neill:** GPs are asking for this; they are asking for support to allow them to see people in a more timely fashion. GPs are distraught and distressed if they cannot see people on the day and if people are having to wait for a number of days to get appointments. This is about real transformation; it is about doing things differently and allowing GPs to free up their time. I do not think that we will get to a

point where we cannot support GPs to do this. This will deliver better outcomes for people. In the scheme of things, the financial investment is not massive, but it makes a real difference. I do not think that there will be an issue with competition and who gets the service; it will be an issue of how quickly we can roll it out and how everybody embraces it.

## Homelessness Strategy 2012-17

4. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Health how she has taken the homelessness strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-17 into account in the exercise of her Department's functions. (AQO 412/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** One of the objectives of the homelessness strategy is to improve services to vulnerable homeless households and individuals. This objective impacts on the health and social care service in a number of ways, particularly in relation to mental health, domestic and sexual violence and substance misuse.

Officials from my Department and the Public Health Agency participate in the homelessness strategy steering group and contribute to addressing policy and service delivery issues in partnership with the Department for Communities, the Housing Executive and the range of voluntary and community sector organisations that provide assistance and outreach to homeless people. In addition, I am a member of the inter-ministerial group on rough sleeping and homelessness, and Minister Givan will shortly convene a meeting of that group that I will attend.

Health and social care must be available on the basis of clinical need to everyone equally, including homeless people and rough sleepers, and care and treatment must be delivered in the appropriate primary, community and secondary settings when required. While services are available, it is accepted that there may be increased difficulties in homeless people and rough sleepers accessing those services, and that is a key area that the Department is considering in conjunction with the Public Health Agency.

We are all aware of the tragic deaths of five homeless people in Belfast last winter. Concerns were raised about a possible lack of communication between health services and homeless people; problems with access to mental health and addiction treatment; and a lack of arrangements with social services when homeless patients are discharged from

emergency departments or inpatient care. Those concerns are being addressed.

The Department for Communities is leading on an interdepartmental action plan to address some of the problems that are specific to Belfast, and my Department, the Public Health Agency and the Belfast Trust are responsible for addressing two key actions, namely developing arrangements to ensure that people discharged from hospital who do not have access to accommodation are signposted effectively to existing services and assessing the services available in relation to alcohol and drug early intervention, harm reduction and treatment and support services —

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for her thorough answer. She referred to mental health issues and substance misuse. Obviously, the best solution to homelessness is to prevent it in the first place. Will she give a commitment that she will send sufficiently senior officials to the homeless strategy steering group to ensure that decisions can be made and to ensure that they can look at addressing issues such as detox facilities?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I can make sure that that happens. It is not just a nod to the issue; it is about real and meaningful engagement. I will certainly make sure that the relevant officials attend, and I will also show leadership at the ministerial group, which is important in showing the significance of the issue and the priority that we give to it.

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. We all know about health inequalities, and we discuss that constantly in the Health Committee and in the Chamber. One of the biggest health inequalities is amongst our homeless community. In my area of Belfast, innovative work is being done by health and social care staff. Will the Minister look at that innovative work and maybe roll it out across our other cities in Northern Ireland? I know that some of our nursing staff in Belfast are doing great work.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I obviously concur with you about the work that staff do on the front line in engaging with people, trying to make a difference and trying to support them. It is my job to support those staff to enable them to do what they do well. We should be innovative,

and I am always open to looking at new ideas and at good practice and rolling it out where it is proven to work. If there are any initiatives that work, we should replicate those across the North to ensure that we deliver the best support we possibly can for those who find themselves homeless.

**Mr Boylan:** I want to follow on from some of the answers that have been given. The Minister outlined issues associated with mental health and substance misuse. Will she inform the House of what services are available to assist homeless people who suffer from mental health and substance misuse issues?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There is substantial demand for addiction and mental health services for young people throughout the region, and services are under constant pressure. In Belfast, the demand for drug and alcohol mental health services has resulted in those services being provided by a very specialist team with a largely consultative role that only directly deals with very high-risk individuals. Step 3 child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) community services continue to see and treat young people who have a significant mental health issue as a result of their substance misuse, for example, psychotic presentation, or have co-morbid mental health and substance misuse issues. Regionally, the Public Health Agency (PHA) has confirmed recurrent investment in the Drug and Alcohol Mental Health Service (DAMHS), and trusts are in the process of recruiting to those teams.

In addition, a range of alcohol and drug education, early intervention, treatment and support services was launched in July 2015 across all five health and social care trust areas. A number of those services are targeted specifically at children and young people and their families, and work is ongoing to improve awareness of the services. It will, of course, require time for those relatively new services to bed in properly and to allow for meaningful assessment of their effectiveness. In the meantime, the need of any additional support will continue to be monitored and kept under review.

**Mrs Dobson:** Does the Minister agree with me that a key tool to ending scenes of people sleeping rough on the streets of Northern Ireland would be to place a statutory duty to prevent homelessness on public services such as the NHS? Will she consider that?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not think that it is just the responsibility of the health service; it requires a

holistic response. It should obviously be cross-departmental. It relates to a home or a house and to people's mental health and physical well-being; it is right across the piece. If we were to legislate for that, it would obviously be cross-departmental, but I would certainly be open to looking at all that. We should do absolutely everything we can to prevent anyone from becoming homeless and should provide whatever supports we can. I am very open to working with Executive colleagues to make sure that we deliver the best possible outcomes.

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Minister for her commitment to showing leadership on homelessness. Is she satisfied that her Department is doing all that it can in working with other Departments and partners outside government to prevent and tackle homelessness?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes; I have no reason to believe otherwise. As I said earlier, we have some fantastic and amazing healthcare workers engaging with people on the front line and trying to prevent homelessness and who are worried about the patients they deal with. They do an excellent job, and I have no reason to doubt that my Department is in any way found wanting in working cross-departmentally, with other agencies and with the community and voluntary sector. If the Member has any particular issues that she wants to raise, I would be very happy to receive that information.

## Pharmacy Relocation Proposals

5. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Health whether she will review the current regulations governing proposals by pharmacies to relocate their premises. (AQO 413/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** There are no current plans to review the regulations relating to applications by community pharmacies to relocate their premises. The Health and Social Care Board is required to make arrangements for the provision of community pharmacy services, which includes dispensing drugs that are prescribed by prescribers. It does that by contracting out those services to independent retail pharmacies, and a community pharmacy contractor can only dispense health service prescriptions if they are included in the pharmaceutical list that is maintained by the board.

If a community pharmacy contractor wishes to relocate within the neighbourhood in which they already provide services and to provide the same pharmaceutical services without

interruption, they can make an application to the Health and Social Care Board. The change of premises must be within the neighbourhood of the premises currently occupied, and the same services must be provided to essentially the same population. If the board agrees that the relocation is minor and is satisfied that the pharmaceutical services that are provided from the existing premises will be provided from the new premises and that there will be no interruption in the provision of those services except as allowed by the board, it must grant the application. In reaching its decision, the board must take account of the views of Community Pharmacy NI.

A minor relocation is one in which there will be no significant change in the population served and in which other circumstances are such that there will be no appreciable effect on the pharmaceutical services provided by the applicant or by any other community pharmacy in the neighbourhood. If the board decides that a relocation is not minor, the application is treated as if it were a new application to join the pharmaceutical list.

**Mr McCausland:** The reason that I raised the question is that, whilst it seems logical to have some form of collocation or near location of a pharmacy and GP surgery, on occasion there are objections from other pharmacies. I encourage the Minister to look at outcomes in view of the fact that sometimes the decisions can be disadvantageous to local communities where a change of location may have been beneficial. I ask her to look at past decisions and, in that light, consider whether there is merit in reviewing the regulations.

**Mrs O'Neill:** OK. I will take on board what the Member says. The issue has not been highlighted to me as one of concern, but I will ask officials to look into it.

**Mr Milne:** Buíochas fosta don Aire. What is the Minister's assessment of the role of Community Pharmacy in supporting the reform of the health and social care system?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Community pharmacies have a strong role to play in supporting the reform of the health and social care system. They help people to get well and to stay well. They dispense approximately 40 million prescription items a year, provide advice and information about medicines and a healthy lifestyle, offer services to improve the safe and effective use of medicines, and support self-care and prevention. There are currently 533 community pharmacies, employing highly qualified pharmacists supported by dedicated healthcare

teams. Community pharmacies are therefore an important resource in local communities, and it is estimated that approximately 9% of the population visit a community pharmacy daily.

My Department's vision for Community Pharmacy's contribution to the reform of the health and social care system is set out in a number of strategic documents currently being implemented, including 'Transforming Your Care', 'Making It Better Through Pharmacy in the Community' and the medicines optimisation quality framework. Optimising the benefits of medicine is an important enabler of reform, and the skilled Community Pharmacy workforce are applying their clinical skills to help achieve better outcomes for patients and promote healthy lifestyles. Community pharmacies also support reform by helping to reduce demand on GP and other acute services through provision of advice and treatment of common complaints without the need for a doctor's appointment.

**Mr McKee:** It is unfortunate that a major high street pharmacy is offering free flights and accommodation to entice pharmacists, specifically to relocate from Northern Ireland to England. Can the Minister give a commitment that, under the current regulations, approval for such relocations is granted only when it is determined that such a move would not disproportionately affect existing patient groups using the pharmacy?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I tried to set that out in my initial answer on the factors that the board takes into account when deciding whether someone can relocate. It has to be about serving the population. Community Pharmacy is an excellent resource, which can do, and wants to do, so much more to support people. I read somewhere that, particularly in deprived areas, people are more likely to seek the advice of their pharmacist than that of their GP. We need to use that resource more, and I want to work with Community Pharmacy. The board takes all the factors that I outlined into account when deciding whether a relocation is allowed to go ahead.

**Ms S Bradley:** I welcome the Minister's comments that she values the work of Community Pharmacy and sees an enhanced role for it in the future. Can she give an assurance that, in packaging up that enhanced role, there will be sufficient budget to run alongside it?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. As I said, I very much value the work of Community Pharmacy. We are currently in the process of agreeing new

contractual arrangements with it, and that will form part of discussions for the contract. Pharmacies want to do so much more, and I want to work with them to allow that. They deliver really high patient outcomes and maximise front-line engagement with individuals who come in to ask for advice. There is an appetite in Community Pharmacy to do more, and I want to work with it to make sure that we support it in delivering more.

**2.30 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sin deireadh an ama do cheisteanna liostaithe. That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

## Waiting Lists

**T1. Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Health what advice or hope she can offer to those people, and their families, who are in pain and enduring major disruption to their quality of life, given that, today, one in five people is on a waiting list, including 33,600 outpatients waiting longer than a year; 93% of red-flagged breast cancer patients in the Southern Trust area are not being seen within 14 days; and thousands are waiting for non-elective surgery in the Ulster Hospital, including many of my constituents. (AQT 296/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I share the Member's concern about waiting times. Since I took up office, I have said that some of the waiting times are totally unacceptable. We need to transform how we deliver health and social care so that people are not sitting on waiting lists. I have inherited what I think is an outdated system that is trying to deliver 21st-century health and social care. We have to transform how we deliver care in order to bring down waiting lists. I am certainly committed to that. I have told the House that I intend to announce my way forward on how we will transform health and social care, and I will do that over the next number of weeks. The situation with waiting lists, whether they be for breast cancer referrals, which we discussed last week, or autism assessments — no matter what it is — cannot continue the way it is. We have to address it, and I have said that doing that is a priority for me.

**Mr Chambers:** Many people await the much-delayed publication of the Bengoa report. Will the Minister, first, give an account for the delay and, secondly, give a commitment that it will be

published in its totality and nothing in the original report will be withheld?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Minister can choose which of those questions to answer.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I have already said publicly that I intend to publish the document, and I will do so on 25 October, so you can get your reading ready for that day. I have told the Committee for Health that that is what I will do. Nothing will be held back. I will publish the report by Professor Bengoa and the panel, but, more importantly, alongside that I will publish how I intend to take things forward, transform health and social care, deliver better outcomes and bring down waiting lists. I think that that is the piece of work that we all want. I look forward to engaging with everybody on that because, at this time, we have an opportunity to show political leadership and work with clinicians to ensure that we have clear patient pathways and a better system that delivers 21st-century care for all those who need health and social care services.

## Nivolumab

**T2. Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health whether she intends to instruct her Department to authorise the commissioning of nivolumab, which is part of a combined immunotherapy life-extending cancer treatment that has recently been authorised in England because of its effectiveness. (AQT 297/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not have details on that specific drug. I will always be led by clinical guidance and professionals. I am happy to take a look at it, but I do not have information with me on that drug.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I will certainly provide that to you. I will carry on with access to cancer drug treatments: where are we with the task and finish group's review of individual funding requests? When will we get information on how that will change in the future?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not have a particular time frame, but I believe that I will get the report over the next number of weeks. I will then make decisions on the way forward. It is important that we have and provide clear information for people who may need specialist drugs, whether for cancer or anything else. The work has been really useful. I think that I will take receipt of that over the next number of weeks. I am then

happy to provide the House with information on how we take it forward.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Alex Maskey is not in his place. Caoimhe Archibald is not in her place.

### Fatal Foetal Abnormality

T5. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Health to provide an update on the ministerial working group on fatal foetal abnormality (FFA) and the timescale for publication of the group's recommendations. (AQT 300/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Minister of Justice and I agreed the membership and terms of reference of the fatal foetal abnormality working group on 5 July. That group has been working over the summer and the last number of months to consider the care and support provided to women and their families when a fatal foetal abnormality diagnosis has been given. That includes consideration of legislative changes. The group has met on several occasions, and I expect to receive its report in the coming days. Along with the Minister of Justice, I will then bring it to the Executive.

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Minister for her replies thus far. Prior to the publication of the working group's recommendations, what actions are being taken, Minister, by your Department to provide care and support services for women who find themselves carrying an unborn child with a life-limiting disability?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Obviously, clear guidance has been published and is with all trusts. Any woman or any family who find themselves in the scenario of having a diagnosis of fatal foetal abnormality is in a desperate situation. It requires the health service to be responsive by being supportive of that individual, no matter what their choice is for the future. The work of the working group has been vital in how we go forward and change things. Women who find themselves in this scenario need every possible support we can offer. It is a really difficult scenario, so it is important we make sure that the systems, processes and practices within the health and social care trusts are fit for purpose and are responsive to the needs of those individuals. I am grateful for the work of the working group, and I look forward to bringing forward how we will implement the changes that the group will recommend.

### Fatal Foetal Abnormality: Legislation

T6. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Health, following on from Mr Kennedy's question, what will happen if that panel recommends legislation and how that will be taken forward in a timely manner, given that the Justice Minister has already indicated that her intention is not to bring forward legislation this year. (AQT 301/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I will obviously continue to discuss the issue with the Justice Minister. We have to be guided by the working group we put in place to do a job and bring back recommendations on how we need to do things differently. I suppose it will be for the Executive to decide how we take it forward, but I will bring the report that the working group produces over the next days to the Executive in its entirety. If there is a recommendation for legislative change, I will certainly be up for making that legislative change.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Minister for the openness of her response on the issue. She will be aware that it is three years since Sarah Ewart was diagnosed and Ella Ewart very sadly passed away. She will be aware that women who are faced with that diagnosis do not have time on their side in making their decisions. Can she confirm that she will treat this as a matter of urgency to ensure that the decisions they have to make are treated with the respect and dignity they need to be in terms of the courts and the law?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Absolutely. I can without reservation say that that is the case. This is a priority. This is an issue that has been left in the ether for too long. No matter what their choice is, we need to support these women. The working group was established as soon as I came into office; I made sure that it set about its task. As I said, I will receive that report in the next number of days, and I intend to bring it to the Executive for full consideration.

### Rural GPs

T7. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister of Health to provide an update on what contingency measures her Department is taking to tackle the issue of a shortage of GPs in rural areas, given that she will aware that, in the west, a quarter of GPs are over the age of 55, many will soon be approaching retirement and no new doctors are coming forward to replace them, including in Ederney and Rosslea where no replacement GP is available. (AQT 302/16-21)

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Has the Member a question?

**Mr McPhillips:** Pardon?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Has the Member a question?

**Mr McPhillips:** We have already seen the shortage in Ederney and Rosslea, and there is no replacement GP available for the local population.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Can the Member come to his question, please?

**Mr McPhillips:** Can the Minister provide an update on what contingency measures her Department is taking to tackle this impending rural GP issue?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I fully appreciate the challenges in GP-led services, and I am committed to developing a plan that will ensure long-term sustainability for GP services. There are particular challenges in rural areas. You have pointed to Fermanagh as an example, and that has been an extremely difficult issue. I assure the Member that the board and the trust are working hard to make sure that we have GP services on the ground delivering for patients. I have met local representatives from the Royal College of GPs and the BMA GP committee to listen to their concerns, and I am considering the findings of the GP-led working group, which has made a number of recommendations on identifying future funding priorities for health and social care services here. I am certainly committed to making sure we address the issues and the challenges for GP surgeries.

