



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 May 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Ministerial and Committee Chairperson Appointments

Mr Speaker: Good morning, Members. Before we proceed to today's business, I have some announcements to make. Following Mr Wells's resignation, which became effective yesterday, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson has nominated Mr Simon Hamilton to hold the office of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Having resigned as Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Hamilton affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly on 11 May. I therefore confirm that Mr Hamilton has taken up office as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Following Mr Hamilton's resignation, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson has nominated Mrs Arlene Foster to hold the office of Minister of Finance and Personnel. Having resigned as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Foster also affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly on 11 May. I therefore confirm that Mrs Foster has taken up office as Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Following Mrs Foster's resignation, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson has nominated Mr Jonathan Bell to hold the office of Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Having resigned as junior Minister, Mr Bell also affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly on 11 May. I therefore confirm that Mr Bell has taken up office as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Following Mr Bell's resignation, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson has nominated Miss Michelle McIlveen as junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Miss McIlveen also affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly on 11 May. I therefore confirm

that Miss McIlveen has taken up office as junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

I have received the following Committee resignations: Miss Michelle McIlveen as Chairperson of the Committee for Education; and Ms Paula Bradley as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The nominating officer has informed me that those vacancies will be filled as follows: Mr Peter Weir has been nominated as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education; and Mr Alex Easton has been nominated as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the eighteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the transport sector, which was held in Armagh on Wednesday 22 April 2015.

I attended the meeting along with the Regional Development Minister, Danny Kennedy, and Minister Paschal Donohoe TD, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. I chaired the meeting. I will address the agenda items for which my Department has responsibility: mutual recognition of penalty points and road user and vehicle safety; and the review of the North/South work programme as it pertains to the transport sector.

In our discussion on the review of work programmes for the transport sector, we noted the good work that is already progressing in the sector and agreed that an update will be provided to a future meeting. The Council noted the good progress made by the joint steering and working groups on issues identified with progressing the mutual recognition of penalty points, some of which are complex and difficult to resolve. We noted that the working group will seek legal advice on issues related to equality of treatment, with a view to providing an update on those issues for the November 2015 NSMC meeting. Both jurisdictions will continue to carry forward work on the handling of summonses by the courts, with a view to providing a report to the November 2015 NSMC meeting.

The Council welcomed the continued sharing of knowledge and experience between officials from both jurisdictions on the delivery of road safety measures. The Council noted progress on the development of Ireland's Road Traffic Bill 2015, which will include measures to address drug-driving and proposals to make a number of amendments to legislation regarding penalty points, written-off vehicles and mutual recognition of driver disqualifications between Ireland and the UK. Progress on our own Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill, which will include provisions to tackle drink-driving, to reform the learner and restricted driver regime and to introduce graduated driver licensing and the mandatory wearing of helmets on quads on public roads, was also noted.

We welcomed the continuing cooperation to support compliant goods haulage and passenger transport providers and target those engaged in illegal activity. We also welcomed the continued exchange between enforcement officers on the use of new technology to enforce tachograph and drivers' hours regulations. A note was made of the introduction in Ireland of a new speed limit sign for minor local roads and the publication of updated speed limit guidelines.

Finally, the Council noted the continuing engagement by officials on cross-border taxi and wedding car operations.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I thank the Minister for his statement. I appreciate that there are practical difficulties to be resolved with the mutual recognition of penalty points, but we have been hearing about that for some time. Will the Minister provide more detail on the legal advice that is being sought on issues relating to equality of treatment? Will he let us know what further progress is needed before the mutual recognition of penalty points can be implemented?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Ms Lo, the Chairperson of the Environment Committee, for that question. I share her frustration, as, I am sure, do others, at the apparent lack of progress on this very important measure, which will save lives.

However, this is complex and groundbreaking work. I am not aware of similar arrangements anywhere else in Europe. Good progress has been made by both joint steering and working groups in advancing the work on a number of the key issues identified, in particular on issues connected to equality of treatment. Officials in both jurisdictions working together have assessed that the issues, although complex, can be overcome in ways that minimise the risk of legal challenge. We are now commissioning further legal advice on those issues.

Issues remain with the processing of cases through the courts. Both jurisdictions are currently identifying suitable test cases to monitor through the respective court systems. That will allow us to identify ways of resolving those very issues. It is expected that there will be a further update in November at the next meeting of the NSMC. The investigations, although they take up a bit of time, are essential to ensure that the scheme operates effectively across jurisdictions, given our separate and, in

some instances, different driver licensing and criminal justice processes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister commit to introducing some urgency in the North/South work programme on the collating of evidence regarding the damaging, detrimental impact that the HGV road users levy has on our local economy? I know that the Minister is committed to assessing evidence, but is there any indication from him on the methodology for collecting the evidence? I have constituents who are making that point, and they want to know what to do.

Mr Speaker: There may be some confusion: I am not sure if that question relates to the follow-up statement. Can the previous contributor confirm that?

Mr McElduff: I think that it is relevant to the third paragraph, which talks about the North/South work programme as it pertains to transport sectoral.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Mr McElduff for that question on an issue that I know he has done a lot of work on.

When the HGV levy was debated in the Assembly, I indicated that the Department for Transport had given its commitment that it would consider taking mitigating action if there was evidence that the levy was causing an adverse economic impact on the island. I, in turn, made a commitment that my Department would monitor the situation and revert to DfT should evidence of such impact be found. Initially, I had hoped that we could work with DETI, utilising its ongoing research into economic pressures on businesses. However, DETI's research is unlikely to be an appropriate mechanism as it is not working to a sufficient granularity to identify the specific costs of the levy. Instead, my officials are now working with in-house economists to determine appropriate data and data-gathering requirements. That will include consideration of how we should engage with industry sectors or individual businesses to quantify impact on the economy and individual businesses.

In parallel with the work of the economists, my officials are monitoring HGV levy compliance levels. The most recent data from DVA indicates that compliance is around 50%. As levels of compliance increase, that may assist us further in identifying if there are particular

economic pressures and, hence, where that economic impact is most likely to be found.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note the progress on dealing with drink-driving in both jurisdictions, but I note in the statement that the Minister has produced, under "road user safety", reference to addressing drug-driving. Is there any progress in relation to dealing with that particularly difficult problem in both jurisdictions?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. As outlined in my statement, in Ireland's Road Traffic Bill, there is and has been progress in dealing with the serious issue of driving under the influence of drugs. At the NSMC meeting, I praised the Minister from the Republic for the work that he has done on drugs. I had to further qualify that and say that I meant the work that he has done in tackling driving on drugs. *[Laughter.]* Although we are bringing forward measures to further tackle drink-driving through our Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill, it does not yet contain anything to tackle drug-driving. However, it is an issue that I or whoever should succeed me as Minister with responsibility for road safety should certainly look at. Hopefully, at that stage, we will be able to look at what happens in the South as its legislation passes and is enforced and embedded, and we can learn from that.

10.45 am

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I am sure that Hansard is grateful for that clarification.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that he welcomed continuing cooperation to support compliant road goods haulage and drivers' hours regulations. Has the Minister identified any gaps in the success of that enforcement?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Overend for that question. I am content, as is my counterpart, that the work being done on that is extremely good and has been extremely thorough. As yet, no gaps have been identified in that important work. However, should any gaps be identified and should any Members be able to bring them to my attention, I will be happy to hear from them and address those gaps.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the statement by the Minister. Will he outline what priorities he is hoping for in the North/South ministerial sector on transport going forward? I bring the Minister's attention to a problem that we have in

West Tyrone. We have many students and workers who travel to Dublin to work or college and want to travel on Boyce buses or McGinley buses, but there is a major problem because the bus driver does not have a place to pull the bus in to pick up passengers or leave them off. It is an ongoing problem: what can be done about it?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for those questions; I might answer the first one. The initial work programme for transport was agreed at the inaugural plenary meeting in 1999 and included strategic transport planning and experience of road and rail safety programmes. Those themes remain extremely relevant, and it is generally agreed that the transport sector works well and is progressive in identifying and bringing forward mutually beneficial work. I think particularly of the good work already progressing on a range of road safety issues. Although the council has acknowledged the challenge in developing further areas of mutual benefit in the sector, Ministers Kennedy, Donohoe and I are happy to consider opportunities to identify further themes and give fresh focus to the good work that has already been progressed.