**Mr McPhillips:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she update us on increasing GP places and how newly qualified GPs will be incentivised to work in rural areas?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Recently — I think it was last year — the number of places went up from 65 to 85. There is a recommendation from the GP-led working group that we should look towards raising that number even further, so I am certainly giving consideration to that to make sure that we have the proper workforce and staffing levels to make sure that we have first-class GP services. I will continue to work with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the BMA to address the challenges that are identified by GPs.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Conor Murphy is not in his place.

## Flu Vaccinations

T9. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the seasonal flu vaccination programme. (AQT 304/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** In the North, the annual seasonal flu vaccination programme is delivered through GP practices and school health teams. The vaccine is offered free to those considered to be at most risk of developing serious complications if they are infected with an influenza virus, ie anyone over 65 years old, anyone under 65 with certain medical conditions and all pregnant women. In addition, all preschool children aged two or older can now receive the vaccine via their GPs. The vaccine is also offered to all primary-school children via the school health service. The annual flu vaccination programme is well established and achieves really good rates of uptake.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Minister for her answer so far. What is the duration of the programme?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The annual flu programme began on 3 October. It runs from October until the end of March. The vast majority of vaccinations should be completed by early December in advance of when the flu season normally reaches its peak.

## Huntington's Disease

T10. **Ms Lockhart** asked the Minister of Health what her Department is doing to create a strategy to help those with Huntington's disease, given that a group recently made representations at Stormont. (AQT 305/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not have details with me in relation to Huntington's disease, but I am very happy to provide to the Member in writing what strategy we have around that disease. I think it falls into the category of rare diseases. We are working closely with the rare disease group to be able to make sure that we have a proper strategy in place. I think it kicks in by 2020, but I will give the Member more details on Huntington's disease in writing.

**Ms Lockhart:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I look forward to receiving that information. The concerns raised were very much that this disease normally manifests in children, and you can be a carrier of it. So, a lot of concern was raised about the fact that early testing and —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Does the Member have a question?

**Ms Lockhart:** — I want just to impress upon you the need for early testing.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I take that on board. I did meet the group when it was here in Stormont. I had an opportunity to talk to them, and one of the things that they raised with me was that awareness needed to be raised, because the disease travels through families, so it is important that we do that. It is like everything in health and social care: early intervention and prevention are key.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** As the next period of questions does not begin until 2.45 pm, I suggest the House takes its ease until then.

**Ms Archibald:** On a point of order.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, we do not take points of order between questions. You can make it after.

2.45 pm

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to take their places. We must move on to questions to the Minister for Communities. Questions 4, 6 and 9 have been withdrawn.

## Communities

### Housing: 2017-18 New-build Target

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Communities to outline his Department's target for new-build affordable housing in the 2017-18 financial year. (AQO 421/16-21)

**Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities):** My Department is still working on setting the affordable homes target for the 2017-18 financial year. However, it is likely to be similar to the current year's target. The target for affordable housing this year is 750 homes; that target includes a mix of new-build and existing market homes.

**Mr Attwood:** What is the likely target, for the 2017-18 financial year, of new-build social housing; and has there been any indication from London Treasury of any consequentials arising from the announcement at the Tory Party conference last week, where there were indications that new funding would be made available for social and affordable housing?

**Mr Givan:** Next year, we aim to build 1,600 social homes. With regard to the announcements from the Conservative Party conference, it is not a conference that I follow extensively. I am not aware of anything that will be consequential with regard to the outworkings of that. However, I will be happy to look into that issue.

**Mr Allen:** Does the Minister have the figures for how many of those new builds will be for east Belfast; and is he content that the level of new builds will help to alleviate the housing crisis that we are embarking on?

**Mr Givan:** I do not have the figures, specific to east Belfast, on the current target for those 750 homes this year and how it is being rolled out, but I am happy to try to provide the specific answers to the Member. Obviously, it is critical that we try to afford people an opportunity to get on the housing market. The Executive have been able to allocate funding with regard to the financial capital transaction moneys, and that has allowed us to put in £130 million to be used to support the provision of over 3,500 new homes over coming years. That is something that this House can welcome.

**Mr Dunne:** Will the Minister advise us on any initiatives that his Department has taken to help people, especially young people, get on the property ladder and get access to a new home?

**Mr Givan:** This is an important scheme for us, with regard to affordable homes, so that we can secure more people the opportunity to get on the housing ladder. Beyond the moneys allocated around co-ownership, we are also developing a scheme around the affordable homes loan fund that was launched in March 2014. Initially, there had been some reticence from financial institutes to support what was called "the fairshare product". However, three major lenders — the Nationwide, Lloyds and Santander — have now all signed up to support that product, and housing associations are finalising the administration arrangements for it. That will be another scheme that should help people with an opportunity to get a home that they need.

**Mr F McCann:** Has the Minister taken into consideration the many adults with a learning disability living with ageing parents who need appropriate supported or independent housing?

**Mr Givan:** This is a vitally important issue that I have met a number of people on. We can all bear testimony to, in our own constituencies, people who come to us with needs around

housing, related to disabilities. That is something that I have a particular interest in. With regard to people who are in homes with parents providing care, it is something that I want to take forward regarding the way in which the processes are operating, or, in my view, in some cases have failed. I want to ensure that we have fit-for-purpose processes so that people who are faced with difficult circumstances with housing get the support that they need in a timely manner.

**Ms Bradshaw:** With regard to the new social build that you referred to, how many are in shared housing schemes?

**Mr Givan:** There are shared housing programmes that have been identified by the Executive to be taken forward, but let me be clear: housing is allocated on the basis of need. When people are allocated housing, it should be on the basis not of their religion but of the need that has to be met. In some constituencies, you get housing developments where you are able to provide a shared housing model because of the nature of the housing waiting list that you are drawing from. That is not always available, and it is not always possible to achieve that. Indeed, I do not believe that you should be artificially trying to manufacture circumstances where people are denied a house on the basis of their religion in order to reach a specific target on shared housing.

## **St Patrick's Barracks: Update**

2. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the St Patrick's Barracks site, Ballymena. (AQO 422/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** I am pleased to advise that my Department is progressing plans to redevelop the former military site that was declared surplus by Defence Estates in 2007. Following the purchase of the site last year, my Department appointed consultants to commence the initial surveys and assessments required for the outline planning application. The preferred development option, to fully develop the 36-acre site, was endorsed by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council in July and will be subject to a formal public consultation, which will commence in November. In the interim, I have had a meeting with the council chief executive and the mayor in recent weeks, and I intend to follow that up and visit the site. The outline planning application will be submitted following the public consultation.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Minister for his answer. St Patrick's Barracks has a rich military history, as does the town of Ballymena. Will the Department protect the identity and legacy of the St Patrick's Barracks site in the redevelopment?

**Mr Givan:** The Member will be very familiar with the site in his constituency, and he is right to highlight the rich heritage that exists there. The preferred development option for the site seeks to retain a number of existing buildings, albeit for new purposes. Suggested retained buildings include the guardhouse, Sandhurst Building and the water tower, amongst others. Final decisions on retention and their use will be made after the public consultation and may be dependent on planning and structural surveys and their viability.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Minister for his update. Can he advise on what budget allocation he has set aside for that preferred option and what the time frame is? Can I push him to look at retaining the gates to the barracks, as well?

**Mr Givan:** On the latter point, the issue was discussed with the council chief executive. In respect of the precise costs to develop the site, there will be an economic appraisal carried out by the project's planning and transport consultants. That will identify the costs required to develop the site. It is an important site for the North Antrim constituency and for Ballymena, in particular, in light of the unemployment that has been announced with the significant closures of some of the factories. I recognise the significance of this site. I have received representation, not just from Mr Swann but from my colleagues from the constituency and the Member of Parliament for the area, about the need to really push on with the development. I want to go on site so that I can meet the relevant stakeholders, identify the key plans for it and then push on. If that means trying to identify additional resources to do so, that is something that I will want to seek to deliver on.

**Mr McGuigan:** Given that the Minister has outlined the importance of the site and a number of possible proposals, does he intend to use the site for much-needed social housing in the Ballymena area and other much-needed community regeneration purposes?

**Mr Givan:** In respect of housing, based on the current preferred development option, there have been 140 units identified to allow housing to be developed on the site. I am keen that we do that, but I am also keen to make sure that

we can attract industry onto the site, and that we get the right type of industry, so that it can create the jobs that are needed in the Ballymena area.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister will understand that it is over eight years since the barracks closed and over five years since it was transferred to the Executive. Can he understand the level of impatience locally at the failure to progress this matter to the point of real decisions, and now —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Has the Member a question?

**Mr Allister:** Now we are facing a further consultation —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Can the Member come to his question, please?

**Mr Allister:** What hope is there of bringing plans to fruition? Can he tell us whether there is any contamination issue on any part of the site?

**Mr Givan:** I can understand the frustration that the Member highlighted. I am in this post five months now and am keen to make sure that we really push on with this development. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council has only recently been put on as a key stakeholder, and it has brought strong representation around the need to drive it on. When I met the chief executive of the council and its mayor, that point was made very strongly. They have a very clear vision that they want to develop the site, and the council wants to play its part in doing that. Together we can push on with the development.

I will come back to the Member on the issue around contamination.

## Urban Development Grant Scheme

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the urban development grant scheme. (AQO 423/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** The urban development grant programme is an important tool in the Department's toolbox for regenerating our towns and cities, encouraging private inward investment, job creation and environmental improvement to derelict, vacant or underused sites in priority areas. My Department reopened the programme on 4 April 2016 with a call for new applications. Within the six-week timescale, 147 applications were received. All

have been assessed against my Department's strategic priorities, existing regeneration plans and the scheme's intended outputs.

The standard of applications and proposals was exceptionally high, with 19 applications being taken forward to the next stage, where they are being subjected to a full economic appraisal to determine whether there is a sufficiently robust business case to make a grant offer. Should the projects satisfy successfully the costs and benefits that are assessed in the economic appraisal process, they could lead to over £60 million of new private sector investments being directed into the heart of our towns and cities.

Twenty applications did not meet the minimum standards so were rejected. The remaining 108 applications were all determined to be of merit, but, unfortunately, the level of applications exceeded the available budget. The available budget allocation for this year is £700,000, and that reflects what is deliverable during the remainder of this year.

I am examining the Budget proposals for the remainder of the mandate. It is therefore too early to give a figure for funding in future years. I can, however, assure the Member that funding is being sought that is commensurate with the importance of the programme to the regeneration of our towns and cities.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that the Argyle Business Centre wanted to develop the Shankill Road Mission into a four-star hotel. Its application was turned down, initially because one of your officials said that it was not of strategic merit, yet it scored 14 out of 15 in the matrix, with two perfect fives for strategic fit. The second letter, from the same official, stated, "No, you are being turned down because of the cocktail of funding".

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Has the Member a question? Will he come to his question, please?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Can he confirm that 14 out of 15 was the top score and tell us why the Argyle Business Centre has been denied?

**Mr Givan:** The level of detail that the Member is aware of regarding that particular application is not the level of detail that I have for all 147 applications that were submitted. Obviously, there is a process and criteria. It would be inappropriate for me as a Minister to be intervening and changing those criteria.

On the particular example that the Member raises, it has been relayed to me that the application did have merit but that the departmental officials dealing with it deemed it not to be a viable project owing to the high levels of public funding required for it, which were deemed to breach state-aid rules. The applicant was contacted in writing and spoken to by the Department's officials and advised of that.

I know there was a comparator provided regarding a similar cocktail of funding that was allowed in Londonderry for Bishop's Gate Hotel. The Bishop's Gate Hotel was funded under the previous urban development grant programme. At that time, the north-west development office did not classify lottery funding as state resources, considering it to be private funding. However, an audit report in 2014 recommended that new guidance should be developed, as there was an inconsistent approach being taken to the assessment, analysis and award of that type of funding. When the scheme reopened, the new guidance was developed, and it clarified that, as it was controlled by the state, lottery funding should be classified as state resources.

**3.00 pm**

**Mr Stalford:** Whilst the Minister cannot comment on an individual case, will he outline for the House the criteria against which applicants to the scheme are assessed?

**Mr Givan:** Applications were considered against three key strategic areas: how well they complied with the Department's strategic vision for regeneration, as set out in its urban regeneration and community development policy framework; whether the project was located in a priority area, such as a town centre or neighbourhood renewal area; and the outputs that the project would generate to contribute to the regeneration of the area. Project outputs include such criteria as the ratio of private sector investment to public-sector investment; the number of jobs that the project will create; its impact on the construction industry; and the amount of rateable floor space that it creates. Those are some highlights but by no means an exhaustive list.

**Mr McAleer:** Would the Minister like to comment on what similar levels of support might be available for smaller regional towns?

**Mr Givan:** This was applicable to all towns that met the threshold for my Department, which is a population of over 5,000. When it comes to

villages of under 5,000, the regeneration plans fall within the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. This type of scheme has proven to be very successful. We were not able to provide funding for it in the recent past, but we have been able to find some funding this year to get it open. I am keen for us to increase the budget available in future years, subject to the outworkings of that process, because I recognise that it can help to regenerate areas in need of regeneration.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, Minister. Will you indicate to the House what positive conditions are attached to urban development grants to ensure that the schemes seek and draw together open and shared spaces?

**Mr Givan:** I missed that: was it about the Irish Open?

**Mr Dickson:** When it comes to the delivery of the grant, what guarantee can you give that the schemes attract shared and open space?

**Mr Givan:** I apologise for not picking the Member up clearly at the start.

In respect of all of the grants, the main objective is to regenerate an area to make it more welcoming for people and to provide opportunities for businesses to develop. That is on the basis of being open and accessible to everybody in our society.

## **Musical Instruments for Bands**

5. **Mr McKee** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the uptake of the reinstated musical instruments for bands programme. (AQO 425/16-21)

8. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the future of funding for musical instruments for bands. (AQO 428/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, with your approval, I will group question 5 with question 8.

The musical instruments for bands programme is designed to improve the quality of music-making in the community by helping bands to replace worn-out instruments and purchase new instruments. The scheme is open to bands based in Northern Ireland that are formally constituted. In the current financial year, £200,000 has been allocated by my

Department to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to fund the programme. Grants range in scale from £500 to £5,000, and the scheme opened for applications on 21 July. The Arts Council has advised that 94 applications were received before the closing date of 15 September and that they are being eligibility-checked. All eligible applications will then proceed to assessment. Decisions are due at the end of October. Applications will be assessed on the criteria of artistic quality, public benefit and project management.

Regarding the future of the programme, I intend to establish a steering group to conduct a review of the musical instruments for bands policy. The purpose of the review will be to co-design a more fit-for-purpose musical instruments for bands scheme and make recommendations for improvements or modifications to maximise its impact and improve engagement with young males, who are currently under-represented in cultural participation.

**Mr McKee:** Thank you, Minister, for your answers thus far. Will you advise what moneys from the fund have been allocated to bands in South Down?

**Mr Givan:** At this stage, I am not in a position to announce the bands that have been successful. I indicated in my initial answer that 94 applications had been made. Once they are eligibility-checked, a breakdown will be provided in respect of the bands that have been successful, and Members will then be able to see whether their constituency has benefited from it.

**Mr Clarke:** I am sure that the Minister will agree that many bands were disappointed when the funding was cut. I congratulate him on reinstating it. He said that 94 bands had applied. After the eligibility checks have been carried out — I appreciate that we do not know how many there will be —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Does the Member have a question?

**Mr Clarke:** Given that there is a chance that the fund could be oversubscribed, what is the possibility of additional in-year funding for the programme?

**Mr Givan:** I clearly wanted to re-establish the fund. The fact that 94 applications were made, which is the highest number of applications for a number of years, demonstrates the popularity of the scheme. For me, it was the right

decision. With the success of the process and the fact that 94 applications were made, it is estimated that, should all 94 be deemed successful, the total budget required will be closer to £300,000. I am pleased to advise the House that, if all those applications are deemed successful, I will make that funding available.

**Mr Lynch:** Will that funding be offered to similar cultural organisations such as Comhaltas?

**Mr Givan:** The musical instruments for bands fund is available to all marching bands that avail themselves of musical instruments. No distinction is drawn in its accessibility to one community or the other; it is open to everyone to make an application.

**Ms Mallon:** Is the Minister content that there is a diversity of traditions in the 94 applications received to date?

**Mr Givan:** Given the publicity that surrounded it, I went out of my way to demonstrate that the fund had been brought back into existence to give it as wide a public airing as possible. All those who are engaged in marching bands and musical instruments should have been aware of it. The fact that this is the highest number of applicants to have made a request to the fund demonstrates how widely known it is. I assure the House that I have not looked at where the applications have come from. I am not remotely interested in the religious breakdown. If people have a need to be met, whether they are from a more Protestant tradition of musical instruments or a Catholic tradition, they should be able to access the funding. All people had the opportunity to do so.

## Benefit Fraud

7. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Communities how many people have been convicted of benefit fraud in each of the last three years. (AQO 427/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** The number of persons convicted of benefit fraud through the courts was 453 in 2013-14; 294 in 2014-15; and 272 in 2015-16. In addition, administrative penalties were imposed on 657, 447 and 659 individuals in each respective year.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for his response. Will he outline what he is doing to prevent the payment of benefits to prisoners?

**Mr Givan:** A number of Members have asked that question in previous Question Times. The

Department has a proactive and detailed process to prevent prisoner payments. It includes the sharing of prisoner committal and release data twice weekly with the Northern Ireland Prison Service. It is important to recognise the complexity of benefit rules. Staff must assess and apply the rules of each benefit on a case-by-case basis. When possible and within the law, recovery of any overpayments is pursued. I have asked officials to explore the scope for building on our current processes, particularly the potential for increasing the flow of data from the point of committal to the point of benefit adjustment.

**Mr Durkan:** On the subject of benefit fraud, is the Minister in a position to tell the House how much money has been lost over the past year through benefit fraud and how much has been lost through error?

**Mr Givan:** Benefit fraud across social security benefits, excluding housing benefit, was 0.6% of benefit expenditure in 2015.

That equates to £28.3 million. It represents a significant improvement, with benefit fraud in 2001-02 equating to 2% of expenditure, which would be £94 million in today's terms. The current low levels of benefit fraud have been sustained for a number of years as a result of my Department's robust strategy for tackling fraud and error.

**Ms Gildernew:** Will the Minister give an assessment of the current resource dedicated within his Department to benefit fraud?

**Mr Givan:** The Department invests around £13 million per year across its social security benefit fraud and error operation. That investment provides for a team of almost 400 people directly involved in activities ranging from accuracy checks to prevent staff error to criminal investigations where customer fraud is suspected. Current levels of investment have resulted in a loss through customer fraud and error of just 1% of expenditure. That compares with 3% in 2001-02 and represents a current annual saving of £100 million in today's terms.

**Mrs Barton:** Can the Minister advise how many of those convicted have set up an arrangement to pay the money back?

**Mr Givan:** I think I will need to provide the Member with specific detail on that, and I will come back to her.

**Ms Armstrong:** Fresh Start agreed that half the savings from the error and fraud initiative implemented by the Executive will be reinvested by the Executive instead of the Treasury. To what projects has that money been allocated?

**Mr Givan:** In respect of what was identified in Fresh Start, we first need to secure the funding from Treasury, and that is something where discussions are continuing with Her Majesty's Treasury on an invest-to-save proposal. It is something I have been pushing within the Department to expedite.

## Sport: Participation

10. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities what his Department is doing to encourage participation in sport by people with a disability. (AQO 430/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** The performance of our Paralympians in Rio shows how people with a disability can participate in sport right up to elite level. My Department and Sport Northern Ireland recognise the importance of encouraging participation in sport by people with a disability. We have engaged with other Departments and representatives of organisations from across the disability sector to increase opportunities and develop a long-term action plan to support participation in sport by people with a disability. I will be announcing further details on that in the near future, alongside funding to assist with implementing the plan.

A review of Sport Matters, the strategy for sport in 2015, recommended:

*"That Sport and Disability is recognised as a ... key priority throughout the next 5 years, to achieve greater ... participation".*

The development of the action plan will play a major part in addressing that recommendation and its delivery over the coming years.

My aim is that people with a disability will have an equal opportunity to access sport and active recreation, which will lead to a more healthy, fulfilling and active lifestyle.

**Mr T Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his response. Will he inform the House what plans he has for capital investment in disabled sport?

**Mr Givan:** In the investment I am currently putting in, there is just over £2 million in Special

Olympics Ulster for a four-year period. Across the 11 district councils, £2.4 million is being spent to support Disability Sport NI and Special Olympics. To reassure Members, the Programme for Government indicator includes a very clear line about improving the quality of life for people with disabilities and their families. That is something that will ensure priority will be given to this.

Also, £1 million for a four-year investment will be provided in Disability Sport NI's new strategic plan. I also inform the Member that, in providing support for disabled persons' participation in volunteering, there is £1,200 for each successful applicant. For lifelong volunteering, £175,000 was provided in the past year.

This is obviously a key priority for me. When you have athletes like Bethany Firth, who topped the league for Team GB, you see there is a clear recognition that our Paralympians performed hugely successfully. Now is the right time to try to capitalise on that success and encourage more people to participate.

**3.15 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Cathal Boylan for a brief supplementary.

**Mr Boylan:** Following on from that, how will the Minister encourage more people from rural areas to participate in the sport?

**Mr Givan:** Obviously, funding has been provided to all 11 district councils, so our councils have a real opportunity to identify the type of sporting infrastructure that is needed in the areas they are responsible for. The community planning process pulls together all the relevant organisations. Sport NI is part of that process, so it is developing concrete plans to identify the type of infrastructure that is needed. I will want to support that, when we look at the capital budget over the next four years, to provide the type of funding that I believe is needed. With the right infrastructure in place, we can then encourage more people with disabilities and — this is a priority for me — more girls to get involved in sport.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sin deireadh leis an am do cheisteanna liostaithe. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

## Food Banks

**T1. Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities what his Department is doing to support the many food banks in the North, given that the growing reliance on food banks is a sad indictment of our social welfare system. (AQT 306/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** That issue was drawn very clearly to my attention when I recently visited Coleraine's Causeway Coast Vineyard. That church is involved in more than 18 projects that try to help people. One of the key parts of the programmes is the food bank that it is involved in. It is able to identify individuals when they come in and the type of support that they need, and it is then able to signpost them to statutory organisations, given the wide range of protects it is involved in. A lot of organisations, particularly in our community and voluntary sector, have got involved in this, so I want to ensure that the right support is being made available to those organisations when it comes to tackling all these issues, which are very important to address.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Given all the work that the Department is doing allegedly to support the work of vital food banks, does he not find it strange that, in response to a recent question for written answer that I tabled to him, he was unable to tell me how many food banks we have here in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Givan:** It is not a case of what this Department is "allegedly" doing. I take this incredibly seriously. All of us should be engaged in trying to help the most vulnerable in our society. When it comes to these issues, I want to ensure that I do all I can to support organisations out there in the community, working alongside people. I have been out on the ground very quickly to meet a huge range of organisations that are tackling very difficult issues for vulnerable people. I want to assure them that they have my support. The voluntary and community sector is heavily involved in a lot of that work. We have a concordat that recognises officially the relationship between government and the community and voluntary sector. We constantly look at and review that to ensure that government is supporting the community and voluntary sector in the work that it is involved in. Let me be clear: I want to reduce the number of people who find themselves in situations where they have to go to food banks to get support, and I will continue to pursue that.

## Drew Nelson: Tribute

T2. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Communities to join with him in expressing profound sympathy to the family, friends and colleagues of Drew Nelson, following his untimely passing earlier today, and to state whether he agrees that the far-sighted and positive contribution made by Drew Nelson, particularly to the Orange Order, will be his lasting legacy. (AQT 307/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Member for raising this and for giving me an opportunity, on the Floor of the House, to be able to pay my tribute to Drew. Drew was a friend of mine and was someone in my constituency who encouraged and supported me in many ways.

I look over the Chamber and see Mr Humphrey sitting beside Mr Kennedy — that is typical of what the Orange fraternity can do. It brings people together from whatever background in the Unionist sphere of politics they are involved in. Drew had that foresight. His legacy is one that the Orange Order will benefit from for many, many years in terms of the vision he had for the organisation, the way in which he navigated many issues through the Grand Lodge and how he was able to come forward with programmes that will be of huge benefit.

So, certainly, we join in remembering the contribution that he made. We particularly remember the family at this time and offer them our prayerful support, and we recognise the huge contribution that he made to the Orange Order and to our community at large.

**Mr Kennedy:** Will the Minister also ensure that there will be ongoing positive engagement with the Orange institution in future on cultural and community developments as a lasting memorial to the work of Drew Nelson?

**Mr Givan:** I am more than happy to give that assurance to the Member in respect of supporting the Orange Order in so much of the work that it carries out across our community. When I look at the number of halls, particularly in rural areas, I see how they are accessed by people of all religious persuasions and how those people avail themselves of the support that they get. Drew Nelson was at the heart of taking forward the message about having the halls open and available and the drive to get investment into Orange halls. He continually challenged government on the need to support the infrastructure of the Orange Order for those halls and, of course, he challenged them to recognise the valuable contribution that the

Orange Order makes to our society. Drew Nelson will be sorely missed by the Orange Order.

## Social Strategy for Northern Ireland

T3. **Mrs Little Pengelly** asked the Minister for Communities to confirm that he will continue to engage with the faith and Church community in his development and consideration of a social strategy for Northern Ireland, given that he will recognise the valuable work that the Churches and the faith community do in supporting and helping people to change their lives. (AQT 308/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** I am happy to give that assurance to the Member. She rightly points to the contribution that faith-based organisations make to our society; that is something that I recognise and value. I have witnessed at first hand the values that those organisations have and their passion and compassion. That is something that we, as a Government, need to support and do more on.

In the draft social strategy that I have been developing, we have engaged with all stakeholders represented in the section 75 groups, including faith-based organisations. I will bring that strategy to the Executive in the coming weeks, with the intention of having it issued, subject to Executive approval, as part of the new approach to the Programme for Government.

**Mrs Little Pengelly:** The Minister will be aware of the valuable work, even in my constituency of South Belfast, being done with older people and young people and in supporting food banks, as has already been mentioned. Many of the Churches and the faith community have, perhaps, been excluded for too long from input into consultations and the development of social strategies.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Has the Member a question?

**Mrs Little Pengelly:** Will he confirm that, alongside the development of the social strategy, he will commit to consulting them much more widely on a whole range of departmental policy responsibilities?

**Mr Givan:** Yes. The need to have further engagement is something that I have already raised in the Department. A mapping exercise is already taking place, which is being carried out by the Northern Ireland Council for

Voluntary Action (NICVA), so that we can clearly identify faith-based organisations across the Province and the type of work that they are involved in. Through that consultation process, I want to develop a new way of doing business in that respect between government and faith-based organisations.

On the basis of that engagement with the Department, I intend to take forward the development of a faith covenant, modelled on the principles of the concordat between the Government and the voluntary and community sector, facilitating a valued and effective faith-based contribution to policy development and service delivery across government.

## Racial Equality Strategy

T4. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister for Communities whether he accepts that the deplorable racist behaviour towards a Romanian woman in Antrim town in the South Antrim constituency last week underlines the pressing urgency of ensuring full implementation of the racial equality strategy. (AQT 309/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** Let me join the Member in condemning such attacks and stating very clearly how deplorable they are. When they happen, they are rightly condemned and should be condemned because they are repugnant to us in our society. I very much agree with the Member about that. It is hugely important that government tackles all those issues and that we identify all the vulnerable groups in Northern Ireland and provide the support that is needed. Whether that is through strategies or other processes, we should all have the same aim, namely to try to eradicate that type of behaviour.

**Mr Kearney:** Mo bhuíochas duit, a chara, as ucht an fhreagra sin. I appreciate your answer, which leads directly onto my supplementary. Do you agree that the Assembly must show collective and united opposition to racism, sectarianism, homophobia and all forms of intolerance in our society and promote equality for all identities and traditions, including respect for the Irish language?

**Mr Givan:** OK. In respect of all those issues, let me make it clear that, whatever your tradition, background or sexual orientation, you should be protected in our society. We should make reasonable accommodations for people, and we need to find a way to navigate the tensions that often exist. From my experience and from what people tell me, I know that there

can be conflict at times between different sections of our society. We need to look at a collective approach where we recognise that we are one whole society but that within that there are differences of opinion.

We need to find ways in which can navigate all of that in a way that respects people without compromising some people's views on different identity characteristics and stop using those different identity characteristics as a way to engage in debates that often leave people feeling hurt and offended. In a free society, people are entitled to free speech and to have their own opinions, but I very much want to create a society where we recognise all those different identity characteristics in a way that allows us to find space to recognise the differences that exist.

## Attacks: Faith-based Locations

T5. **Mr Lyons** asked the Minister for Communities whether he agrees that attacks on churches, cultural centres, community halls and places of worship are completely wrong and will not be tolerated. (AQT 310/16-21)

**Mr Givan:** The Member raises a very important point, and it is one that I intend to address on a more appropriate occasion with something more specific. I have been hugely concerned by the attacks that have taken place on a broad range of our faith-based organisations. The attacks that have taken place against Orange halls and against places of worship, be they Protestant churches or Catholic churches, and the desecration of the graveyards of the Jewish people in our community, should cause us huge alarm and be condemned. We need to recognise that such attacks are happening and then we need to address the situation and call out those people who engage in such behaviour for what they are: people who hate those who have different religious beliefs. That is something that I recognise. It has caused me huge concern, and it is something that we need to address.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned Orange halls, and we are all very aware of the number of attacks on, and the extent of the damage that has been done to, them over the last number of years. I welcome his commitment to addressing that as well as the attacks on people of other faiths and religions. Will the Minister send out a very strong message that any Orange halls that are attacked will be rebuilt and that there is no tolerance for those who are so intolerant in that way?

**Mr Givan:** Recently, we were able to see in the media the reopening of Thiepval Memorial in Convoy in east Donegal. The attack on that hall was rightly condemned by all the political parties in that part of the Republic of Ireland. The hall has reopened, and it has done so bigger and with more programmes involved in it. That is a demonstration of the resilience that often emerges from people when they are attacked and their places of worship are attacked. As a Government, we need to very much stand clearly beside people who get attacked in that way and say, "You have our support to continue and hold on to the values that you believe in."

**3.30 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Jo-Anne Dobson for a quick question with a quick answer.

### **Hockey: DFC Support**

T6. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Communities what support he is providing to hockey clubs to enable them to continue to attract world-stage events to Northern Ireland, especially given that, as he will be aware following his visit on Saturday, Banbridge stepped onto the world stage as its hockey club expertly hosted round one of the Euro Hockey League, with a historic performance from the Banbridge boys. (AQT 311/16-21)

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I did ask for a quick question.

**Mr Givan:** It was a pleasure to be in Banbridge on Saturday morning. I was recently at Banbridge Hockey Club. David Simpson, Carla Lockhart and Sydney had me there, and the club was able to outline to me its facilities. I then got to go on Saturday when the club was hosting the Euro Hockey League, which, for Members who are not familiar, is the equivalent of football's Champions League. These were elite sportspeople engaged in hockey. Banbridge had a tremendous result and were supported very strongly by the local community. To put it into context, over 12 million people tuned in to watch Friday's matches online. This was a very significant event for Banbridge to host, and it did so exceptionally well. As a result, £5,000 has been provided to help with the legacy of that competition so that people can buy into the success that it was and, hopefully, more younger people will take up the sport.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up. Tá an t-am críochnaithe.

## **Private Members' Business**

### **Housing Associations: Reclassification**

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That this Assembly notes the likelihood that the Office for National Statistics will reclassify Northern Ireland's 22 housing associations from independent social businesses to public bodies; that this may limit their ability to access private finance to build new homes; that the £1 billion of private debt already on their books could be added to the Executive's balance sheet, taking the Executive's total borrowing to levels that would reduce drastically their ability to borrow money for other initiatives across the Executive Departments; and calls on the Minister for Communities to prepare to bring forward urgent legislation to reverse the reclassification of Northern Ireland housing associations so that they can remain classified as independent social businesses. — [Mr Allen.]*

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after "notes" and insert*

*"the decision by the Office for National Statistics to reclassify Northern Ireland's 22 housing associations from independent social businesses to public bodies; recognises that this will have a significant impact on housing associations and their ability to provide new social and shared ownership homes; further notes that this decision will add nearly £1 billion of housing association debt to the Northern Ireland Executive's balance sheet, seriously impacting on the Executive's ability to borrow money for other initiatives across the Executive Departments; and calls on the Minister for Communities and Minister of Finance to expedite the steps necessary to reverse this reclassification; and agree quickly an interim derogation arrangement with HM Treasury to enable the sector to continue to function normally, to engage closely with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to agree a joined-up approach, and to outline a clear and detailed timeline for specific action, including bringing forward legislation, within the time frame that any HM Treasury derogation allows, to ensure that Northern Ireland's housing associations can remain classified as independent social businesses." — [Mr Allen.]*

**Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities):** I am grateful for the opportunity to address the motion. Like other Members, I am fully aware of the work that housing associations do in building and maintaining a significant number of social homes in Northern Ireland — homes for many of the most vulnerable members of our society. I recognise that anything that threatens that work and, indeed, the added value of the activities that housing associations undertake with, and on behalf of, their tenants is unwelcome and needs to be addressed.