The other issue that Mr Byrne raised has arisen in a number of constituencies over a number of years. I know that action was taken by my predecessor, Alex Attwood, around the issue of cabotage so that Southern operators are now required to register vehicles in the North and establish a registered office here if they are to pick up and drop off in the North.

Mr Allister: I refer the Minister to the last two lines of his statement and ask for an assurance that any changes affecting the operation of taxis and wedding cars from the Republic in Northern Ireland will not at all prejudice fair competition by offering concessions to Republic of Ireland operators where they would meet a lesser standard of regulation than local operators. Can he give that assurance?

Mr Durkan: I can certainly give the Member that assurance. I can perhaps give him a further assurance in that I put that issue on the agenda due to concerns raised to me by Northern wedding car operators who are encountering great difficulty in carrying out their operations in the South. I have a commitment from Minister Donohoe that he will work on that.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That concludes questions on the statement.

North/South Ministerial Council: Transport

Mr Speaker: The Minister for Regional Development will now make a statement on the transport aspects of the North/South — sorry, my computer is playing up. The Minister for Regional Development will now make a statement on the transport aspects of the North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meeting. Sorry about that, Minister.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Speaker, I am content to use paper.

In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the transport sector held in Armagh on Wednesday 22 April 2015. The meeting was chaired by Minister Durkan and attended by me and Minister Donohoe. My statement will address the agenda items that relate to my Department.

Ministers welcomed the continued cooperation between the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department for Regional Development on strategic transport priorities. They also noted the opportunities for cooperation in developing the strategic road network; enhancing east-west and North/South connections; driving a modal shift to public and more sustainable modes of transport; and the potential for shared cross-border public transport services in border areas.

Ministers welcomed the continued cooperation between the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department for Regional Development on EU-related transport issues. They noted the opportunity to strengthen the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) application process for each jurisdiction and agreed to further exploration by departmental officials to develop cooperation statement templates that support project applications to the fund. We also noted the position with regard to the INTERREG programmes, including the update on the INTERREG IV funding of the Belfast-Dublin Enterprise service upgrade and Drogheda viaduct works.

Ministers welcomed the continued investment by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department for Regional Development in the promotion and development of sustainable transport options, including cycling. We also noted that Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport

officials were working with Department for Regional Development officials to scope out potential greenway projects that may be eligible for INTERREG V funding. Ministers noted the update on the work being undertaken by the Northern Ireland greenways working group on the development of cross-border greenways, and they recognised the benefits of collaboration in developing greenway networks.

On major road projects, Ministers noted that public consultation on three reports on the A5 informing the appropriate assessment process concluded in June 2014. Consultation on the fourth and final report concluded in November 2014. They noted that work on new draft statutory orders and a new environmental statement was now complete. When published, they will be subject to public consultation, which may lead to a further public inquiry. Ministers confirmed that both Governments remained committed to the A5 scheme. Ministers welcomed the fact that construction work on the A8 project was progressing well and that the road was expected to be open to traffic by the end of May 2015.

The Council agreed to hold its next transport meeting in November 2015.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he give more detail on the development of cross-border greenways?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. My Department's cycling unit has begun work on scoping out a greenway plan for Northern Ireland, although it does not envisage being involved in the delivery or construction of the greenways. That is because my Department's statutory responsibilities relate to the public road, and the majority of these routes will be located off-road. The aim is to bring together the relevant organisations and to support and move forward on the greenway projects being developed by local authorities. The Department has set up a greenways working group to consider a strategic approach to developing greenways. The strategy will guide local authorities and other partners in the development of their plans and schemes.

Mention was made of the cooperation that we are developing on cross-border greenways. Work is ongoing to identify where we can potentially benefit from EU grant-aid assistance. I know that that will be welcomed by everyone with an interest in the development of

greenways and the enhancement of cycling as part of the cycling revolution.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. Are any joint projects being proposed to apply to Europe for possible funding under TEN-T? Further, can the Minister state whether the Southern Government have continued to commit to their money for the A5 and when we can see a start to the project?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. On his initial point, I take pride in the fact that my Department has, I think, the best record in the Executive at drawing down and seeking out EU funding to assist with projects and schemes. We will continue to do that. There are opportunities where we can work with the Republic of Ireland on such projects, and I have already mentioned the cross-border opportunities for greenways.

I know that the Member has a long-standing and continuing interest in the A5. I intend to circulate a paper to Executive colleagues on the A5 in the coming weeks. The next step will be the publication of the draft vesting orders and draft direction order. A new environmental statement for the scheme will be published at the same time as those draft orders. Publication of the new environmental statement and the draft orders will be followed by a further consultation period of a minimum of six weeks. That is likely to lead to the need for a further public inquiry on the scheme.

The Member asked about the contribution from the Republic of Ireland Government. Those indications are still in place. The outline of work that I have made clear this morning confirms that timescales are dependent on all these things being carried out and, of course, to the full satisfaction of the judgement of Mr Justice Stephens in the judicial review a couple of years ago.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin. I thank the Minister for his statement. He will be aware of projects that I have an interest in that are potential and actual projects in the north-west in particular. Further to Mr Byrne's question, can the Minister provide the House with any details of specific projects that the Department is pursuing through the TEN-T process?

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

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. Of course, close to the Member's heart is the A6 scheme. That is one of the projects that we

have identified to pursue EU funding opportunities for. Others potentially include the York Street interchange and the southern relief road in the Newry and south Down area. Those are opportunities that we are actively pursuing and will continue to pursue.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the work that he is doing to deliver a modal shift to public and sustainable transport. Can he update the Assembly on what he is doing to improve the integration of sustainable transport, in particular to improve the carriage of bicycles on buses and trains and to include cycle provision in the upcoming Dublin Road improvement scheme?

11.00 am

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question and, indeed, for the interest that he takes, particularly in cycling. I know that he is chair of the all-party group on cycling.

I am clearly very keen to see progress made on all those issues. It is fair to say that the overall cycling infrastructure is relatively weak and needs support and investment. We will provide that as far as we can in the difficult and challenging financial circumstances that we find ourselves in. I want to encourage more sustainable modes of transport through cycling and walking, and, as we bring forward schemes, even improvement schemes, it is my intention to integrate those with the cycling strategy. The Member is aware that the initial strategy has been published. Further work continues on that, and we intend to bring forward proposals where we can see projects put in place in areas. I look forward to action on that early in 2016.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I very much welcome the confirmation that both Governments on the island remain committed to the A5 project. In earlier correspondence, the Minister indicated that, as part of the consultation process, four events would be organised, in Ballygawley, Omagh, Derry and Strabane. Have any dates or venues been agreed for those?

I also welcome the reference to cross-border greenways. Does he agree that a project for the Great Northern Railway beds, which straddle the nine counties of Ulster, could be looked at for funding through INTERREG?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his questions. I have indicated the next steps for the A5, which is the further consultation period

that will result from the publication of the environmental statement and the draft orders. As part of that, we intend to hold public consultation events. I am not sure that locations have been finally confirmed, and I may take the opportunity to write to the Member to update him on that issue.

On the greenways, progress is possible on moving forward and seeking out successfully grant aid for such schemes. I think that everyone will welcome that.

The Member had a third point that I am struggling to remember.

Mr McAleer: INTERREG funding for the railway beds.