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

Let me assure those Members who brought forward the motion, the Opposition. Well, I am not actually sure whether it was the Opposition. I noted that, when the motion was first brought forward, it was in the name of the Ulster Unionist Party alone. I then noted that, with it having got it so badly wrong, the amendment was brought forward by Members from the Ulster Unionist Party and Members from the SDLP. I note that the Alliance Party, the Green Party or People Before Profit was not included in that. Maybe opposition exists only within the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP as the official Opposition, or maybe the more minor parties in opposition feel put out by that. I am not quite sure about the genesis of the motion. The motion that was laid first was wholly inaccurate in what it was calling on me to do. It called for:

*"the Minister for Communities to prepare to bring forward urgent legislation to reverse the reclassification of Northern Ireland housing associations so that they can remain classified as independent social businesses."*

With the motion having been brought forward, the Executive being fully aware of all those issues, and the Minister of Finance and I bringing a joint paper through the Executive, an amendment was then brought forward that demonstrates how flawed the Ulster Unionist Party's motion was. Maybe it is because of the expertise in the SDLP or maybe it was just that the Ulster Unionists read the press release that the Minister of Finance and I provided, but the amendment:

*"calls on the Minister for Communities and Minister of Finance to expedite the steps necessary to reverse this reclassification"*

and to seek a derogation. There was no mention of the Minister of Finance in the original motion. There was no mention of a derogation in the original motion. After the

Executive take a decision and provide that statement to the public, we get an amendment that more accurately reflects what the Executive need to do. The Executive, however, are already doing it. If this is the calibre of the way in which the Opposition are going to conduct their business, clearly it is going to be left to the Executive to get on with doing business. The Opposition should be able to highlight where the Executive do things wrong and how they should go about doing things. I listened to Mr Beggs say that asking for derogation only is "living in cloud cuckoo land." That is exactly what we need to ask for — a derogation. That will allow the Executive and the Assembly the opportunity to take the legislation through it. Does Mr Beggs believe that we should not have a derogation? I do not know because he is not in the Chamber now. Maybe some of the members of the official Opposition, led by the leader of the official Opposition, want to respond on whether we should get a derogation or not. Mr Beggs did not seem to know.

**Mr Durkan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Givan:** I am happy to give way.

**Mr Durkan:** We just had Question Time with the Minister for Communities, during which he failed to answer two questions that I put to him. Now that he is supposed to be responding to the debate, might he do that?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I am not sure that that is a point of order. Minister, go ahead.

**Mr Givan:** It is not a point at all.

I listened to the Members who spoke about this. The SDLP was ably led by Ms Mallon — on her own, I hasten to add. The SDLP is so concerned about opposition that it puts down just one Member to front up the debate, and nobody else joins them. That is a demonstration of how seriously it takes this issue. The SDLP just so happens to have the chairmanship of the Committee, and the Chairman of the Committee dealing with what is supposed to be and is a very serious issue was not able to be here for the debate. Maybe the Opposition need to reflect on the way in which they want to conduct their business, but this Executive will get on with doing business.

Within hours of the Office for National Statistics announcing its decision, the Executive had dealt with the issue and taken a strategic decision on how we wanted to go forward. The Opposition were left playing catch-up and

having to amend their original motion because they got it so badly wrong. I want opposition to work. My party argued for opposition to be put in place as part of the Fresh Start Agreement. It is because of that negotiation that there is an official Opposition. We are being badly let down in the House when we do not have people who are able to carry out the role of official Opposition by testing this Government. They are not able to do that.

**Ms Mallon:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Givan:** I will make some progress and then happily give way to Ms Mallon. Let me explain a little bit more about the detail.

ONS made its announcement on 29 September. On that very day, the decision was issued, and it was agreed that officials in my Department should take forward, as a matter of priority, work to develop proposals to achieve a reversal of the ONS decision. It was also agreed that officials in the Department of Finance should commence negotiations with Her Majesty's Treasury to agree a derogation from normal budgeting rules for a period to allow us time to progress the necessary legislative changes. On one level, this is a technical adjustment to do with the application of international statistical standards to national accounts, and, if that was the extent of the impact, this would not be the important issue that it is. That was highlighted by Members, and Mr Agnew rightly pointed out that this is a hugely serious issue. It is so serious that the Opposition should be ashamed about the cack-handed manner in which they have addressed it. Members have outlined how serious it is, so let me repeat some of those points.

**Mr Allen:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Givan:** I will give way to Mr Allen later.

The change of status means that the subsequent annual borrowing of housing associations will count against the Department's capital budget. As a result, the capital needs of the housing associations would need to be assessed against other departmental priorities, and this is likely to constrain the annual borrowing of housing associations and therefore impact on the funding of new social housing development. In turn, this would result in a reduction in the number of new social homes being built each year at a time when we have increased pressure on public finances and increasing numbers on the housing waiting lists. That is clearly an unacceptable situation. The treatment of the historical debt of the housing

associations needs to be considered as well, but that would have little impact in Northern Ireland. While the historical debt is added to the public sector net debt at a UK level, this does not impact on the Department's budget or the Northern Ireland Executive's debt. Therefore, it does not affect the Executive's borrowing powers.

Officials in my Department will now consider all the detail of the ONS announcement. They will also consider the response in the other jurisdictions — Scotland and Wales have just had their associations reclassified as well — and put forward proposals that best suit our needs. The main areas specified in the ONS decision include the powers of the Department in relation to consent powers over the disposal of land; removing, suspending or appointing committee members to a housing association as a result of an inquiry into mismanagement; and directing housing associations to transfer land to another body as a result of an inquiry into mismanagement.

I indicated that I would give way to Ms Mallon and then Mr Allen.

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Minister. Minister, on a number of occasions, you have emphasised the grave severity of the issue, yet you spent the first five minutes — one third of your response — deriding and scolding the Opposition, followed by another two minutes telling us what we already knew. Will you please address the substantive issues and address and answer some of the questions that I and other Members posed?

**Mr Givan:** Again, I am not sure where Members have been. I went to the Committee and highlighted that this was an emerging issue. I also raised it repeatedly during Question Time and said that it was an emerging issue that would have serious ramifications for our ability to provide the housing that we need. The direction of travel in all of this was that a decision was coming and we were preparing for it. The Executive then engaged — rightly — on that issue, and, within less than 24 hours of the decision being taken by the ONS, the Executive agreed on the strategic approach that we needed to take. We are moving ahead in addressing the issue, the first step of which is, obviously, seeking a derogation.

During the debate, the Member asked, "Where is the legislation? Why is legislation not being provided?". For the Opposition to do their job, they need to know how all those areas function. Excuse me if the Members feel that I am giving

them something of a lecture, but I am doing it in the interests of trying to ensure that the Opposition are in a position to do the job that they are meant to do.

The ONS provided a summary. I am holding the official letter that was received on 28 September and made public on 29 September and that the Executive then addressed. The Member wants to know why there is not legislation on the Floor of the Assembly right now.

**Ms Mallon:** I did not ask that.

**Mr Givan:** The Member said that she did not ask that: have a look at Hansard. The final paragraph of the letter from the ONS deals with the issues:

*"[This] provides an adequate summary of the points most relevant to this decision. However, please note that this may not be an exhaustive list of all central government controls in place in the current legislation."*

The ONS is still to give the detailed publication of its report, which will identify all the measures that it believes need to be addressed to have the reclassification. What a foolish Executive they would be if they produced legislation when they did not know exactly what they needed to legislate for. That is a basic function of how the Executive have to do their job. When we get that detailed report, please be assured that the Executive have already taken those decisions and that the issue is at hand. The Opposition can rest assured that we will be able to address them.

**Mr Allen:** I thank the Minister for giving way. On a number of occasions, the Minister has emphasised the seriousness of the matter. However, as other Members pointed out, it was not serious enough for you or the Finance Minister to come before the House and make a statement and give the House an outline of how long a derogation we need to apply for to start shaping the legislation. Will you give us an idea of that?

**Mr Givan:** Again, Members clearly were not listening when we raised the issue in Committee and on the Floor of the Assembly. I have been questioned on the issue and have sought to reassure Members that I take it very seriously, so seriously in fact that, within less than 24 hours of the decision being taken, the Executive took the decision on how we would effectively deal with it and immediately made that available to the public. I understand that

members of the Opposition will maybe feel that they are not being taken by the hand in the way in which they want to have their hand taken. We have informed the public about it all; that was released into the public domain. Instead of the Opposition focusing on the real issues, what I have heard from them in previous debates is that they want the BBC charter to have a requirement to give coverage to the Opposition in the Assembly and that they are concerned about where they should be seated in the Chamber and the title that should be given to the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. Opposition is about a lot more than those issues. It is about delivering on the real issues that matter to people. I happen to take the provision of social housing incredibly seriously. We need to provide the homes that our people demand of us. We will get on with doing the business that is required of us.

### 3.45 pm

Over the next number of months, we will develop and consult on the proposals and complete the drafting of the legislation. We will then take that draft Bill through its Committee Stage and bring it to the Assembly. I will need the support of the Committee in carrying out its scrutiny role when we get to that stage. Given that the issue, as Members have indicated, is so critical to them, I have every confidence that the Committee will expeditiously deal with all that scrutiny and we will get this through by receiving Royal Assent as soon as possible after we know the exact nature of what we need to legislate for. I look forward to working with all Members constructively on the issue.

**Mr Smith:** I support the motion and the amendment, which I urge all Members to support. As many said during the debate — I listened to many of the comments — if we had not tabled the motion, when would this important issue be debated? I, for one, certainly do not believe we are wasting our time; we are bringing out key issues that need to be aired. When we as a party formed, along with the SDLP, the official Opposition, we said we would be constructive and positive. Today I hope we have shown that through the intent of the motion and the amendment, which I believe can and should get the Executive parties' support. That is why I have been surprised at the attitude and tone of some on the Executive Benches. The response seems to be "How dare you ask a question?". I am afraid we will continue asking questions, whether you like it or not, frankly.

**Mr Allen:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Smith:** I certainly will.

**Mr Allen:** Does the Member not find it extraordinary that the Minister criticised the Opposition for tabling the motion but did not find time in his 15 minutes to outline the timeline for derogation and to say when we would see legislation? Will that derogation be long enough to allow legislation to be passed? What discussions has he had with the Treasury to ensure that the derogation has a timescale that befits what we need to do here?

**Mr Smith:** I thank Mr Allen for his point. I totally agree: the Minister spent 15 minutes saying very little. He did it very well, but he said very little.

The one thing the debate has brought out is a ministerial statement, such as it was. It has delivered that output — on a hugely serious issue, as the Minister admits. Otherwise, we should do what Mr McCann expected and take it that everything is all good. We were told the Executive approved a paper last Thursday, so we could all sleep easy. The question for me is this: why did the Minister not proactively take the issue to the Floor? Where is the openness, transparency and respect for the House? At least, Minister Ó Muilleoir tweeted yesterday that he was looking forward to the debate and referenced "good partnership work", which is what, I think, everybody was trying to bring forward today. I presume his busy schedule did not allow him to attend despite the tweet, but at least he was making the right noises. We have had to endure a patronising lecture from the Minister. Frankly, when he and his colleagues can deliver good government, I will take a lecture on opposition from him. Until that time, he can, frankly, keep it to himself.

I want to address the substance of the debate. While this is a statistical change to the presentation of national accounts, as my colleague Andy Allen outlined when moving the motion, there are critical elements to the ONS reclassification of Northern Ireland's housing associations as public bodies. There is the obvious impact on the provision of public and affordable housing in Northern Ireland. Without the ability to access private funding, it will be impossible to achieve the Executive target of 8,000 social housing starts. The Finance Minister has already made it clear that the only alternative under the changed accounting rules is to fund future builds from the Northern Ireland Budget. Frankly, that is totally untenable. It is also ironic, to my mind, that, as the public-sector voluntary exit scheme comes to an end, we are potentially adding 3,000 workers to the public-sector payroll. There are massive

ramifications of this that need to be aired, and the debate was timely and required, despite what the Minister might think.

Everyone is agreed that we have no alternative but to seek a derogation from the Treasury to allow us the space to legislate to deliver the changes needed to reverse the ONS decision. What changes are needed? First, the Department's direction of governance will need to be changed: consent before disposing of land, powers relating to the dissolution or winding-up of an association and powers relating to the disposal of proceeds funds will all need to be changed. Essentially, the reclassification is based on the degree of control the state can exercise over housing associations' corporate policymaking, and legislation will be needed to reverse the ONS assessment.

Northern Ireland's housing legislation is both older and more complex than that of Great Britain, making our process more challenging. When the housing associations were classified in England in October 2015, Parliament was fortunate enough in that the Housing and Planning Act 2016 was already under way and could be amended to include a package of deregulatory measures, but even with that running start, the process is likely to take 18 months before Royal Assent. In this jurisdiction, we will have to start the legislative process from scratch. I encourage the Minister to get the process under way, as time is against us. It would have been useful to at least have got some outline today of what a timetable would need to be and also an understanding of what the initial engagement has been with the Treasury around this derogation. I believe that the Treasury is being robust on this. We will need to agree a window of at least 18 months in which to pass the required legislation, so the first action for the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance is to convince the Treasury that we have developed a tight timetable and credible plan to reverse the situation and are thereby deserving of the time and space to deliver the required changes.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree with me that it is a shame that the Minister could not provide reassurance and that, whilst we accept that the full nature of the ONS comments are not available, the Executive could, at least, be working on legislation at this point based on the initial response of the ONS?

**Mr Smith:** I totally agree with the Member. It would have been nice to have heard some

positivity at least from the Minister rather than just the diatribe that we have had to endure.

There has been mention of the potential for a coordinated approach with colleagues in Scotland and Wales, if required, to secure the Treasury derogation for the three devolved institutions. If that needs to be done, so be it. Again, we need to progress that without delay. The legislative changes that are required will not drastically deregulate the housing association sector, so I do not believe that Members should be overly concerned about the change that is needed. Housing associations will still be regulated by the Department. They will still be regulated charities with charitable controls. There are still the strong protections around the reinvestment capital grant of £2.3 billion that is being invested by the Northern Ireland Executive in housing association assets.

In conclusion, we need to see quick action from both relevant Departments to drive forward the changes needed to reverse this ONS classification, otherwise our ability to borrow to invest will be stymied, and we will be unable to build the thousands of social and affordable homes that Northern Ireland desperately needs. I urge Members to support the motion and amendment.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the decision by the Office for National Statistics to reclassify Northern Ireland's 22 housing associations from independent social businesses to public bodies; recognises that this will have a significant impact on housing associations and their ability to provide new social and shared ownership homes; further notes that this decision will add nearly £1 billion of housing association debt to the Northern Ireland Executive's balance sheet, seriously impacting on the Executive's ability to borrow money for other initiatives across the Executive Departments; and calls on the Minister for Communities and Minister of Finance to expedite the steps necessary to reverse this reclassification; and agree quickly an interim derogation arrangement with HM Treasury to enable the sector to continue to function normally, to engage closely with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to agree a joined-up approach, and to outline a clear and detailed timeline for specific action, including bringing forward legislation, within the time*

*frame that any HM Treasury derogation allows, to ensure that Northern Ireland's housing associations can remain classified as independent social businesses.*

## **Growing Northern Ireland's Exports**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments — *[Interruption.]* Order, please. If Members want to continue their conversations, they can leave the Chamber.

As two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, the House should note that the amendments are mutually exclusive, so if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

**Mr Lyons:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly welcomes the recent Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs export data for Northern Ireland, which record a growth rate of 9.5%; notes the Executive's commitment to increase the competitiveness of the economy; recognises the opportunities that the decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union presents to improve external sales; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to ensure that growing exports is a key part of the Northern Ireland economic strategy.*

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion on behalf of myself and my colleagues this afternoon. As a party, we have made clear our commitment to growing the Northern Ireland economy in order to create more jobs, more wealth and more prosperity for our people. That is something on which, across the Chamber, we all no doubt agree, but how do we achieve it? It is our belief that growth in exports is an essential component in the stronger economy that we all want to see in Northern Ireland, and the benefits of it are clear. An increase in exports leads to increased sales, increased growth and increased profits; it helps to spread risks that businesses may face and helps companies with competitiveness and innovation. No one can doubt that exports, and indeed all external sales, are anything other

than positive and beneficial for the Northern Ireland economy.