Mr Kennedy: Yes, the beds of the old railway. I think that there are opportunities there. It is a case of whether we can work with others. Local government may want to play a role in identifying how we can bring forward projects that would enhance opportunities for other sustainable modes of transport on such greenways and old railway beds.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Minister, for your statement. To secure the economic future of this part of the land, we need good road infrastructure. Particularly on improving the economic potential of south Down, can you tell me about the latest developments in your discussions with your Southern counterparts on the Narrow Water Bridge and the southern relief road?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his question. He will realise that, at the transport sector meeting in April, there was no discussion on the Narrow Water Bridge. It was not referred to. I indicated in my earlier answer that the southern relief road is a scheme that we are seeking to take forward and that we see the benefit of submitting applications for funding to assist with it. The Member knows of my commitment to the southern relief road, even as a local representative in the area. I am keen on this and very much agree with him that the secret of economic regeneration is better connectivity throughout Northern Ireland, including south Down.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): That concludes questions on the statement.

Executive Committee Business

Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Business Committee has agreed to group these two motions into one debate. Following the debate, I will put the Question on the first motion. I will then ask the Minister to move the second motion and to put the Question on it without further debate.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Dr Farry: I will address this and the subsequent regulation.

I seek the Assembly's approval of the Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, which are subject to the confirmatory procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. They were made on 2 March 2015 and came into operation on 15 March 2015. The regulations need to be considered as part of a larger set of 24 associated statutory rules that together provide for significant enhancements to current employment rights for new working parents. The enhanced provisions have been made possible by the Work and Families Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which received Royal Assent in January of this year. I believe that it will be helpful if I provide Members with a brief reminder of the background and context to the changes associated with the Act. This will be relevant to the consideration of all 11 regulations that I will bring before the Assembly today.

To many Members the detail will, of course, be familiar, given the relatively recent passage of the Act. Related sets of regulations have been grouped in order to assist Members. Members should note that the remaining statutory rules forming part of the overall legislative package brought forward by my Department are subject

either to the negative procedure or, in the case of the order commencing the provisions of the Act, to no Assembly procedure. A further two statutory rules have been made by the Department for Social Development, and I thank that Department for its assistance in introducing this ambitious package of new rights for working families.

By way of brief background, the policy to which the regulations give effect was the subject of full public consultation in 2013. At the time, my Department asked for views on whether it would be appropriate to extend to Northern Ireland the system of shared parental leave and pay that was then proposed in Great Britain. The consultation also asked whether alternative options would be appropriate and sought views on the extension to all employees with 26 weeks' service of the right to request flexible working. In addition to dealing with those broad policy questions, the consultation invited specific input on the administration of any new system. The 28 substantive responses to the consultation showed substantial support for extending shared parental leave and pay to Northern Ireland and for broader entitlement to request flexible working. It was on that basis that I introduced the Work and Families Bill in April last year and, with Members' support, secured Royal Assent to the resulting Act of the Assembly in January.

It subsequently fell to officials to prepare and make operational the associated regulations to enable working parents in Northern Ireland to access the new entitlements from April of this year. The legislative package, taken as a whole, enables eligible working parents to share leave and pay entitlement in respect of children due to be born or placed for adoption on or after 5 April. Parents are now able to share leave in a way that was not possible before. The system is flexible in that it permits both parents to return to work for periods during their leave, taking time off in separate blocks. It also allows parents to be off work alternately or at that same time, depending on the needs of the family.

In introducing these rights, I have been conscious that we need a system that enables employers to balance the needs of their business with those of the parents working for them. The measures therefore include requirements about what must be included in a leave request; they set defined notice periods; they cap the number of employee notifications for leave; and they allow employers to refuse requests for multiple separate periods of leave — that is to say, periods of leave broken up by time back at work. Much of the operational

detail of shared parental leave and pay is set out in this first set of regulations, which are the subject of this motion.

The Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, which I will refer to in short as the “leave regulations”, in association with the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 — the “pay regulations” — provide the main entitlements for a mother, or adopter, and a child’s father, or adoptive parent, or a mother’s or adopter’s partner, to take shared parental leave and pay. The rights to shared parental leave and statutory shared parental pay are now statutory rights for employees with a partner who is working, or who has recently been working, whether employed or self-employed. Eligible employees are entitled to share up to 50 weeks of shared parental leave and up to 37 weeks of statutory shared parental pay.

This particular statutory rule sets out the qualifying requirements that must be satisfied by an employee, and their partner, for the employee to qualify for shared parental leave. The requirements are that the mother or adopter must be entitled to some form of maternity or adoption entitlement, have given notice to cut it short, and share the main responsibility for caring for the child with the named partner. For a parent to be eligible to take shared parental leave, they must be an employee and they must pass what is known as the “continuity of employment test”. In turn, the other parent in the family must meet another test known as the “employment and earnings test”. I will explain these tests.

To meet the continuity of employment test, the person must have worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks at the end of the fifteenth week before the week in which the child is due — or the week in which an adopter was notified of having been matched with a child for adoption — and must still be employed in the first week that shared parental leave is to be taken. For the employment and earnings test to be met, the person must have worked for at least 26 weeks in the 66 weeks leading up to the due date and have earned above the maternity allowance threshold of £30 a week in 13 of the 66 weeks. Where both parents satisfy these tests, they will both be able to share the leave.

A family can still use shared parental leave even when only one parent actually meets the eligibility criteria. For example, a self-employed parent will not be entitled to take shared parental leave but could still pass the

employment and earnings test, allowing the other parent in the family to qualify.

The regulations also set out the notice and evidence requirements which must be met for the employee to qualify for shared parental leave. The regulations further specify that shared parental leave can be taken at any time between the birth of a child, or the placement of a child for adoption or with prospective adopters, and must be taken before the child’s first birthday or the first anniversary of the placement. An eligible mother or adopter must cut short maternity or adoption leave for shared parental leave to become available. She or he may do this — as is the case now — by simply returning to work, or she or he may do it by giving notice to curtail the leave at a specified future date. The curtailment of maternity or adoption leave and pay is dealt with in separate regulations. As with similar statutory arrangements, employers are free to go beyond the statutory minimum requirements in an effort to attract and retain employees.

It is important that I also draw Members’ attention a few wider points. Equality is a key driver behind the shared parental leave and pay package as a whole. The new rights are a contribution to enabling cultural change in how women’s and men’s caring responsibilities are perceived vis-à-vis their role in the workplace. The perception that women are the carers, and therefore the only ones who will be absent from work following childbirth or adoption, need no longer be the accepted norm. Shared parental leave and pay will help challenge hidden prejudices that may adversely impact on women’s career prospects. Likewise, for those men who want to take an active role in childcare, these enhanced legislative provisions now enable them to do so from the point of their child’s birth or placement for adoption.

I should highlight that none of this erodes the protections that are already in place for employed mothers. An employed mother will continue to be entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave and 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay or maternity allowance. It is only if she chooses to do so that an eligible mother can now end her statutory maternity leave early and opt to take shared parental leave. As is the case throughout this legislative package, similar provisions also apply to adopters and adoption leave. For fathers, paid paternity leave of two weeks will continue to be available, both to birth fathers and a mother’s or adopter’s partner.

11.15 am

I turn now to the regulatory impact of the measures. The projected set-up and

administration costs to employers are relatively small. A regulatory impact assessment, carried out on the basis of the corresponding exercise in Great Britain, has identified only modest costs in respect of the package of new rights for working parents. Across all regulations I bring before the Assembly today, the assessment anticipates one-off transitional costs across all employers totalling £1.5 million, which relates to the cost of management time and changes to payroll and human resources systems in implementing the new right. Annually recurring costs of three quarters of a million pounds are expected to be associated with parents exercising the new rights in respect of adoption leave and pay, antenatal appointments, unpaid parental leave and shared parental leave and pay.

I want to reiterate what I said on many occasions, namely that these measures are not only good for parents but for business and the economy. By increasing employees' abilities to balance their work and family commitments, the new rights should improve employers' ability to retain their best people. By working with their employees to develop practical plans for sharing leave and pay with a partner, employers may also see key workers being absent for shorter periods of time as shared childcare becomes a social norm.

Whilst employers have generally been positive about shared parental leave and pay, I do, however, take on board concerns that they have raised about the practical implications of operating the new systems. Those concerns were echoed by the Committee for Employment and Learning, which sought assurances that my Department would engage with employers to ensure that supporting guidance materials meet their needs.

The Department has published detailed guidance, which was shared with employers before being finalised. We will continue to work closely with key stakeholders to ensure that all the guidance materials are fit for purpose. My officials have also delivered a number of free seminars on shared parental leave and pay, in conjunction with the Labour Relations Agency, to employers and trade union members. Those have been well received. Further sessions in association with the Labour Relations Agency and the Equality Commission are scheduled in the next few weeks.

I can assure the House that my Department fully appreciates that some employers may experience challenges. My Department is therefore committed to continued engagement

with stakeholders as shared parental leave and pay arrangements become embedded.

I have attempted to set out for Members the key features of the rights to shared parental leave and pay in respect of the first motion, and I will, over the course of the session, deal separately and succinctly with the provisions of the other regulations as the remaining motions on shared parental leave and pay are put to the House this morning. However, I do appreciate that the regulations are specific and technical in places. I have no difficulty if Members wish to explore any issues in broader terms, and I will seek to address those issues.

I will briefly turn to the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, which are also part of this initial debate. They are also subject to the confirmatory procedure as laid down in the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

The pay regulations, in association with the leave regulations already considered, provide an entitlement for a mother/adopter and a child's father/adoptive parent or a mother's or adopter's partner to take shared parental leave and pay. Those particular regulations set out the qualifying requirements that must be satisfied by an employee and also by their partner for the employee to qualify for statutory shared parental pay. They also set out the notice and evidence requirements that must be met for employees and agency workers to qualify.

Like shared parental leave, shared statutory parental pay can be taken at any time between the birth of a child, or the placement of a child for adoption or with prospective adopters, and the child's first birthday or the first anniversary of the placement. Statutory shared parental pay is comprised of untaken statutory maternity pay or maternity allowance, or untaken statutory adoption pay. An eligible mother or adopter must curtail her entitlement to those statutory payments in order for statutory shared parental pay to become available. She or he may do that, as now, by simply returning to work. Alternatively, she or he may do it by giving a curtailment notice at any specified future date. The curtailment of maternity or adoption leave and pay is facilitated by separate regulations. Statutory shared parental pay is currently paid at £139.58 per week or 90% of an employee's average weekly earnings, whichever is lower. If the mother or adopter curtails their entitlement to maternity adoption pay or maternity allowance before they have used their full entitlement, statutory

shared parental pay can be claimed for any remaining weeks.

To qualify for statutory shared parental pay, a parent must pass the continuity of employment test and have earned an average salary of the lower earnings limit of £111 for the eight weeks prior to the fifteenth week before the expected due date or matching date. The other parent in the family must meet the employment and earnings test already outlined in respect of the leave regulations. As with the leave arrangements, employers are of course free to go beyond the statutory minimum pay requirements where they consider that this will benefit the recruitment and retention of employees.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their scrutiny of the two statutory rules. I am also grateful to the Committee for its recommendation that these regulations be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I thank the Minister for outlining the detail of the rules and regulations. I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee for Employment and Learning's views on the statutory rules relating to the Work and Families Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank the Minister and his officials for their engagement with the Committee during the briefing on all the statutory rules, as there were a considerable number of them.

The Committee was actively involved in the passage of the Work and Families Act, which received Royal Assent in January. In its detailed consideration at Committee Stage, it became apparent that the regulations, not the Act, would provide the detail of how the main rights operated in practice. The Committee raised a number of issues at Committee Stage, but it was content to ensure that these were covered by the statutory rules.

As the Minister has grouped the statutory rules, I will speak briefly on each to confirm the Committee's position. The Committee considered the issues raised at Committee Stage when the proposals for these regulations were considered at its meeting on 11 February 2015 and agreed that it was content with the proposals for the statutory rules.

The Committee, at its meeting on 18 March 2015, agreed that it was content with the Department's statutory rule, the Shared

Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, and agreed to recommend that the rule be confirmed by the Assembly.

At a meeting on 25 March 2015, the Committee agreed that it was content with the Department's statutory rule, the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, and agreed to recommend that it be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Rogers: My SDLP colleagues and I welcomed the Work and Families Act. In turn, we welcome and support all these regulations. The Work and Families Act was designed to help to address inequality by taking steps towards creating a culture of shared parenting. I welcome these regulations, which provide for qualifying birth parents, adopters and intended parents in surrogacy arrangements to qualify for shared parental leave.

Dr Farry: I will be much briefer this time, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, I thank the Committee Chair for setting out the Committee's position. I thank him, the Committee staff and all the members for the very expeditious way in which they addressed these very important and very complex regulations. The Chair was right to identify that the regulations are very much at the heart of giving effect to the Act and are where the key detail is contained. I am confident that we got these right. Of course, we remain open to further consideration should that view change over the years ahead. I welcome Mr Rogers's comments endorsing the broad thrust of the Act and on the importance of the regulations to give effect to it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I remind Members that I will put the Question on each of the two motions listed on the Order Paper separately.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The next three items in the Order Paper are motions regarding paternity and adoption leave, maternity and adoption leave and maternity and parental leave. The Business Committee has agreed to group the three motions into one debate. Following the debate, I will put the Question on the first motion. I will then ask the Minister to move the second motion and put the Question on it without further debate. I will do likewise for the third motion.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That the Maternity and Adoption Leave (Curtailed of Statutory Rights to Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

That the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Dr Farry: The purpose of the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 is to amend the Paternity and Adoption Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 to take account of the policy changes being brought forward in association with the Work and Families Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. It is the first in a group of regulations that have general application and that include amendments to ensure that the system of shared parental leave and pay

operates seamlessly alongside other statutory rights for working parents.

The regulations remove the requirement that employees must be employed continuously by their employer for 26 weeks or more before being able to access the right to statutory adoption leave and make statutory adoption leave a day one employment right. That is an important change. It aligns adoption leave with maternity leave and, importantly, prevents situations arising whereby, because neither parent is entitled to adoption leave, the adoption cannot go ahead. Without the measure, a child might not be adopted at all because there is no one available to provide care. Alternatively, a child could remain in care for longer than necessary.

The regulations also adjust the right to return to work following paternity or adoption leave to ensure that account is taken of situations in which employees have accessed the new right to shared parental leave. They further make adoption leave available to foster parents who are prospective adopters if they have been notified that a child is to be placed with them as part of a fostering for adoption arrangement. They also confer the right to paternity leave on the spouses, civil partners and partners of prospective adopters in that situation.

The regulations also prevent paternity leave from being taken for an adoption placement if such leave has already been taken at an earlier stage as part of a fostering for adoption process for the same child. They achieve the same end in relation to adoption leave, so that it may also not be taken on two occasions for the same child. They also prevent paternity leave from being taken if a person has already taken paid time off to attend an adoption appointment for the child and is thus the adopter or has already taken shared parental leave.

Finally, the regulations protect employees who suffer a detriment or who are dismissed because of time off work for antenatal or adoption appointments. The right to take time off for these appointments was introduced by the 2015 Act, which amended the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 to make relevant provision.

The Maternity and Adoption Leave (Curtailed of Statutory Rights to Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 enable an expectant mother, a mother on maternity leave, an adopter or a prospective adopter to give notice to end his or her relevant entitlement on a specific future date. When such entitlements have been curtailed, the balance of the untaken

period of leave may be taken as shared parental leave if the parents satisfy entitlement and notification criteria.

The benefit of curtailing leave, rather than the mother or adopter simply returning to work, is that it enables the number of weeks of maternity or adoption leave that will be untaken at the date to be known in advance. It also allows a child's father or the mother's or adopter's partner to start taking shared parental leave whilst the mother or adopter remains on maternity or adoption leave. This enables both parents to be at home together with the child from the earliest stages following birth or placement for adoption. Separate regulations establish entitlement to curtail statutory maternity pay, maternity allowance or statutory adoption pay in order to allow statutory shared parental pay to arise.