Of course, we have received good news from HMRC about the value of Northern Ireland exports in 2015. A 9.5% increase from 2014 is very positive, particularly when you consider that England, Scotland and Wales all experienced a decline during the same period. Whilst the figures for Northern Ireland are encouraging and signify that the Executive's strategy is working, we must not be complacent nor content with the current position. There is still huge potential for growth, and the job of the Executive is to ensure that they play their part in keeping the momentum going.

As we move forward, our key outcomes in exports should not only be an increase in their value but an increase in the number of local companies exporting. This is good not only for local companies but for the economy in Northern Ireland as a whole. We do not want to be over-reliant on a small number of companies for our export base. We need to see this grow and expand, but it is going in the right direction. We welcome the action that has already been taken to support these objectives. No doubt the Minister will outline his recent announcement of the trade accelerator plan, which will address many of the key areas where support is needed.

At this point, I want to mention some work in my constituency that I hope the Minister will commend. The Local Economic Development Company Ltd (LEDCOM), an economic development company in Larne supported by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, is hosting a series of business seminars this year, and the one that is being held in January is entitled 'Exporting within the European Union and beyond Post Brexit – the challenges and rewards'. This is exceptionally positive, as it will provide not only practical help and advice for local companies on exporting but recognise that new opportunities can lie ahead.

The support from the Department and from Invest, and support locally, is particularly necessary in Northern Ireland, as we have the highest concentration of SMEs in the UK, and SMEs are less likely to export.

**Mr Aiken:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I will give way very briefly to the Member for South Antrim, who must have had a very boring night on Saturday, because he was tweeting me. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Aiken:** No, I was just saying about the FT.

I fully support this, but one of the things that we should also do is invite the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce to be involved in this dialogue. The promotion of small and medium companies, as well as medium companies, throughout Northern Ireland by the Chamber of Commerce has been first-rate. That is one of the key things that we need to do to develop exports.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not think that there should be any limits on engagement with other organisations that have an interest in helping.

We have also made clear our desire to see our SMEs grow, develop and upscale into larger companies, and these two issues go hand in hand. Large companies are more likely to be exporters, and companies that are exporters are more likely to grow. However, any support should be in a targeted way, rather than a scattergun approach. I was pleased to hear from the Minister when he attended the Economy Committee and said:

*"We, as an Executive, then need to ruthlessly and relentlessly support those sectors and subsectors in which we are really strong."*

Whilst the Minister was referring to growth in jobs as a whole, I believe that the same approach needs to be applied to exports: not just that we ruthlessly export those sectors where we are strong or competitive or have the potential to be strong or competitive, but that we ruthlessly target those markets where there is greatest opportunity for growth. Members will note from figures recently released that one of the strongest areas of growth has been in the medicinal and pharmaceutical sector. That is an area where we have had much good news, and the Minister will be aware of the success of one such company in my constituency, Terumo BCT in Larne, which he visited with me in his previous role as Health Minister and which is a world leader in medical devices.

This area and others in which we can be competitive and truly first-class should be the focus of our energies.

**4.00 pm**

It is also important that, having identified our key sectors, we identify our key markets. It is clear that the Republic of Ireland continues to be a significant trading partner, and we want to

see that continue. However, figures recently released demonstrate clearly that we are seeing a change in our exporting partners. Sales to the EU and even to the Republic of Ireland are falling. That is not surprising, as they have become a smaller share of the world economy and struggle in terms of economic growth. Instead, we see growth in exports to the mid-sized developing economies, places like Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. The figures there are clear for all to see. Yes, 52% of Northern Ireland exports are sold into the EU, but that is down from 59% the previous year. Trade to countries outside the EU increased by 28%, while overall EU exports dropped by 3.6%.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I have been very generous. If the Member is quick, I will give way.

**Mr Allister:** Indeed. Would the Member agree that, in setting out the export figures, we need to be mindful that, in fact, our greatest external market outside Northern Ireland is GB? We export 60% to GB, and, of the balance, a fraction goes to the EU.

**Mr Lyons:** The Member must be good at reading my mind: that was the exact point I was going to make. There is, obviously, a difference between exports and external sales, and, of course, in terms of external sales, the UK is by far our largest market.

Whilst our biggest trading partners are the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and the US, which saw a massive increase of 75% last year, we need to look at the next tier of countries, where there has been significant economic growth and room for us to expand. That is why we included in our motion a recognition that there are opportunities that can come from leaving the EU. We all know the position of each party in the Chamber, and the arguments have been made numerous times. However, I hope that everyone in the Chamber, regardless of their position on Brexit, would want Brexit to be a success. I hope that people will want us to be able to exploit the opportunities that could come from leaving the European Union.

Whilst Sinn Féin has made it clear that it would rather stay in the EU, it has, in its amendment, recognised the result, which is to be welcomed, and that we need to focus on getting the best deal and outcome for Northern Ireland, especially in issues relating to cross-border trade and maintaining the common travel area. For those reasons, we are content to support

the amendment if it creates greater consensus in the Chamber than might otherwise be the case.

We tabled the motion to impress on the Minister once again the importance of exports to the local economy and the need to support key sectors and to target key markets. Additionally, we call on the Minister to make sure that, as a devolved Administration, we are to the fore in getting out there and showing the world what we have to offer and, in so doing, bringing greater opportunities, wealth and prosperity to everyone in Northern Ireland.

**Dr Farry:** I beg to move amendment No 1:

*Leave out all after "economy;" and insert*

*"recognises the importance of Northern Ireland continuing to participate within the European single market to improve external sales; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to ensure that growing exports is a key part of the Northern Ireland economic strategy."*

It will not be lost that Mr Lyons did not give his support to the first amendment and did not take the opportunity to give his full support to the single market. I think that the business community, here in Northern Ireland and across the UK, will take note of that. The fortunate opportunity for the DUP in the House to unite around that does seem to have been missed. Hopefully, they will reconsider as we go along.

At the outset, we can concur that exports are a good thing. Export-led growth is a key route through which we can transform our economy, drive up skills and productivity and enhance prosperity. There has been some recent improvement in that regard, though we may dispute some of the underlying explanations of that. We also concur that exports should continue to be a core element of Northern Ireland's economic strategy.

In some regards, the Brexit decision is especially frustrating at a time when the peace process is well embedded and the Northern Ireland economy is addressing some structural reforms and really has the potential to take off and see real results. We are dragging ourselves down at a time when we are really about to lift off. Our amendment gives the Assembly the opportunity to declare unequivocally that continued participation in the EU single market is one of the most important aspects, if not the most important aspect, of what makes the Northern Ireland economy

competitive today and would maximise our competitiveness in the future.

Recent export growth has reflected some microeconomic interventions around skills, innovation and the building-up of capacity among local companies. Over the past few months, there has been a short-term boost due to the radical changes in the value of the pound in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. However, cheaper exports are balanced by more expensive imports for manufacturers and consumers. The drop in the value of the pound also reflects a drop in the value of the overall UK economy. Even the companies benefiting from the currency changes would accept that volatility in exchange rates is not healthy and that an economy cannot be truly prosperous unless it is based on strong and solid foundations. Therefore, the key issue for expanding our export base is accessibility to markets.

There are a number of scenarios when it comes to trading relationships. They range from some form of special status or special arrangement that allows us to continue to be part of the European Union through to Northern Ireland alone or the UK as a whole continuing to be part of the EU single market, passing through some form of access to single market akin to the Norwegian model or the less advantageous Swiss model, with the backstop of the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. Over recent days and weeks, there has been a lot of talk about WTO rules from Conservative Ministers and from some former and current unionist politicians. That has received a strong rebuke from UK-wide employer organisations such as the CBI, which should know.

Before the Brexit vote, there was a rather warped narrative that there was somehow a choice to be made between trading with the European Union and accessing the rest of the world. No doubt we will hear that reinforced today by some of the apologists for the "Leave" campaign in the Chamber, who will argue that the proportion of Northern Ireland exports to the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the European Union has declined and the proportion of our exports to the United States and the rest of the world is increasing and that, ergo, our future prosperity lies outside the European Union. That neglects to consider that the gap between the level of exports to Ireland and the rest of Europe, whether we are talking about services, manufactured products or agrifood, is still significantly ahead of the rest of the world. While that gap may be narrowing, it is nevertheless considerable. It would be foolish in the extreme to make it more difficult

for Northern Ireland companies to access what is still by far their largest non-UK market.

Moreover, Europe versus the rest of the world was never an either/or choice, rather a both/and. The European Union is better placed to create new free trade agreements with other parts of the world than the UK going alone. The UK is no more likely to participate in a free trade agreement with the United States, Canada or China by going it alone than by going through the European Union. Such deals often take years to negotiate and are rarely straightforward. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) is already in considerable difficulty, and even the proposed Canada-EU deal is creating controversy. Beyond our shores, we see difficulties with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) for the United States. Of course, bilateral deals can be struck, such as the Swiss deal with China that has often been cited. Worryingly, however, that one was concluded very much on China's terms. If you want simply to surrender to the terms of other countries that wish to trade with us, of course we can do all these deals, but it is not necessarily in our interests to do so.

It is also worth reflecting for a moment on what the term "WTO rules" entails. It is essentially the global multilateral floor on which further progress on breaking down barriers can be built or on which more specific arrangements can be based. In theory, the UK can throw off its tariff walls to imports and hope that others will reciprocate in how UK exports are treated. It is not as straightforward in practice, as many states continue to seek to protect their domestic markets, particularly and notably for agricultural products and services. It is particularly naive to think that the UK can simply lower its tariffs and expect the EU to reciprocate. To do so, especially in the absence of acceptance of freedom of movement, would be to see the unpicking of the wider European project. We should also be clear that there is a difference between the concept of a single market, a customs union and a free trade zone. They are not the same, but many on the "Leave" side seem to think that they are.

The level of tariffs is not the only barrier to trade. Transactional costs, regulatory matters and the policing of issues such as country of origin are just as important, and this is where specific free trade agreements — most importantly, the preference for a single market — become much more important. These complexities would not be addressed under WTO rules. The further we move away from the notion of a single market, the greater the impact of transactional costs and regulatory

issues will be. All that red tape, which I believe the "Leave" campaign was seeking to get away from, will create more and more barriers for our exporters.

If we are serious about doing the best for Northern Ireland, we need to maximise our relationship with the single market and, ideally, be participants in it. Different companies and sectors in the Northern Ireland economy will have different current and potential overseas markets, and there are dangers in extrapolating from outliers. We can all cite the good deals being done by company x and company y in the United States, which is to be welcomed, but let us look at the statistics and see where the bulk of our trade is going and will continue to go.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Farry:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** I would like some clarification on what the Alliance Party's amendment means, because it uses the rather equivocal language of:

*"continuing to participate within the European single market".*

Does the Alliance Party want us to belong to the single market or have access to it? The wording used — "continuing to participate" — would cover both. Will you nail your colours to whichever mast it is?

**Dr Farry:** I am happy to clarify. The word "participate" is fairly clear and unambiguous: we want to be part of the single market, and that is our starting point. The notion of access to the single market is one step removed from that. If we talk about access to the single market, we accept that there will be some barriers, particularly in transactional costs and regulatory issues. Every time we take a step back, the implications for our exporters will become more severe.

It is clearly in the interests of the UK economy as a whole to maximise engagement with the single market. The business community is loud and clear in that regard, most recently in its warnings about the consequences of a hard Brexit. A hard Brexit would entail a drop in the UK's GDP and a major baseline correction in our overall wealth as a nation. This logic is even more acute in Northern Ireland, given our land border with an EU state and the nature of some of our business sectors, such as agri-food, which is, to a large extent, organised on a North/South basis. Agri-food is also a much

bigger component of our economy and faces the additional hit of being confronted by the highest EU external tariffs, if we leave the single market.

It is also worth briefly considering our inward investment narrative. There is an air of complacency from some that, given Northern Ireland's recent strong track record and the onset of corporation tax powers, everything will be OK. However, our success to date — it has been a success — has predominantly been around attracting quality back office functions from US companies, and our skills base has been particularly helpful in that regard. That type of investment can continue, but access to markets is also a key consideration for investors. Corporation tax has the potential to be a game changer, but that is based on attracting profit centres to Northern Ireland, which are much more likely to want to have a base from which to sell to the single market.

At present, our investment context is characterised by risk and uncertainty, and it is important that people fully understand and recognise that. If we are serious about investment, we must recognise that it is not just about tax and talent, as is often said; it is about tax, talent and trade. The stakes for Northern Ireland at present are very high, and it is important that the Assembly takes the opportunity today to declare its full support for the single market.

**Ms Archibald:** I beg to move amendment No 2:

*Leave out all after "economy;" and insert*

*"recognises that the result of the referendum on membership of the European Union has significant implications for businesses; calls on the Minister for the Economy to ensure that growing exports is a key part of an economic strategy to achieve long-term, sustainable and socially balanced economic growth; and further calls on the Minister, in recognising the unique circumstances on this island, to work with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to ensure that cross-border trade and freedom of movement continue uninhibited."*

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to move our amendment. I will say at the outset that I endorse the call to ensure that growing exports, and enabling companies to do this, should be an integral part of our economic strategy. However, it is also important to recognise the implications of the referendum result, which present companies here with significant challenges, and we must

face up to this. That is not being negative; it is being realistic.

Over the past couple of months, like most Members in the Chamber, I have had many discussions with stakeholders, businesspeople and business representatives. The message most clearly articulated is that the uncertainty following the referendum result is causing difficulties, and there is a fear factor, whether we like it or not. For businesses, this makes it difficult to plan for the future and means that they are less likely to invest. As recently as yesterday, the acting director of the British Chambers of Commerce remarked that the uncertainty we now face is making businesses, which already tend to be risk-averse, even more risk-averse.

#### 4.15 pm

Agri-food is an important sector for our economy and for exports. Last week, the chair of the Agri-Food Strategy Board was before the AERA Committee. When asked about the opportunities being presented by Brexit for the agri-food sector, he made the salient point that energy will now be spent on managing the situation we are faced with rather than building and growing what we know today. He was subsequently asked whether too much emphasis was being put on negative rather than positive impacts, and he responded that we have to understand the risks before we manage them, and, if you work on the basis that there is no threat, you will do nothing about it. We have to face up to the challenges that businesses now face and realise that the environment that we are in does not encourage investment. We need to put in place supports to encourage enterprising behaviours. Organisations representing businesses, including the CBI and the British Chambers of Commerce, referenced the importance of consultation with the sectors and their representatives in developing any priority for negotiation and helping to create stability in the short term. I believe that we have a responsibility to do that.

It is also important to acknowledge the achievements of companies here. The export data that we have seen this year to June are positive news. We should learn from what may have contributed to that. The report, which shows a 9.5% increase in exports, also includes more detailed information, which Mr Lyons referenced. A 74% increase in exports to the US is highlighted, which is great news, a 56% increase in what it calls "chemical and related products", and a 10% increase in miscellaneous manufactured products. As Mr

Lyons said, such industries have been expanding here for some time, and it is really good to see their success. The report shows that the number of businesses exporting here had fallen in comparison with the same quarter in 2015. We have work to do in supporting businesses to explore accessing export markets, and the trade accelerator plan launched last month is a positive step. Alongside that, it is important to ensure that there are appropriate practical and logistical supports in place, particularly for SMEs, to enable them to make the most of any export opportunities that arise. We must also look towards supporting those same enterprises with their product and service development to ensure that they are able to take up opportunities. Supports for innovation and upscaling are also important strands to any economic strategy, and they will underpin general sales and export capabilities. It is important that companies right across the North, of all sizes and sectors, including the third sector, have the same opportunities to access all these supports and are being made aware of them. Any dissemination events must include more diverse locations to ensure genuine regional balance in their delivery.

I now come to the final part of our amendment. The previously mentioned HMRC report also shows that 52% of our exports go to the EU, which is still a sizeable amount worth some £3.5 billion. Remaining part of the single market is important, and the messages coming from Westminster are not reassuring. However, the main export market for businesses here is cross-border, with over 31% of our exports worth £2.1 billion going to the South. It is absolutely vital that we continue to have unfettered access to that market and that trade and movement continue as is. Sinn Féin strongly believes that the best means to achieve that is to negotiate arrangements for the North. That is a real possibility that must be fully explored.

Protests took place at the weekend at border crossings across the country, calling for the "Remain" vote here to be respected. Those present at protests represented a wide cross section of the community — business groups, cancer support groups, disability support groups and individuals — all of whom recognise the impact any changes will have on their lives. We call on the Minister to work with his counterpart in the South to ensure that arrangements will be created to ensure that cross-border movement of people, goods and services will continue unimpeded.

I urge Members to endorse our amendment. We recognise that remaining within the European single market would achieve the aims regarding free movement and trade access, so we will support the Alliance Party amendment. We believe that majority support would be a strong statement from the Assembly, acknowledging the democratic will of the majority here who voted "Remain".

**Mr Aiken:** I support the Alliance motion, and to work in such a constructive manner, I will point out some ideas to help to boost trade and exports, which is what we are looking for in Northern Ireland.

First, let us celebrate, because we do not do it very often, and pass on our thanks to our companies that have helped to achieve a much-laudable 9.5% growth in our exports since 2015. Of particular note, as we talked about, is the growth in sales to the United States, which grew by 74%, and the importance of our life sciences sector, which has grown its export value by 56.3%, rising to £1.5 billion. It is also pleasing to note that we exported over £1 billion-worth of agricultural products and that our manufacturing sector exported over £2.3 billion-worth of products.

When looking particularly at our pharma sector, which has over 258 excellent companies, including the great company of Randox in my constituency, we can see that a combination of a highly skilled workforce, linkages to research and development-driven universities and a supportive financial sector and legislative system can, when properly marshalled, produce world-class and globally leading results. That has all helped Northern Ireland exports to rise to the value of £6.6 billion. Indeed, as pointed out, our manufacturing and services sectors outperform, per head of population, those in Wales and Scotland, although our productivity is considerably behind that of the key English regions, such as the south-east, the Midlands and the Northern Powerhouse, and also, worryingly, that of the Republic of Ireland.

We also have to recognise that there will be considerable impact post-31 March 2019, which is fewer than 29 months away. I was going to make a cheap joke about the length of time it takes for the office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to answer an FOI request, but I will not. We will be out of the EU. Worryingly, it is possible that we will also be out of the single European market. We note with interest that our largest export market is the Republic of Ireland. At a value of £2.1 billion, it is double our next largest export destination, which is the US. It will also, post-Brexit, be the

UK's only land border with the EU. When any two highly successful economic zones meet, particularly with the EU economic zone being the world's largest economic market, which is not going to change any time soon, and the UK being the sixth or seventh largest economy, there is normally great opportunity. However, as many in the Assembly will be aware, the trade across the Irish Sea is currently worth some £52 billion/€52 billion looking at today's exchange rate. That taken, £2.1 billion is slightly more than 4% of that trade. That is probably a bit of an indictment of our failures to effectively promote that trade. Despite a plethora of initiatives, including the hard work that Invest Northern Ireland and, to a much lesser extent, InterTradeIreland have been involved in, we have no great push to raise the export figure to a more representative one, such as 10% of the current inter-island trade, which is a target of around £5 billion.

We cannot just rest on growing trade to the Republic of Ireland, as we already stated. We must seek to grow all our global exports over the next decade and beyond. We need to work constructively with organisations like UKTI and others to achieve that. In Invest Northern Ireland, we have an organisation that exceeded all its Programme for Government targets. However, in view of the overall export figures of £6.7 billion measured against the overall figure of UK exports of close to £300 billion, our exports should be in proportion. They should be at least £10 billion to £12 billion. Again, when measured against Programme for Government targets, Invest NI's performance seems impressive, but we have no benchmarking against what UKTI, Scottish Development International or even Enterprise Ireland or IDA Ireland achieve. Those figures would be very useful for all. We have called several times for Invest Northern Ireland to be benchmarked. I would like the Minister to take that for action.

What, going forward, would be worthwhile targets? First, let us achieve 10% of all cross-Irish Sea trade. We will need to ensure that we build economic and trade relationships with the Irish that are as strong as possible. Secondly, we need to grow Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector to achieve 20% of our GDP and boost our exports outside the Republic of Ireland to at least £10 billion to £15 billion. Our target within 10 years must be an export-driven economy that achieves, in 2016 terms, at least £20 billion in exports per annum.

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

**Mr Aiken:** That challenging target, even with the resultant corporation tax, would allow Northern Ireland to be well placed to meet the challenges of the forthcoming decades.

**Ms S Bradley:** As SDLP spokesperson for the economy, I welcome the 9.5% increase in export growth. Before I get into my speech proper, I note with some amusement the secondary clause in the motion that somehow suggests that the two clauses are connected and that the growth may, in some part, have something to do with this Government. Some might even stand to argue that it happened despite this Government rather than because of them.

That said, amongst the many figures that are presented, there is a breakdown in the overall growth. The stand-out figure has to be that 56.3% growth from chemical and related products and life sciences, which is an impressive growth in any one year. Also worthy of specific mention is the growth in exports to the US. It is unfortunate that the SDLP/UUP joint motion —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order. There are Members, Ministers and former Ministers with penetrating whispers. I ask them to show some respect to those contributing to the debate.

**Ms S Bradley:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I assure you that I am immune.

It is worth looking at. The figures that have gone through are very impressive.

I also note all the companies in Northern Ireland that have contributed to exports. It is worthy of note, and we should take time to congratulate those businesses. They are not asking this House or this Sinn Féin/DUP Government for congratulations. If anybody is really listening to the business community at this time, they will hear that it is asking for leadership and for an economic anchor in this pre-Brexit period. Likewise, companies that are contemplating the possibility of the export market must be supported and encouraged. Policy must reflect something that they recognise as being something that they can approach and adopt for their own business.

In my view, businesses in Northern Ireland are amongst the most versatile in the world, and they have had to be. I am confident that they will respond to any challenges and opportunities presented to them. However, it is wholly unreasonable for anybody to expect

them to respond to challenges that are unknown to them.

Whilst welcoming the 9.5% growth, it is incumbent on all of us in this House to take a much wider view of the economic performance and policies. Today's report issued by the Ulster Bank's purchasing managers' index (PMI) tells us that output and new orders have stagnated during the month of September. The HMRC statistics that we are considering also reaffirm that our largest export market continues to be just over the ditch and further South, right across Ireland. We must acknowledge this as a reality, and it is something that we need to collectively protect.

In its submission to the refocus of Northern Ireland's economic strategy, the Federation of Small Businesses quoted NISRA statistics that the EU represented 59% of our exports, with 37% of that being made in the Republic of Ireland. During recent visits to local businesses and companies that are involved in exports, I have been told that ease of access to trade negotiations, ease of transport with no dependency on shipping, a shared cultural understanding of product and demand and the security of working in the single European market are just a few reasons why the South is such a sustainable export partner.

During the visits, CEOs and management teams also shared with me their thinking on the recent referendum result. Instead of going into the political arena, they are focusing heavily on the real issues. One business informed me that it has considered the possible impact that tariffs may have on sales and it will consider the possibility of setting up business in the South if the burden of costs and administration imposed on it weighs too heavily. A second export business that I spoke to was less concerned about talk of tariffs but recognised that its particular business was heavily dependent on the free movement of people to maintain a level workforce.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a conclusion.

**Ms S Bradley:** They, too, have also not ruled out the possibility of moving South. I ask the House this: where does it leave our future exports when we face the real possibility of exporting our exporters?

**4.30 pm**

**Mr T Buchanan:** One of the key strengths of Northern Ireland's economic growth is the ability

to export goods across the globe. While Northern Ireland might be small in stature, in comparison with the economic landscape around the world, it nevertheless punches well above its weight on the world stage. That is evident from the recorded growth rate of 9.5% in exports over the past year; indeed, the value of exports to the United States between June 2015 and 2016 reached almost £620 million, with evidence that the increase in the share of those exports stemmed from within Northern Ireland. We are the only part of the UK to have recorded growth in our export markets, and that is being done in a challenging and uncertain economic climate. Local businesses are keeping their eye on the ball and steadily growing their business, in spite of the reports of doom and gloom prior to the referendum to leave the EU and thereafter.

It was this party and the First Minister who consistently made the economy a key priority in the Programme for Government, recognising the importance of the economy in growing every sector in Northern Ireland. It is encouraging to see the many reports of local businesses winning contracts around the world. It is essential, therefore, to ensure that local businesses operate in a competitive environment and are well placed to take advantage of external opportunities that face global competition.

As a Government, we must continue to lead from the front and demonstrate that local businesses can and do grow when they have an outward vision, looking outward and seizing the new opportunities coming our way. Encouraging an outward-looking vision and grasping every available opportunity is where we, as a Government, must seek to lead our local economy. The Economy Minister has just announced a trade accelerator plan in conjunction with Invest NI, to build on the growth of exports over the past 12 months and enhance the support available to existing exporters in Northern Ireland and those who are perhaps considering exploring the export possibilities for their companies. Post-Brexit Northern Ireland, with the rest of the UK, will enter the cusp of a new dawn for businesses, with new opportunities presenting themselves around the globe. As the new dawn of global trade emerges, we have an entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland that, I believe, will rise to the challenge of competing for those global contracts. I encourage the Minister to continue his successful track record and ensure that growing exports continues to be a key part of the economic strategy of Northern Ireland going forward.

Export growth will not take place in a vacuum. It will require a combination of key stakeholders in the process from the core research and development that will drive the innovation of the Province to the Invest NI groups around the world that will provide key contacts to develop export markets from the starting point of Northern Ireland. Everyone needs to play their part to achieve success, and we have seen that in the steps that many businesses have already taken in launching their companies into the wider global market. It is up to the Executive to build on firm foundations that have been forged through strategic partnerships and to make that information readily available to the local small to medium-sized enterprises that are considering exporting their products and services.

At this point in our history, we should rise to the challenges ahead, grasp the potential opportunities that present themselves and launch onto the world stage with confidence to realise the potential exports that are there for the taking. I support the motion.

**Mr Murphy:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I also welcome the figures and the HMRC report showing an increase in exports from companies here. That is to be welcomed. It is encouraging, as we want to see companies continue to grow and, of course, continue to export, as that is a vital part of building our economy and making sure that it is stronger and spread more evenly throughout every sector of our economy. I certainly welcome the fact that companies are beginning to export to newer markets as well; that is very encouraging. But the reality is that the report is set against what is happening in England, Scotland and Wales. Given that we operate from a much lower benchmark, some perspective is needed on the figures, although any increase is encouraging.

It is the case that we, as an EU country, are currently exporting to a lot of markets, even newer markets, on the basis of the trade arrangements and agreements that have been made by the EU on the basis of the trade negotiations that have been conducted by it. Of course, if the North were to lose its status as an EU member and as a country that was part of the EU arrangements, the arrangements would be left up to an entirely new set of trade negotiations conducted from London. I think that it is widely accepted that the capacity does not exist to have such trade negotiations. While, on first reading, the report is positive — I certainly welcome that — there is a sense of getting off the sinking ship, grabbing a deckchair floating by and thinking that we are doing very well as a consequence of that.

Even this morning, we got some, I suppose, more sobering opinions. Certainly, one came, I am sure, to most members of the Economy Committee from the chief economist for Ulster Bank, Richard Ramsey, who said:

*"While growth in the UK economy as a whole continued to recover from the surprise vote to leave the EU in late-June, the latest PMI data signal that firms in Northern Ireland are facing a much more difficult time of things at present. Data for August had shown a return to growth of business activity, but this has been followed in September with a month of stagnation. Moreover, local firms have yet to see a return to rising new business since the referendum, with new orders broadly unchanged in the latest survey period."*

He finished by saying:

*"The overall picture is one of firms struggling to secure new work in the wake of the vote to leave the EU, with the notable exception of those companies able to capture additional export business. Recent noises that the UK government could favour a 'hard-Brexit' will likely do little to reassure local firms."*

We also got some feedback from the Food and Drink Association, which has yet to put together a piece on Brexit. It referenced the "53 other trading partners" and the preferential treatment for themselves through lower tariffs or quota from being members of the EU. It also said:

*"On exiting Europe we may well also exit these trade agreements and as a result the tariff walls will make it uneconomic to export to those markets."*

Those are sobering checks that make it surprising for us to hear — it is perhaps not surprising to hear some Members on the opposite Benches say these things — organisations like InterTradeIreland declare that the business community is excited by the prospects that lie ahead. As Chair of the Economy Committee, I have engaged with businesses big and small over the last number of months, and I can assure you that I have not met a single business that is excited about the uncertainty that lies ahead, the hardening position that seems to be coming from London daily or the plummet in sterling that seems to have happened as a consequence of that.

It would be much better for us if we recognised the challenges that lie ahead — the letter from

the First Minister and deputy First Minister goes some way along that route — and engaged with our biggest trading partners; Members have already mentioned the trade with the South and with Britain and the important trade with the EU. From our perspective, we would like to see the British Government respect the democratic wishes of the people here to remain. We should also seek other opportunities. On Friday, I attended the launch of a report on the potential economic benefits of reunification of this island, which was done by an eminent economist and someone who was involved in German reunification. This is a time not to grasp at straws and try to present them as something significant but to grab hold of the reality of the situation that we find ourselves in and examine all the options to protect the best interests of the people we represent.

**Mr Dunne:** I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today on what is a very important issue. Northern Ireland has a proud, rich heritage of engineering, manufacturing and processing and has always been to the fore in innovation, research and developing new products that are in use throughout the world.

Invest NI has worked with many companies in providing expert support and advice for businesses that seek to expand and grow their new products into new markets, and it must continue that work in promoting Northern Ireland across the world. Promoting Northern Ireland around the world through trade missions is a valuable way of selling this country, attracting FDI and broadening the horizons of our existing businesses, allowing them to engage with new markets through exports.

There is no doubt that we have seen new markets open up in recent years, such as the Middle East. We must redouble our efforts to expand our sales across the globe and make Northern Ireland an even greater, outward-looking, global competitive economy. We also recognise the work of InterTradeIreland as it helps to develop business on a cross-border basis, with programmes of support for existing and new exporters as they seek to build customer links and develop confidence to export new products and services.

One successful recent case study is SDC Trailers in Toomebridge, which has just secured £480,000 of new business in Saudi Arabia. Ulster Carpets has also recently signed major deals in the Middle East, and Wrightbus has been exporting its famous buses across the globe for many years now. The Denroy Group, in my constituency of North Down, has built an incredible reputation as a local company. It is

now exporting to 80 countries around the globe, through its top range of hairbrushes, medical devices and aircraft components, making it one of our country's most successful exporters, with annual sales of more than £10 million.

Having spoken to a number of small local businesses that have been on Invest NI missions, I know that they truly value those trips, which have allowed them to grow their export base, develop their business and ultimately create more jobs. Our thriving agri-food sector, in this Year of Food and Drink, is another example of a vital sector with great potential to grow and enhance through exports. The white meat sector through Moy Park and the red meat sector through Dunbia are strong examples of local processors that continue to see growth, exporting quality produce into Europe and world markets.

A recent FSB report indicated that between a quarter and a third of its local members currently export. For every business that currently exports, there is another considering exporting. That is encouraging, and as the FSB points out, the Executive, the private sector and the banking sector must focus on providing support for ambitious businesses that are keen to export and develop. That is why I welcome the trade accelerator plan that was recently launched by our Economy Minister, Simon Hamilton, and is designed to boost exports further and support our local businesses.

Despite the challenges that exist for our companies to be able to create products competitively, there is no doubt that there are real opportunities for Northern Ireland to flourish and grow in the future, to increase the competitiveness of our economy and to grow our exports now, without the confines of being a member of the European Union. I support the motion.

**Mr Chambers:** I concur with the sentiments contained in the first sentence of the motion. I join the DUP in welcoming the growth in our exports announced by HMRC and applaud any efforts to increase the ability of our economy to compete in a global market. However, I have concerns about joining the proposer of the motion in recognising the opportunities that Brexit presents to improve external sales, without also recognising the major dangers and threats to our exporters placed on them by the UK taking a democratic decision to leave the EU.

The HMRC figures that represent the pre-referendum situation are very encouraging, but

we must not become complacent on the back of them.

**Mr Lyons:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Chambers:** Sorry, I will give way later.

It goes without saying that we expect the Minister for the Economy to ensure that growing exports is a key challenge for him. I am confident that it is already foremost in his mind, especially given the growing suspicion that he might have voted to remain in the EU.

Last week, the First Minister was very scathing in her comments about what she called "Remoaners". As she said it, I am not sure whether she even glanced across the Chamber at her Sinn Féin colleagues in the Executive who are currently involved in High Court action on the very subject of remaining in the EU. It will be interesting to see whether Sinn Féin goes into a different Lobby from its Executive colleagues, despite the much-talked-about non-aggression pact. Indeed, I welcome the confirmation from its contributor earlier as to how Sinn Féin will be voting. The DUP might have to borrow from Sinn Féin — Ourselves Alone — when the vote is called this evening.

The funding cuts made to university budgets, resulting in a reduction in the number of courses on offer, and the loss of future EU funding will adversely impact cutting-edge research in the places that lead to income from exports through product development. Is that more lost ground to be made up by new export opportunities? If we are serious about maintaining and then growing export figures, we need firm commitments to invest in our transport and broadband networks, and to provide the right training for our workforce. We must also support calls for a VAT reduction to 9% to grow even further the huge contribution that tourism makes to our economy, a contribution that sometimes goes unrecognised.