11.30 am

The Maternity and Parental Leave etc. (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 amend the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. The purpose of doing so is to remove the limitation on the right to unpaid parental leave so that it may be taken at any time before a child's eighteenth birthday. Members should note that the right to unpaid parental leave is entirely distinct from the right to shared parental leave, which is the main subject of today's motions.

The regulations also amend the right to return to work after maternity and parental leave, to reflect the introduction of shared parental leave by the Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

The effect will be that unpaid parental leave will be able to be taken at any point up a child's eighteenth birthday, including immediately before, after, or in between periods of other family-related leave. Extending to the child's eighteenth birthday the time until which an employee may exercise entitlement to unpaid parental leave reflects the fact that caring responsibilities do not end when the child reaches five or starts school.

Again, I pass on my thanks to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their scrutiny of these rules.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I will be brief once again, as the Minister has already outlined the detail of the statutory rules

in this group that deal with maternity, paternity and adoption leave.

The Committee considered the issues raised at Committee Stage of the Bill when the proposals for these regulations were considered at its meeting on 11 February and agreed that it was content with the proposals for the statutory rules, but requested that the Department provide more detail on the proposal for the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015. The Department returned to the Committee on 18 February, and it was agreed that the Committee was content with the proposed statutory rule.

At the meeting on 11 February, the Committee was content with the proposals for the Maternity and Adoption Leave (Curtailed of Statutory Rights to Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

At its meeting on the 18 March, the Committee agreed that it was content with the Department's statutory rules and agreed to recommend that the rules be confirmed by the Assembly.

Dr Farry: I thank all the Members who spoke — in particular, the Chair. I thank the Committee for its support of this particular set of motions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I remind Members that I will put the Question on each of the three motions listed on the Order Paper separately.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

Maternity and Adoption Leave (Curtailed of Statutory Rights to Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Maternity and Adoption Leave (Curtailed of Statutory Rights to Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Maternity and Parental Leave etc. (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The next six items on the Order Paper are motions regarding shared parental leave, shared parental pay and the application of employment rights to parental order cases and adoptions from overseas. The Business Committee has agreed to group these six motions into one debate. Following the debate, I will put the Question on the first motion. I will then ask the Minister to move the second motion and I will put the Question on it without further debate. I will do likewise for the remaining four motions.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107G and 107I to Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

That the Shared Parental Leave and Paternity and Adoption Leave (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

That the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

That the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107A, 107B, 107G, 107I, 112A and 112B to Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

That the Paternity, Adoption and Shared Parental Leave (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Dr Farry: The Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 modify the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 to provide an entitlement to statutory shared parental pay for qualifying individuals adopting from overseas and reflect the different triggers and qualification points that exist in cases of adoption from overseas. This is the first in the final group of regulations before the House today.

This group of regulations adjusts the application of the key shared parental leave and pay regulations to ensure that the rights that they confer are also available to those whose journey to becoming parents has been via a slightly different route. This group of regulations caters specifically for parents who have adopted their child from overseas or who have become parents using a surrogacy arrangement. For the purposes of these specific regulations and others concerned with adoptions from overseas, an adoption from overseas is defined as an adoption of a child who enters Northern Ireland from outside the United Kingdom in connection with or for the purposes of adoption which does not involve the placement of the child for adoption under the law of any part of the United Kingdom. The modifications that these regulations apply relate to dates and evidential requirements that are relevant to the entitlement and notification of statutory shared parental pay in adoption cases.

The sole purpose of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107G and 107I to Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 is to modify existing powers in primary legislation to allow the making of regulations giving entitlement to shared parental leave to employees who are adopting from overseas. Such regulations are made separately.

The Shared Parental Leave and Paternity and Adoption Leave (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 modify the Maternity and Adoption Leave (Curtailed of Statutory Rights to Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 so that each appropriately reflects entitlement to shared parental leave for qualifying individuals adopting from overseas and the different triggers and qualification points that exist in these cases. They also amend the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Adoption from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 so that those regulations incorporate changes equivalent to those made to the Paternity and Adoption Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 in relation to births and adoptions in Northern Ireland by the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

The Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 modify the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 in cases where a person has applied with another person for a parental order under section 54 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008. Under that section, a court may make an order providing for a child of a surrogate mother to be treated as the child of the applicants for the order if certain conditions are satisfied. The modifications are to provide an entitlement to shared parental pay in respect of adoption, modified in a way that provides different triggers and qualification points to recognise that the statutory pay relates to the birth of a child and not an adoption.

The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107A, 107B, 107G, 107I, 112A and 112B to Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 apply and modify existing powers to allow the making of regulations to give an eligible employee entitlement to statutory adoption leave, paternity leave and shared parental leave if that employee has a child born with the help of a surrogate and the employee is a parental order parent.

As stated before, a parental order parent is someone who, on the day of the child's birth, intends to apply for a parental order under section 54 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 with another person in respect of the child and expects the court to make such an order, or someone who obtains such an order.

The Paternity, Adoption and Shared Parental Leave (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 rely, in part, on enabling powers modified by the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107A, 107B, 107G, 107I, 112A and 112B to Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015. The regulations modify the Paternity and Adoption Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002, the Maternity and Adoption Leave (Curtailed of Statutory Rights to Leave) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Shared Parental Leave Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015. The purpose of the modifications is to provide entitlement to adoption, paternity and shared parental leave to qualifying parental order parents. The amendments provide different triggers and qualification points to recognise that the leave relates to the birth of a child born with the help of a surrogate and not an adoption.

Again, I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their scrutiny of these rules.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning):

These six statutory rules deal with adoption from overseas and parental order cases in particular. The Committee considered the issues raised at the Committee Stage when the proposals for the regulations were considered at its meeting on 11 February, and it agreed that it was content with the proposals for the statutory rules. On 18 March, the Committee agreed that it was content with four of the departmental statutory rules and agreed to recommend that the rules be confirmed by the Assembly. On 25 March, the Committee agreed that it was content with two of the departmental statutory rules and agreed to recommend that the rules be confirmed by the Assembly.

Dr Farry: Again, I thank the Chair for his comments and confirmation of the Committee's response, and I congratulate Members on following all that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I remind Members that I will put the Question on each of the six motions listed on the Order Paper separately.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107G and 107I to Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107G and 107I to Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Shared Parental Leave and Paternity and Adoption Leave (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Shared Parental Leave and Paternity and Adoption Leave (Adoptions from Overseas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107A, 107B, 107G, 107I, 112A and 112B to Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Application of Articles 107A, 107B, 107G, 107I, 112A and 112B to Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

Paternity, Adoption and Shared Parental Leave (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Resolved:

That the Paternity, Adoption and Shared Parental Leave (Parental Order Cases) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved. — [Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning).]

11.45 am

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Members will take their ease for a moment while we change the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Committee Business

Committee for Social Development: Report of Inquiry into Allegations Arising from BBC NI 'Spotlight' Programme

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to two hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for Social Development on phase 3 of its inquiry into allegations, arising from a BBC NI Spotlight programme aired on 3 July 2013, of impropriety or irregularity relating to NIHE managed contracts and consideration of any resulting actions [NIA 222/11-16], which deals specifically with decision-making relating to the award, modification and cancellation of NIHE maintenance contracts to establish any impropriety and, in particular, whether the actions of Ministers were appropriate.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend the motion to the House. Members will be aware that the inquiry was initiated following a 'Spotlight' investigation in July 2013 that made a number of serious allegations in relation to the actions of the former Minister for Social Development Mr Nelson McCausland. Members will also recall that those allegations were so serious that the day after the broadcast the former Minister appeared before the Committee. At that meeting, the Committee agreed to hold an inquiry into the allegations, the terms of reference for which were subsequently agreed in October 2013.

Before outlining the findings of the report, I will say a few words about the inquiry process. This was the first time that a Statutory Committee of the Assembly carried out an inquiry of this nature. That presented difficulties in how the Committee conducted the inquiry, and we frequently required legal advice and discussion by the Committee on specific matters of procedure. That took time and resulted in progress being delayed. Indeed, some comment has been made about the

length of time the inquiry has taken, but I point out that it has essentially been three inquiries in one, because there were three distinct elements to the terms of reference.

Members will know that the Committee has already produced two inquiry reports. Phase 1 of the inquiry has already been debated by the Assembly. The key conclusion of that report was that Mr McCausland had, in fact, deliberately misled the Committee for Social Development.

The Committee published its report on phase 2 on 13 March 2015, and, overall, the Committee agreed that good progress had been made on the range of issues relating to procurement, governance and contractual management in the Housing Executive and the Department but that significant work remains to be done. The Committee will, obviously, monitor that in the time ahead.

Today the Committee is, obviously, asking the House to note its report on phase 3 of the inquiry, which deals with decision-making relating to the award, modification and cancellation of Housing Executive maintenance contracts to establish any impropriety or irregularity and, in particular, whether Ministers' actions were appropriate.

I suppose a positive outcome of the inquiry is that a number of lessons have been learned from the experience that the Committee believes the Assembly and the Executive should consider to ensure that proper procedures and accountability mechanisms are in place, should this type of inquiry ever be necessary again.

This was a new type of inquiry, so the current procedures for obtaining information from the Department proved problematic from day one. Procedures require that all departmental evidence relating to a Committee inquiry must be authorised for release by the relevant Minister. That may suffice under normal circumstances but, in the Committee's view, presents a clear conflict of interest in the case of an inquiry into the actions of a Minister. The Committee also showed considerable flexibility in accommodating witnesses, who at times were unable to attend as originally scheduled and that, of course, also contributed to a delay in the inquiry.

Allegations of political interference in the Housing Executive, potential breaches of the ministerial code of conduct and potential misleading of the Assembly are very serious indeed. For that reason, the Committee was

committed to gathering all relevant evidence to ensure that this was very much an evidence-based inquiry. Contrary to some statements that have been made, this was never a case of finding against the Minister and then going in search of evidence to support that position. This phase of the inquiry was a difficult process for all concerned. At times, it was uncomfortable hearing the evidence, and harder still when the evidence received from witnesses was of a contradictory nature. In such instances, the Committee agreed to take further evidence from those witnesses under oath or by affirmation.

On a number of occasions, the Department sought to have departmental witnesses accompanied by a legal adviser during evidence sessions. Following legal and procedural advice, the Committee ultimately rejected such requests. Given that the requests were made by the Department, not by named individuals and that the reasons for requiring legal advice were never made clear, some members viewed the departmental interventions as little more than delaying tactics, designed to hamper rather than assist the Committee.

The amount of evidence provided to the Committee by the Department, the Housing Executive and the BBC was vast. The Committee received written evidence and held 17 oral evidence sessions. During the collation of phase 3 evidence, the Committee became aware that the Department had not supplied at least some papers on behalf of the Housing Executive, and the Committee found that most unsatisfactory. However, of particular concern to members was what we described as stonewalling by the Department and the former Minister in the independent fact-finding exercise into the actions of Mr McCausland's special adviser, Stephen Brimstone.

While it was notified in September 2013 that the exercise had been completed, the Committee was only informed in September 2014 of Mr McCausland's decision not to initiate any further action. That was the case despite correspondence with the Department over that period seeking clarification on the outcome of the exercise. A key recommendation of the fact-finding report was that a formal disciplinary investigation should be initiated into the special adviser's actions. Despite that, the former Minister decided that no further action was required. That, in our view, is clearly holding accountability in contempt.

Members will also be aware that the Committee engaged with the current Minister over a period

of several weeks to seek the release of the report. That was not resolved entirely to the Committee's satisfaction, as the Minister provided only a redacted version. However, I place on record that I have some sympathy with the current Minister, who inherited this situation from Mr McCausland and his special adviser. I also recognise that this was a difficult process for the present Minister, given the challenge that the inquiry presented to his party colleagues and to his trying to maintain good working relations with the Committee on legislative and policy issues. I am glad to say that he has diligently continued to do so.

Indeed, I personally argued with and to the Committee that we should not pursue the current Minister through the courts for failing to produce the full, unredacted fact-finding report but should instead draw our own conclusions, based on what was obviously a vast amount of evidence that we had received, including the redacted fact-finding report. The Committee also made clear that it would have had no hesitation in pursuing the matter had the former Minister remained in place. Ultimately, the Committee took the road of drawing its own conclusions, but that does not detract from the continuing lack of transparency around the actions of a serving senior — temporary — civil servant. In the public interest, that needs to be resolved.

The Committee also encountered some difficulty in its engagement with the BBC. Some members were deeply annoyed by the BBC's refusal to give oral evidence. However, the Committee acknowledges that the organisation provided a significant amount of written material to the inquiry. While it regretted that the BBC would not provide oral evidence, the Committee also recognised the wider implications for the organisation had it done so.

The seriousness of the allegations led the Committee to establish guidelines on procedural fairness for its inquiry, underpinned by legal advice, to ensure witnesses had opportunity to state their case. In accordance with the guidelines, the Committee forwarded the draft report to those who were adversely referred to in it, to allow them to provide comment prior to publication. Comments received from Mr Brimstone are included in the report appendices. On careful consideration, the Committee did not accept the points raised by him in his response. Mr McCausland did not provide any response to the Committee.

DUP members of the Committee opposed the findings of the report and produced an alternative report that was not agreed by the

Committee: I want to put that on record. However, the Committee agreed to include that report in the appendices to the Committee report that you have in front of you today.

I hope that all objective, reasonable people will agree that the process that I have just outlined reflects the Committee's aim to be fair and accommodating to witnesses and members alike; that there has, throughout the inquiry, been a painstaking and detailed process of evidence-gathering and careful consideration of that evidence and the different views around the Committee table; and that the Committee has had to address significant procedural and legal issues to reach this point.

The central issue for the Committee to consider was the action taken by the former Minister following his decision to meet East Belfast DUP MLAs and representatives of Red Sky in June 2011. In particular, the Committee considered whether Mr McCausland's subsequent request that the Housing Executive board consider extending the termination notice constituted impropriety or irregularity or whether the actions of the Minister were appropriate. The Committee noted that Department officials advised him against attending the meeting on the basis that it was an ongoing contractual matter between the Housing Executive and Red Sky. The Committee concluded that, although the Minister was notionally free to meet whomever he chose, his attendance at the meeting was imprudent, particularly as Red Sky was in administration and the administrator, BDO, was not present.

The Committee agreed that the Minister's position, as indicated in the note of the meeting, that he would like to have the administrator in place until the end of August to allow all issues relating to the handover of contracts to be considered and that, during that time, the proposed new company might also be able to progress matters indicated that he sought to have the termination date extended, which would give time for a new company, referred to in evidence as Newco, to be established and to be in a position to bid for the maintenance contracts in a new procurement exercise. Whether it was his intention or not, the Minister's decision to seek to have the termination date of the Red Sky contract extended impacted on the existing contractual framework to transfer contracts to adjacent contractors. That was a process that the Housing Executive had already initiated, and it potentially provided a commercial advantage to a newly reconstituted Newco in a forthcoming procurement exercise. In relation to his request to the chair of the Housing Executive board that

the termination date of the Red Sky contract should be extended from July to allow an open procurement competition, the actions of the Minister are considered by the Committee as evidence that he became involved with contractual matters that, as advised by his officials, were outwith his responsibility and rested solely with the Housing Executive and the administrator, BDO.

The Committee considered the possible motivation behind Mr McCausland's actions to seek to have the termination date extended. While he maintained that it was to ensure that similar problems were not present in the contractors to whom the contracts would be transferred, the Committee could not accept that it was reasonable for a Minister simply to ignore the independent, well-documented issues with Red Sky and allow it to carry on its contracts while such an investigation took place. That would be irresponsible at best.