#### 4.45 pm

The most crucial part of our export future is access to the single market. Our Prime Minister is speaking about a hard Brexit, and the president of France and other significant European leaders are sabre-rattling, saying that leaving the EU will be a bumpy ride for the UK. The First Minister claims that it would be madness to show our negotiating hand at this time, but is she confident that she will be playing in a game of economic poker, given that Brexit will undoubtedly be negotiated by people at Westminster whose aspirations may differ

from those of the Executive? Now is the time for the Executive to spell out loud and clear what we need from Brexit, and access to the single market should be top of any list.

I am amazed that the DUP motion makes no mention of the single market. My party's document, 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU', is very clear that we must have unfettered access to the EU single market. In a debate about exports, it would be remiss not to mention the efforts of local companies such as Ulster Carpets, Kitchenmaster and SDC Trailers, all of which recently secured export deals to the Middle East, as my colleague Gordon Dunne mentioned, with much appreciated support from Invest Northern Ireland. We should also acknowledge the ongoing contribution to our economy by the many exporters in every sector across Northern Ireland, such as Whale and Denroy in my constituency.

I am left with the suspicion that the motion is a bit of a fig leaf for the DUP to give itself a degree of comfort after the referendum unexpectedly gave it what it wished for. There is considerable uncertainty about exports in a post-EU era. The perfect outcome for Northern Ireland would be to retain all our exports to the EU, especially the Republic of Ireland, and have the chance to explore and grow other markets. I cannot support the DUP motion because it totally ignores the importance of UK access to the single market. I will support the Alliance amendment.

**Mr McGlone:** As we discuss the report, I am sure that all of us in the Chamber have heard about firms that we have worked with, such as SDC Trailers. I am sure that all of us want the best, and do our best, for businesses, given the circumstances in which they find themselves. We want them to grow, and we want them to collaborate and cooperate. However, other aspects of the report are quite sobering for any business. While exports from the North are up, we are starting from a lower base, and the number of exporters has decreased by 4.5%, which is the largest decrease in the UK. The number of importers has increased by 2.4%, but there was a fall in import value in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland accounts for only 2% of UK exports. The largest customer is still the Republic of Ireland, which accounts for 32%, or, as referred to earlier, £2.1 billion of Northern Ireland's exports. That is where we get into the area of cooperation and the fact that 52% of our exports go to other EU countries, which is a higher proportion than is the case for England,

Scotland or Wales. Indeed, food, beverages and agricultural produce make up 35% of Northern Ireland's exports to the EU, so they are an extremely important part of our economy.

I am sure that all of us who speak and listen to businesses know — it is reflected in report after report — that, pre Brexit, the key is stability. We need certainty about the place, but that cannot be given. We have heard "the letter" from FM and dFM to the Prime Minister referred to. It would be interesting to see if there has been any response to "the letter". One of the Members referred to how FM and dFM cannot reveal their negotiating hand because it is too early: I could understand that if they had just one hand for negotiating with or had even agreed the cards that are in their hand for negotiating with. One says, "This is the way to go", and the other says, "This is the way to go". Meantime, the certainty that is required for business is not there. Those are the circumstances that you arrive at when you vote to pull out of something and take us into those uncharted waters.

There has been a welcome surge in chemical-related produce, with an increase of £541 million in the medicinal and pharmaceutical subsections. With other members of the previous ETI Committee, I have visited those very successful companies. That accounts for the vast majority of the overall 9.5% increase. It is high-end produce where the investments have to be in R&D. Horizon 2020 has played a pivotal role in that, collaborating and working with universities or companies in other nation states to help develop that produce and draw down the expertise in those other places. Those related industries involve complex supply chains. For that reason, it is a sector that could be disproportionately hit by leaving the European single market.

Mr Chambers and others are absolutely right: if we do not have that access to the European single market and cannot play a positive role in it, that would not be a good place to be. We have heard the figures on its relevance to exports from Northern Ireland; indeed, when we look at the role that the Republic plays, we see that it remains the North's largest import partner, accounting for 27% of Northern Ireland's imports. There was a slight decrease of 1% from the previous year, but it is so important nevertheless. I welcome the Taoiseach's recent statement about setting up a forum on the issues associated with Brexit. Key stakeholders have contacted me about playing their role in that so that we can collaborate and

work together positively in the interests of the entire island.

**Mr Allister:** I support the motion and oppose both amendments. The Alliance amendment, of course, wishes to take us back. It wishes to drag us against the democratic will of the people of this United Kingdom to effectively remain in the EU. Members will have heard me probe with Dr Farry whether it was about access to or belonging to the single market, and he made it plain that their amendment was geared to remaining in the single market. By the act of staying in the single market, we utterly disrespect the decision of this United Kingdom to leave the EU. It is all the baggage of the single market that caused people to want to leave the EU. The baggage of its relationship with the customs union, of not being able to make a single trade deal for yourself and of having to accept untrammelled free movement of labour are the very things that caused the wise people of the United Kingdom to vote to leave the EU. Saying that we must remain within the single market is to utterly disrespect that decision. I am disappointed to hear that the Ulster Unionist Party, having said that it accepts the outcome of the referendum, intends to vote for the Alliance Party amendment.

**Dr Farry:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Dr Farry:** Will the Member concede that it is perfectly possible for the UK to technically leave the European Union but remain part of the single market? That is, in essence, the so-called soft Brexit option advocated by the CBI. It may not be his preference, but it is entirely consistent for people to make that argument if they wish to do so.

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

**Mr Allister:** It is technically possible, but it totally negates the effect of leaving the EU. It leaves you in the worst possible position and leaves you shackled to all the restraints, the bureaucracy and everything else that comes with being in the single market.

**Mr Aiken:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Quickly, yes.

**Mr Aiken:** Thank you very much indeed. I am sure the Member is probably aware that, if we were not part of the single European market,

trying to deal with the World Trade Organization would probably be just as bureaucratic or even harder. Would the Member care to outline some alternatives, therefore, if we are not to deal with the bureaucracy of the World Trade Organization going forward in our trade discussions?

**Mr Allister:** We would be master of our own negotiations. We would not have to depend on Brussels, with all its attachment to endless hideous bureaucracy, to negotiate anything for us. We would, in fact, have a seat at the table, which we do not have in the WTO. We, the United Kingdom, would have a seat at the table and therefore could negotiate for ourselves. Outside the EU, we could also make the trade deals. The whole economic argument about leaving the EU is made on the simple premise that you want to follow the growth. The growth in the world is not in the moribund EU, where the economies are failing and falling; the growth in the world is elsewhere. Yet, there are those who want to tie us haplessly to the very place in the world that is failing economically instead of lifting their eyes to the vision of what lies out there in the world where the growth is. That is why we have to get mastery over our trade deals and our regulation.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** No, I have been very generous with my time.

I was disappointed to hear the proposer from the DUP say he is minded to accept the Sinn Féin amendment. It takes the one salient, useful thing out of the DUP motion, namely recognising the opportunities that leaving the EU presents to improve external sales. The DUP, having put that in the motion, is now prepared to see it written out of it in pursuit of a negative spin about recognising the effects of the result of the referendum and its significant implications for businesses. Worse than that, the last phrases of the Sinn Féin amendment are about setting the ground for opt-out. It says:

*"recognising the unique circumstances on this island, to work with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to ensure cross-border trade and freedom of movement continue uninhibited."*

That can happen only on an opt-out. Did we not hear the Prime Minister say there can and will be no opt-outs? We entered as one nation, we leave as one nation and the United Kingdom Government negotiate for us. I am

disappointed at the tendency towards accepting that amendment. The DUP was absolutely right not to accept the Taoiseach's invitation to whatever forum he is setting up. It would be absolutely wrong to accept the amendment, which, in the same tenor and towards the same direction, takes out of its motion the very thing that is most important, namely —

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

**Mr Allister:** — grasping the opportunities to build our future where the growth is: outside the EU.

**Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy):** I very much welcome the debate and the opportunity to respond to the motion and the contributions made so far. At the outset, I thank the Members who tabled today's motion. It is right that we recognise the many successes and outstanding performances of Northern Ireland businesses. That is something we should do more of in the House. I am determined that during my time as Minister for the Economy we will seek to celebrate success in its many guises.

It is understandable that creating more and better jobs will get the bulk of our attention, but it is my intention to celebrate new contracts that see local companies exporting their goods, products and services.

Examples, such as the success of SDC Trailers from Toomebridge and its £480,000 contract with the Kanoo Group in Saudi Arabia and Ulster Carpets' contract to provide carpet to a new five-star resort in Dubai, were announced in the last week. Growing our exports and expanding trade opportunities is absolutely crucial for Northern Ireland and central to the Executive's economic strategy. In a small region like ours, we simply cannot rely on a home market of 1.8 million people to deliver economic growth. We have to look beyond these shores.

### 5.00 pm

I am absolutely delighted that the latest HMRC figures showed that Northern Ireland had an increase in value of 9.5% on exported goods. Significantly, we were the only part of the United Kingdom to record an increase in exports over the last year. That equates to £6.67 billion of sales in a 12-month rolling period. That is excellent news and a reflection of our increasingly global outlook when it comes to trade.

I want to pick out a few highlights from the HMRC figures. Exports to Japan were up 31% to £40 million, while sales to Australia were up by 11.1% to £80.3 million. The Americas continue to be a target market for companies from Northern Ireland, with exports recorded at £2 billion, up by 49.7%. Northern Ireland manufacturing exports to the USA have been impressive, increasing by almost three quarters to £1.46 billion. The most notable growth in the US market was that recorded in the medical and pharmaceutical sector, where product exports increased by £458 million, driven by the ongoing success of local firms like Almac and Randox. We also saw significant growth recorded in Canada, with exports reaching £372 million, an increase of £10 million or 2.8%, largely due to increased sales in the food, medicinal and pharma sectors.

Last week, I travelled to the Middle East to meet influential business leaders in the United Arab Emirates and see at first hand the success of local companies in securing business in that important market. I would like to pay tribute to the work of the excellent team of Invest NI officials who are based in Dubai and work closely in support of companies that are seeking to trade in the Middle East. I was hugely impressed by the team and the success of Northern Ireland companies who are proving that opportunities exist in the Middle East for those who want to make their mark on the global stage. Exports to the UAE alone stand at £60 million in 2015-16, which is up almost 15% on the previous year. Businesses like CDE Global, Wrightbus, Brett Martin and Kitchenmaster have set up offices in the UAE to act as Middle East bases to boost their trade opportunities in the wider region. Other companies, such as Ulster Carpets, AJ Power and Mallaghan Engineering, to mention but a few, have been successful in securing orders in the Middle East. From what I saw in the Middle East, Northern Ireland companies are more than capable of securing contracts and succeeding anywhere. The quality of products and services that are provided by Northern Ireland companies is second to none, and that is being increasingly recognised.

Of course, winning new orders and contracts internationally helps grow employment locally. Growing our exports is an absolutely critical element of creating the increasingly outward-looking, globally competitive economy that I want to see Northern Ireland become. That is why I recently launched the new trade accelerator plan, which offers a range of enhanced support for businesses to explore more trading opportunities outside Northern Ireland. Mr Aiken mentioned working with the

Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry. We certainly use and will continue to use the chamber and, indeed, all chambers of commerce and business organisations, to deliver our message on exports. I will be engaged with the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry at one of its Export First events in early November. Indeed, November is Exporting is GREAT month so there will be a renewed focus on exports in that month.

My role and that of my Department is to help open international doors for Northern Ireland companies, and, in the months ahead, I intend to work in close cooperation with our network of Invest NI teams around the globe and in concert with colleagues in the new Department for International Trade to expand our exports and build on the success that we have seen reflected in the latest figures. We are on the cusp of exciting times for the United Kingdom, and I am determined to ensure that Northern Ireland is perfectly placed to take advantage of the opportunities that the years ahead will present.

Aspects of the proposed amendments to the motion predictably, given their source, focus on the impact of the democratic decision of the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. It is hard to take seriously the predictions of doom and gloom for Northern Ireland exports that emanate from the same people who predicted immediate doom and gloom for the UK economy after June's referendum. We all know that there are challenges for the UK as a whole and Northern Ireland in particular as a consequence of Brexit. The Executive continue to work closely with local business to identify these challenges and with Her Majesty's Government to secure the best possible deal for Northern Ireland, including securing the best possible deal on trade.

Trade is perhaps the area where the greatest number of opportunities arise from Brexit for the UK. I want us to continue to trade with the European Union post-Brexit. The nature of those trading arrangements will be determined by the upcoming negotiations, but we should use this once in a generation opportunity to be forward-thinking and outward-looking in our trade ambitions. If we look more closely at the aforementioned HMRC export statistics, we see that the greatest opportunities lie beyond the borders of the EU and that, while the EU accounts for a large chunk of Northern Ireland's exports, it is not perhaps as dominant as some would have us believe.

Mr Allister and Mr Lyons made the distinction between external sales and exports; that is an important distinction. Our largest market for external sales outside our region is, of course, Great Britain. If you take manufacturing alone — I am using not HMRC figures but the wider figures that NISRA correlates — GB manufacturing accounts for £10 billion worth of sales outside this region. The ROI, by comparison, is £2.1 billion. That is a factor of five to one of a difference, a point made by Mr Allister in his contribution.

Of Northern Ireland's top 10 trading destinations, using the HMRC data, five are inside and five outside the EU. The five outside the EU include the US, our second biggest export destination, Canada, our third, as well as South Korea, China and Thailand. These non-EU markets account for 48% of exports and have been rising in our top-10 destinations. It is the trend in the figures that is most interesting: EU markets, such as the Republic of Ireland and France, showed a 2.5% and 6.5% decrease respectively, while the US accounted for a staggering 74% increase over the last year.

Similarly, when we look at the trend in export figures by territory, Europe's trend is downward, while the Americas and Asia Pacific are upward. That reflects the fact that growth in the global economy is not being driven by Europe; it is being driven by the rest of the world, especially by the emerging markets. Between 1996 and 2016, average GDP growth in the European Union was a lowly 1.7%. In comparison, average GDP growth in the United Arab Emirates between 2000 and 2015 was 4.7%; in China, between 1989 and 2016, it was 9.82%; in Indonesia, between 2000 and 2016, it was 5.3%; and in Brazil, between 1991 and 2016, it was 2.72%.

We are all aware of the well-publicised and ongoing economic problems of the eurozone; we are probably less familiar with the diminishing competitiveness of the EU. The recently published World Economic Forum competitiveness index shows that 11 of the top 20 places are occupied by non-EU states, with non-EU states taking the top three positions. Securing trade deals with states and regions outside the EU should be our future focus, learning the lesson of, for example, the free trade agreement between Singapore and the Gulf Cooperation Council, which has seen an increase in trade of about 30% between the two since the commencement of the agreement just a few years ago. That is why our Invest NI developing markets and emerging/frontier markets are dominated by destinations outside

the EU, such as Canada, the Middle East, Australia, India, south-east Asia, South Africa and Nigeria. To reflect that, our Invest NI trade mission calendar will focus heavily on markets such as Canada, China, Peru, Columbia, Mexico, the Middle East, Malaysia and Singapore over the next year.

Clearly, as well as expanding our export opportunities with emerging markets, we will want to continue to trade with Europe. I was recently in Germany and found business there still to be very interested in investing in Northern Ireland. Germany is Northern Ireland's fourth biggest trading partner, as measured by exports and imports. We import around £100 million more in goods than we export to Germany. I am confident that, as a pragmatic nation, Germany, which dominates the EU, will want to ensure that future trading arrangements do not jeopardise its huge volume of exports to the United Kingdom.

I will continue to work closely with Dr Liam Fox, whom I have already engaged with, to ensure that Northern Ireland benefits from the new trading opportunities that Brexit will bring.

I believe that the latest export figures show that the Executive strategy of focusing strongly on exports and supporting businesses to expand into new markets is working. However, we cannot stand still, and I want us to build on the success of this latest rise in exports by helping Northern Ireland to become an increasingly outward-looking trading region. There are still far too few companies exporting from Northern Ireland, and I believe that we are capable of much more.

Growing our exports is a critical element of growing local business and transforming Northern Ireland into a globally competitive economy. It enables our economy to better withstand economic shocks and helps to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland can contribute to and reap the benefits of growth. To do that, we must strive to be more competitive in everything that we do. Enhancing our competitiveness is an important element in supporting long-term economic growth. Being better than before is obviously laudable, but I make no apologies for believing that we should strive to be the best exporter amongst comparator regions. We need to know that we are forging ahead of similar small advanced economies. That is the true measure of competitiveness.