The Committee noted evidence from Mr McPeake, the director of housing and regeneration and acting deputy chief executive at the time, who said of a meeting on 28 April 2011 with DUP MLAs:

"I did not get the impression that the political representatives were unhappy with us terminating the contract because their workmanship was poor. They were more concerned about the fact that the decision happened in the heels of an election".

He went on to say:

"Equally, they expressed worries about the effect of the termination on employment."

The Committee also noted that the fact-finding report records Mr Brimstone as saying that he made the now well-reported telephone call to Councillor Palmer in order to brief her fully on Minister McCausland's position on the matter, which was reflective of the party's overall position. He is also recorded as stating that he asked Councillor Palmer to consider and reflect the party position to the board so that it understood and was aware of the Minister's position. Mr Brimstone also stated that he was initially unaware who Red Sky but that

"just prior to joining the Department, it became a big issue for elections in east Belfast".

When, during oral evidence, the former managing director of Red Sky was asked to

remind the Committee of how the meeting came about, he said:

"Norman Hayes had contact with one of the local MLAs, Robin Newton, and prevailed upon him to see if he could bring any influence to bear in political circles for the termination to be delayed while we made the case".

The Committee heard extensive and conflicting evidence about the phone call that was made by the Minister's special adviser to Councillor Palmer about her participation at the special Housing Executive board meeting. The Committee noted Mr Brimstone's proclaimed inability to recollect certain details surrounding that phone call and his refusal to answer related questions. Importantly, in contrast to Mr Brimstone's evidence, the Committee found Councillor Palmer's evidence on the matter to be consistent, convincing and compelling. In particular and perhaps crucially, the Committee considered that Councillor Palmer had also provided supporting evidence in the form of five redacted drafts of an apology that indicated that the only issue discussed was the termination of the Red Sky contracts. While Mr Brimstone refuted the evidence that Councillor Palmer provided, he did not provide any further material to support his position on the basis that it related to "internal party matters".

12.00 noon

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I do not want to give way because I will not have enough time, Dolores. I am sorry about that.

A prerequisite for holding public office is to accept that one must be accountable for one's actions in that role. To underpin that fundamental requirement, there must be appropriate mechanisms in place to ensure that holders of public office can be held accountable. While there is currently a mechanism to investigate allegations in relation to the conduct of MLAs, no such equivalent mechanism is available for investigating alleged misconduct by Ministers. The Committee believes that procedures for establishing a mechanism for investigation and consideration of the findings of any subsequent report on allegations of inappropriate conduct made against Ministers should be taken forward as a matter of urgency. As per the Committee's terms of reference for the inquiry, had such a mechanism been in place, the Committee would have had no hesitation in referring the

matter for consideration to the appropriate authorities, given the serious nature of the conclusions. The Committee considers it entirely inappropriate that the decision on whether to take forward a formal disciplinary investigation of the actions of a special adviser rests with the appointing Minister and considers that this procedure needs to be urgently reviewed.

The Committee also calls on the current Minister to publish the fact-finding report in full and, in the interests of accountability and transparency, to review the decision not to initiate the recommended formal disciplinary investigation of the actions of the special adviser. The Committee is of the opinion that the existing Civil Service guidelines and mechanisms for challenging Ministers in relation to their becoming involved in operational or contractual matters are not sufficiently robust and need to be reviewed urgently.

On the key issue under consideration, the Committee has concluded that the Minister acted inappropriately in seeking to have the Red Sky termination notice extended. On the basis of the evidence, the Committee has also been driven to conclude that the actions of the Minister to seek to have the Red Sky contract termination notice extended were politically motivated. The Committee concluded that, had the Housing Executive board acceded to Mr McCausland's request, it would have effectively reinstated the contract to an organisation that had lost the trust and confidence of the Housing Executive and facilitated the interests of a private organisation —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Ms P Bradley: I rise as a member of the Committee for Social Development. I am thankful that we have finally got to the stage of debating the issue in the House after what has been almost two long years of work, evidence-gathering and listening quite often over and over again to the same evidence-gathering and coming to the same conclusions. In my opinion, the past two years would have been better spent getting on with the programme of DSD and achieving some of the goals that we wanted to achieve in this mandate. We have now left ourselves a very short timescale to achieve some of that.

I will start off by saying that, when the Committee began to investigate the

appropriateness of the actions of the former Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, in relation to the termination of the Red Sky contract, it became clear very quickly that certain members of the Committee brought with them a preconceived idea about the events that they were being asked to investigate. That being the case, in my opinion, any report would be extremely biased and would be based not on the evidence before them but rather on that presented by a television programme. There was no premise of "innocent until proven guilty" but, rather, trial by media. With that in mind, I find that I cannot support the main report tabled by the Committee but, instead, support the findings in the minority report, which was included in the appendix of the main report.

The first point that the minority report investigates is that the former Minister had acted appropriately in attending meetings with East Belfast MLAs. It is my belief that it was contained in the evidence that the Minister had checked the legality of such a meeting and, therefore, he attended in an overt attempt to ensure that his actions were correct.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: No. The Member will have plenty of time of his own to discuss it.

The advice that the former Minister, Nelson McCausland, received was that he was free to meet whomever he chose. According to the permanent secretary, that was correct and the Minister simply had to be cautious about what he discussed at any meetings and his role at meetings. I, therefore, agree that, in that respect, the former Minister was acting within the remit of his authority.

Prior to the meeting, the former Minister received advice about the limitations of his role at the meeting. He was informed that the cautious approach was appropriate when discussing any contractual affairs. The evidence received was that the former Minister was again overt in the meeting, making it transparent that the issues involved were a matter purely between the administrator and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. That ensured that those present should have been aware that the former Minister's attendance was merely in a role to listen to concerns as per the advice he had received. Again, I agree with the minority report that, in this respect, the former Minister acted appropriately.

In light of what the former Minister had heard at the meetings, Mr McCausland corresponded with relevant personnel advising that he felt that

a forensic investigation should be made of other contractors in order to avoid a repeat of the issue experienced by Red Sky. It would appear, through the evidence received by the Committee, that the former Minister's actions were motivated purely by the desire to ensure value for money for the taxpayer and the public purse — a role that all of us in the Assembly are charged with. I agree with the minority report that the former Minister acted appropriately in that matter also. In order to facilitate this aim being met, the former Minister therefore requested that the Red Sky contract should be extended beyond 14 July 2011. That was merely a request, not a direction, and therefore was not to give any private company an unfair advantage. It was also noted that the former Minister always referred to the awarding of contracts through an open procurement procedure.

The BBC 1 programme made serious allegations that the former Minister had inappropriately acted in his role as Minister, bringing political interference into the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. On examining the evidence, I cannot support a report with that view. Indeed, I believe that the preponderance of the evidence suggests that the actions of the former Minister in asking the Housing Executive, in partnership with the administrator, to consider extending the termination had the best outcome for Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants. It is my belief that the former Minister, at all times, strived to ensure openness and transparency in his dealings, taking advice when necessary and working at all times —

Mr Speaker: Time is almost up.

Ms P Bradley: — to benefit those we are elected to represent.

Mrs D Kelly: Sadly, few organisations or individuals come out of the report with any good light being shone on them with, I have to say, the honourable exception of Councillor Jenny Palmer. In a nutshell, the Committee believed Jenny Palmer's account of what happened in relation to her conversations with Mr Stephen Brimstone, who said, "Put the party first". It is with some regret that I note that Ms Bradley, in her contribution, has also put the party first, rather than the evidence. The House is supposed to look objectively and hold to account Ministers and Departments in relation to their stewardship of public funds, and the Committee's inquiry has found that there was political interference at the highest level by the

former Minister Nelson McCausland and, indeed, his special adviser.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will.