The opportunity exists now to transform our economy. We have come through one of the worst recessions on record; we are forging

ahead with plans for the introduction of reduced corporation tax; and we are on the cusp of an exciting new era for the United Kingdom. When and where doors are opened to new trading relationships and emerging markets, Northern Ireland must be ready to seize the opportunities. My Department's Export Matters action plan sets out our ambitions for growing exports with three main targets: to increase the volume of external sales by 80% by 2025; to increase the number of our companies engaged in external sales to 16,000 by 2025; and to increase the geographical diversity of our export markets. Key to achieving those targets is enabling the companies already active overseas to be more successful and supporting those not yet selling overseas to become export-active. Creating the economy that we aspire to requires partnership between the public and private sectors. Our role in central and local government is to provide the framework and conditions that enable our companies to flourish and grow. For those that already export, Invest NI is increasing its support for market visits to ensure that businesses are able to strengthen existing relationships through the trade accelerator plan. That support will include assistance for more country visits and access to Invest NI's team of advisers based in countries around the world. For those that are yet to take the first step and begin exporting, Invest NI is enhancing its programme of support for first-time exporters, looking at our closest markets in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

I conclude by again recognising and celebrating the export success of local companies over the past year, as witnessed in the latest figures. Northern Ireland has fantastic companies across all sectors producing goods and services of the highest quality that can compete with businesses anywhere in the world. Globally, there are huge opportunities. We should have the ambition, confidence and self-belief to grasp them.

**Dr Farry:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** No, I will not give way.

As we strive to become a globally competitive economy, I assure the supporters of the motion and the House as a whole that, in my role as Minister for the Economy, I will do all in my power to assist our exporting companies to succeed internationally and deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. I found the debate to be useful; I have no hesitation therefore in supporting the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I call Mr John O'Dowd to make the winding-up speech on amendment No 2. You have five minutes.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Five minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker? Thank you very much.

Who would argue against supporting a motion that congratulates our companies for raising their game in relation to exports? Of course, you would support it. Well done to everyone involved and to all those who have supported them. I wish them continued success in the future. However, wishing them success is not the same as enabling them to have success. We are actually restricting the potential of local companies to export. Several Members, particularly those who favour leaving the EU, were keen to talk about where local companies currently export to and how they have exported outside the European Union, which raises this question: we are still members of the European Union, so how do our companies export to countries beyond it? To listen to some of those who support Brexit, as it has become known — I am not necessarily saying that it is those in this Chamber — you would think that we were going to set sail to discover new lands. Here is a newsflash: the European Union has already discovered those lands, is already trading with them and already has trade agreements with them. I will go through several of the countries that were mentioned.

5.15 pm

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will not, no.

One Member mentioned Turkey. Our trade has increased with Turkey. He failed to mention that Turkey is a member of the EU customs union. He failed to mention that Turkey pays into the EU budget for the privilege of being a member of the EU customs union. Mr Allister described the EU customs union as something akin — he did not use these words — to the devil and as a barrier to trade. Guess what? We trade with Turkey. Why are we trading with Turkey? Because it is a member of the EU customs union. Other Members went on to talk, rightly, about our increased trade with the United States of America. How are we trading with the United States of America? Through trade agreements negotiated with the European Union and others. I will quote —

**Mr Allister:** There is not one.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I quote —

**Mr Allister:** There is not one.

**Mr O'Dowd:** There are currently negotiations around a new trade agreement —

**Mr Allister:** There is not one.

**Mr O'Dowd:** There are currently negotiations around a new trade agreement, but we are trading with it on the basis of agreements. I will read —

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I would like to continue without being constantly interrupted.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order. It is clear that the Member has no wish to give way.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I quote the comment from the European Commission on the relationship with the United States of America:

*"The European Union and the United States have the largest bilateral trade relationship and enjoy the most integrated economic relationship in the world."*

What did President Obama say to people in Britain about new trade agreements when he visited? Get to the "back of the queue". That was his comment. How is that going to help our local exporters move forward?

Oliver Hart has just been awarded the Nobel Prize for economics. He is a Nobel Prize-winning economist. He has just been awarded it. Here are his comments on Brexit:

*"The EU is Britain's most important trade partner. Trade barriers with the EU would rise and this will hurt Britain's investment and growth."*

I move on to Saudi Arabia. How are companies exporting trailers to Saudi Arabia? How is the company in my constituency providing carpets to Saudi Arabia? Through the European Union's Gulf Cooperation Council, the EU's largest exporter to that region. How are those companies doing this? They are doing it through current EU arrangements with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. How are we —  
[Interruption.]

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order.

**Mr O'Dowd:** How are we trading, as the Minister mentioned, with Japan? Japan is the second-biggest trading partner in Asia, next to China. Who with? The EU. Trade is conducted with Australia through the EU-Australia partnership framework. The Minister mentioned South Korea. Again, I quote the European Commission:

"1916" —

no, 2016; I am thinking of another debate  
[Laughter.] —

"2016 marks the fifth anniversary of the EU-South Korea Free Trade Agreement".

Lo and behold, the EU has discovered all these trading partners that those who support Brexit and those who believe they are going to support our exporters are going out to find.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Member for giving way. Surely it is a legitimate point of view for people in the Chamber to say, "I voted against leaving the European Union, but at the same time I can recognise that there are opportunities that can come from leaving the EU". That is the problem that we have seen in the Chamber today. People want to rerun the referendum rather than say, "This is where we are. Let us get on with it and exploit the opportunities".

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Member has the guts of an extra minute.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I believe that the "Remain" vote should be respected here and that we should remain members of the EU. I have read out to you today a list of trade agreements that already exist with countries that other Members in the Chamber have said we should trade with. We are trading with them; we trade with them through the EU. Once we leave the EU, we have to rewrite and renegotiate every trade deal that there is. Will that help our companies to export or hinder them? I believe that it will hinder our local companies in their export progress.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I call Mr Stewart Dickson to wind on amendment No 1. Again, you have up to five minutes.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, I thank my colleague Stephen Farry for moving the amendment today and for the reference that he made to the importance of the single market in that. Indeed, I thank colleagues in the Chamber from Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP who have

indicated their support for the amendment as well.

This is about sending out a clear signal that unites pro- and anti-Brexiteers in this debate: the single market is vital to the future success not only of Northern Ireland but of the United Kingdom.

This is not about the specifics — the nuts and bolts — of how all of that is to be achieved. The Prime Minister and, hopefully, the Executive and the Executive Office will be involved in those matters as they evolve.

It is clear that the referendum result has to be accepted. We cannot have a rerun of the question that was put to the country earlier this year, but there has to be a democratic grip on the process. It is quite clear that the Prime Minister is very unkeen to let go of the undemocratic grip that she has on the process by so far refusing to allow her MPs even to debate the matter. However, that debate will have to take place not only in Westminster but in this place, Scotland and Wales.

Today is about sending out a strong signal that the European single market is important to the future of the United Kingdom, and it is important to the future of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Much has been said about improved exports. While all of that is true, a stable pound is the most important thing for our economy. A volatile pound is not what is needed for this economy; it is what will, ultimately, lead to a very volatile market situation. While we can all laud the improvements in exports, the widening deficit between imports and exports in the United Kingdom is the figure that we should be keeping an eye on, and it has reached an eye-watering £4.7 billion.

Forty years of trading relationships — building trust, building exports, building stability and, as other Members said, building beyond is the legacy of the EU and what it has done in trade negotiations. Export figures are to be welcomed — [Interruption.]

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order.

**Mr Dickson:** — but, as I have said, the trading deficit is what we need to keep our eye on.

Today is about the economics of remaining in the single market. The politics, and the future of the UK and the EU, are a debate for another day. Sadly, for every positive export story, there are negative stories. Recently, lorry

drivers in my constituency of East Antrim have been telling me of their fears and concerns as owner-drivers and small companies. They have to drive across Europe, and they fear the red tape and additional problems that they will face — if, indeed, they have any business to do on behalf of their clients in a single market in the future. Access to the single market is what the debate is about; it is what it should always have been about. It is somewhat disappointing that the DUP failed to include that in its motion.

Mr Allister referred to the benefits of deals with the World Trade Organization. That may very well be true, but the reality is that the word is "negotiation". It is a two-way street, and those negotiations are currently undertaken on our behalf by key and skilled negotiators. The Government have admitted that they do not have such negotiators in the United Kingdom, and those skills will have to be built up over time.

**Dr Farry:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** Yes.

**Dr Farry:** Does the Member recognise — this is probably the key difference to arise in the debate — that, given the current WTO rules, we are more likely to see the opening up of different markets around the world, in the United States, Canada and China, if we are part of the single market. They are much more likely to do a deal with the European Union than with the UK in isolation.

**Mr Dickson:** I entirely agree with the Member.

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

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** No, I have to finish. I entirely agree with the Member. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, none of those nations or states that he referred to has indicated at any time that it would be better for the United Kingdom to be out of the EU and out of the single market. In fact, it is my understanding that every single one of them wants us to remain in the single market and would have preferred that we remained in the EU.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** No.

**A Member:** Are you scared of him?

**Mr Dickson:** Certainly not.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order.

**Mr Dickson:** It is important for us to continue to negotiate with states within the European Union and maintain our links with the single market.

Finally, I say to the Minister directly that, while he has clearly set out a cogent argument of where we need to go now and in the future with our trade and exports for Northern Ireland — I do not necessarily disagree with what he says —

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

**Mr Dickson:** — given the situation that we find ourselves in, can he point to any trade or employers' organisation in Northern Ireland that agrees with his analysis?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Member's time is up. It occurs to me that very few of us mind Germany doing well as long as it is not in Hanover tomorrow night.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Before I put the Question on amendment No 1 — oh sorry, we have not yet heard from the Member who is to make the winding-up speech on the main motion. *[Laughter.]* We must have a story from Mr Storey.

**Mr Storey:** I have never had an introduction like that before in the House.

I will start by saying a word of congratulations to all who took part in the debate this afternoon. It is about the tone and tenor of what we said, because let us remember that, while we clearly have our differences, the business community out there wants us, as its public representatives, to do the very best for it. It gets frustrated with cheap political point scoring and jibes. Sometimes, that masks for us all because we all have organisations, companies and families who are involved in these businesses, and they want us to do the very best.

Here is the starting point: the referendum clearly indicated the will of the British people. I am disappointed in a party that was once shackled to the Conservative Party and was

quite happy to bring David Cameron here, and now, all of a sudden, it wants to distance itself from the current Conservative Government. However, whatever the politics of that may be, we must respect it. Other parties in the Chamber lectured us for many years about recognising the democratic process, then, all of a sudden, they lose the vote and say, "Oh no, but it was only Northern Ireland. We were talking only about Northern Ireland". When I went to vote, it was very clear that I was voting as a citizen of the United Kingdom. Let us ensure that that is said.

With regard to the competitive nature of Northern Ireland, let us be very clear that we saw that at the weekend. Northern Ireland can clearly win on the pitch, and, as the Deputy Speaker said, we wish them well in their endeavours tomorrow night in Germany and trust that they have a good result. Saturday evening proved to us again that there is that competitive edge, drive and fervour in Northern Ireland companies. In the debate today, we heard a range of comments and views on where we are with our economy.

I commend my colleague Mr Gordon Lyons for opening the debate. He emphasised the commitment to growing the economy. That is what we all, collectively, want to see. If we are worth the salt of our occupations in the House, we all want to ensure that companies in our constituencies do well. The products mentioned ranged from hairbrushes —my colleague Mr Dunne extolled the merits of the company in his constituency, and you can see by the look of him that he uses one pretty regularly — *[Laughter.]* — to a variety of other businesses. Members referred to Wrightbus in North Antrim, of which we are rightly proud across the world because of what it does for Northern Ireland's manufacturing and the reputation of manufacturing in the United Kingdom. Last week, I had a great opportunity to accompany the First Minister in visiting Christies Direct in Ballymoney. The company, based in Northern Ireland, is going beyond the bounds of its ability to sell its products and has become the second-most-visited website in the world after Walmart.

It is based in Ballymoney. That is a great credit to a local business that is taking on, on the world stage through the Internet, a very challenging set of circumstances.

### 5.30 pm

Let me turn to some of the comments. Mr Farry referred to a number of comments, and he said

that the referendum was frustrating. It may be frustrating, but that is what it is. He then went on to talk about us "dragging ourselves down". Who is it that is dragging us down? It is the constant, relentless naysayers and doom-and-gloom merchants who on the one hand say, "We have these wonderful companies. Look at what they do and how well they perform, and look at the great products they have", but it is all doom. They say, "We are all going to head into the abyss because of this awful decision". We have —

**Mr Lyons:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Storey:** Yes.

**Mr Lyons:** Would the Member agree with me that the reason we hear some of those comments from other parties is that they do not want Brexit to succeed? They want to be proved right, and they do not want to see the success that we are having in our economy.

**Mr Storey:** There may be an element of that, but it is also a case of wanting to have the best of both worlds. The reality for us is that we will leave the European Union. That is the reality for us as a result of the decision. If you listen to the comments by Liam Fox, you will find that he is intimating that, while the negotiations have not yet started, there will be countries that want to come and do business with the United Kingdom. There are companies that want to ensure that the opportunity to do business with the United Kingdom is still in place and enhanced and can be benefited from. That is where we need to focus our attention.

Going back to what Dr Farry said about "dragging ourselves down", we have now unshackled ourselves. Not many Members have reminded the House of the imposition of rules and regulations and red tape that have been a hindrance to business and that have, in fact, been an impediment to making progress.

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for giving way. Could he tell me under what trading scenario he envisages that there will be no rules and regulations? Does he recognise that, if he follows through on some of his party's policies on, say, immigration, he will be asking businesses to take on more regulations, such as checking people's right to work in the country?

**Mr Storey:** We have never said that all regulation is bad, but we have talked about imposition by unaccountable bureaucrats in Brussels telling businesses in Northern Ireland

and the United Kingdom how they should best operate when they are the worst. Let us remember that this is an organisation that cannot even balance its budget. This is an organisation that has the most bloated bureaucracy of any democratic — I would not even call it "democratic" —

**Mr Aiken:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Storey:** I will give way to my colleague from North Antrim. No, not the one from South Antrim.

**Mr Allister:** Would the Member agree that one of the greatest punitive impositions of the single market is that its hideous regulations apply to every company whether it exports or not and, therefore, every company in the United Kingdom is pulled down by regulations that have no relevance to it, in the sense that it is not even going to export? By escaping from the single market, we escape that hideous burden.

**Mr Storey:** The Member makes the point, and he makes it well. Five per cent of companies export, but they have to be subject to 100% of the rules and regulations, therefore —

**Mr Aiken:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Storey:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr Aiken:** The key here is the World Trade Organization. If anybody here thinks for one moment that the World Trade Organization will be easier to deal with than the EU, they are very sadly deluded. We need to get the best trade deal we can, and we must be able to do so by getting the most sensible deal we can, whether that is with the EU or going forward.

**Mr Storey:** The Member misses the point that we limit our own ability in terms of bilateral trade agreements. It seems that you must always accept the lowest common denominator in planning for the future. There is no ambition or certainly very little ambition; I did not see much ambition in the 10-point plan that was produced by the Ulster Unionist Party. My other North Antrim colleague has left the Chamber: maybe he has left because he knows what his stance was in regard to the referendum and what he was telling the voters — *[Interruption.]* — and the farmers in North Antrim. At least, we have now raised the temperature of the debate in the House. Let us — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order. The Member has about 10 seconds.

**Mr Storey:** It was all going well until I stood up. *[Laughter.]* Let us make Northern Ireland work. I believe that, unshackled from the European Union and given the negotiation of Her Majesty's Government, we have a bright future, a future that is to the benefit of all our citizens.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Member's time is up. I am rather glad I let him in. The House is in good tune.

Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

*Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 46; Noes 30.*

#### **AYES**

*Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Mrs Dobson, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Ms Hanna, Mr Kearney, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McKee, Mr McMullan, Ms Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Sheehan, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Armstrong and Mr Dickson*

#### **NOES**

*Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Lyons and Mr Robinson*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** As I indicated, amendment No 2 will now not be voted on. I have been advised by the party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 27(1A)(b), that there is agreement that we can dispense with the three-minute rule and move straight to the Division.

*calls on the Minister for the Economy to ensure that growing exports is a key part of the Northern Ireland economic strategy.*

*Adjourned at 6.02 pm.*

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 46; Noes 30.*

## **AYES**

*Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Mrs Dobson, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Ms Hanna, Mr Kearney, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McKee, Mr McMullan, Ms Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Sheehan, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Armstrong and Mr Dickson*

## **NOES**

*Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Lyons and Mr Robinson*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly welcomes the recent Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs export data for Northern Ireland, which record a growth rate of 9.5%; notes the Executive's commitment to increase the competitiveness of the economy; recognises the importance of Northern Ireland continuing to participate within the European single market to improve external sales; and*

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