Mr Allister: In fact, in terms of putting the party first, has it now not reached the absolute dregs, with Councillor Palmer being disciplined for daring to tell the truth to the Committee?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I could not have put it any better myself. I was astonished to read in the media that Councillor Palmer, rather than being held up as a shining example of a good representative with the values that a representative should have, hold and display, is now being crucified by the DUP for standing up for what is right and proper. Despite the efforts of the Members opposite in their minority report and, no doubt, in their later contributions, the former Minister Alex Attwood and former Minister Margaret Ritchie MP came out of this as people who upheld what was right and good in terms of the investigation.

The public and we in the House owe a debt of gratitude to the BBC for the excellent investigative journalism that exposed for all to see how public money is withered away and dwindled away in the political interests of a particular political party.

Public money was filtered away to Red Sky, who actually claimed, I believe, for putting windows into an apartment block that did not even exist. You could not make it up, and we are told by Members opposite that that was good stewardship and accountability. I do not think so.

Before I go much further, I have to put on record my gratitude to the Committee staff — Dr Kevin Pelan and his team — for the excellent way in which they assisted the Committee in its inquiry. My congratulations go, too, to the Chairman, Mr Alex Maskey, who chaired the meetings in very difficult circumstances.

The Member opposite made allegations about a lack of objectivity: if you want to see a lack of objectivity, look at the minority report. That tells the public and the rest of us all that we need to know about how some Members believe that they uphold the principles of public office. I

think that they are called the Nolan principles, and I do not mean Stephen Nolan.

As the Chairman said, this was an evidence-based inquiry. It was strewn with memory lapses by the former Minister and his special adviser about what actually happened. There are questions to be asked, too, of the Department about the timeliness with which it provided information to the Committee. Mr Speaker, I hope that, in your role, you will liaise with others in the House on how we can take forward the recommendations in the report on the findings — the adverse findings in particular against the special adviser — and whether his Minister, his party colleague, has a role in determining whether to continue with the disciplinary investigation recommended by the Civil Service fact-finding investigation. Let us not forget that.

Not only were the public the losers in terms of good stewardship of the public purse but residents, particularly in east Belfast, suffered shoddy workmanship and the failure of good service delivery by their public representatives, who, after all, have put the party first yet again.

It has been a long and difficult inquiry. I regret to say that, while I can commend many members of the Committee for their conduct during the inquiry, it is nonetheless the case that certain DUP members are under investigation by the Commissioner for Standards for unparliamentary behaviour.

Mr Allister: Where is Sammy?

Mrs D Kelly: Indeed. I hear Members ask where Mr Wilson is today. Let us wait and see the commissioner's finding on his behaviour. I am sure that, in Westminster, he would not get away with the behaviour that he displayed during the Committee inquiry here.

I urge that Members follow through on the recommendations. This is a significant report and a huge piece of work by the Committee.

Mr Beggs: The report, which scrutinises the actions of the DUP Minister for Social Development, his adviser, Mr Brimstone, and, indeed, officials, is a fascinating read. If it were a political thriller, I have no doubt that it would be a bestseller, but it is not. Sadly, it is about public probity in Northern Ireland and inappropriate action by government officials and their advisers. We had ministerial meetings against the advice of civil servants and in the absence of the administrators with former Red Sky directors. Who was at that meeting? Was

it appropriate? It certainly appears not to me. They were discussing extending contracts. For whose advantage? For the advantage of those in the room who were obviously seeking to reinvent themselves, yet they were the directors who, through all the investigations by the Housing Executive, were deemed to be carrying out inappropriate actions and spending public money inappropriately.

12.15 pm

It is interesting that the Minister, when provided with an early draft of the Committee report, did not come back with any substantive issues, and neither did Mr Brimstone. I will give a couple of quotes from the report. The permanent secretary of the Department for Social Development, Mr Haire, said of that meeting:

"I had not come across something like that in my career previously."

There is also a quote from a Mr Cuddy:

"The problem was Red Sky was off the Richter scale; it stood out because of the scale of this. And the scale was identified through the forensic report."

I will concentrate on what I see as rearguard action — the circling of the wagons by the DUP, the Minister, his special adviser and, indeed, some DUP Committee members. We have heard about the minority report, but what has not been said is that there was a DUP MLA report on an investigation of the DUP Minister and the DUP special adviser. You might just think that it was a little partial and might not unearth what needed to be unearthed.

It is disappointing that the progress of the report has been delayed repeatedly because of the difficulty in obtaining evidence from the Social Development Minister. Take the issue of the Committee seeking information on the fact-finding exercise on the action of the special adviser, referred to on page 7. That exercise began in August 2013, and the Committee was advised that the report was complete on 25 September 2013. However, it took numerous requests, legal advice and, ultimately, the threat of the use of section 44(7) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 before a redacted version was provided to the Committee in February 2015, some 18 months later. Undoubtedly, that delayed the report. I suspect that many in the DUP are pleased that the report is being aired only now and that the issues were not raised before the general election [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Beggs: The redacted report is fascinating. Of the three and a half pages of conclusions and recommendations, only one and a half paragraphs were disclosed. What was disclosed was that the investigation of the actions of Stephen Brimstone recommended that a formal disciplinary action should commence. However, such a formal disciplinary action is in the gift of the Minister, and the Minister decided not to commence that action. I have no doubt that, if this situation arose at Westminster or in the other devolved Assemblies, the Ministers and the special advisers would be sent away forthwith and given short shrift. Public opinion would not allow for it. That needs to be addressed in this Assembly so that we have appropriate mechanisms whereby, if inappropriate action occurs, those responsible can be held to account. It is unfortunate that that has been hidden from the electorate, which recently voted.

I support the Assembly's recommendation that more powers should exist, but let us look at what Sammy Wilson, one of the DUP Committee members, did. First, there was his "thug" remark in the middle of a Committee hearing, which, of course, disrupted the Committee at a time when Mr Allister was getting Mr Brimstone into an awkward situation. Secondly, when the whistle-blower —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Certainly.

Mr Allister: I think that the Member is right: it was pretty obvious to anyone there that, on every occasion that the special adviser needed the human shield of the DUP Committee members, they acted accordingly in order to disrupt the Committee and delay the report, which was their anxiety, even carrying it to the point one day of abusing the staff of the Committee.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: I agree with the Member.

Councillor Palmer was the whistle-blower, and anyone who examines her evidence will see that she was very credible, clear and consistent in what she said. She felt that Mr Wilson's actions were tantamount to bullying her in the Committee. DUP Assembly Members bullied the whistle-blower. I understand that Mr Wilson interrogated her for some 35 minutes. Where is the justice in that? Where is the support for

whistle-blowers? The DUP was clearly trying to protect its members against the public interest. It is important that public representatives protect the public interest and not narrow party interests. It is important that we change our regulations in the Assembly so that this cannot be repeated in the future.

Mr Dickson: This debate will, I believe, leave one political party, the people in it and, indeed, this very institution in a perilous state, further discredited in the eyes of the very public whom we seek to serve.

Sadly, for all too many, it will confirm their view of the Assembly. I have, with other members of the Committee, listened for many months. I have questioned for many months, and I have looked, like those looking in on our inquiry, open-mouthed at a story that, on many occasions, beggars belief. It is a story that, when you thought it could not get any worse, did. This is a story that demands resignations; a story that demands integrity in public office. Sadly, the story of today will be one of denial and refusal to do the right thing. That will be the order of the day for that party. It is a sad and sorry tale, in which I hope the public will judge the players harshly, especially when it comes to election for the Assembly in the future.

It has been a long road from the original BBC 'Spotlight' programme in July 2013. In the meantime, the Social Development Committee took on the duty of investigating the allegations put forward in the programme and listening to the stories of those involved. In particular, I wish to place on record my thanks to Councillor Jenny Palmer for her brave, clear and fulsome evidence to the Committee. I also sincerely thank all of those who cooperated with us, and I leave the public to judge those who did not.

I wish to place on record my thanks to the Committee Clerk and staff, who have handled one of the most complex reports that the Assembly has had to deal with with integrity and balance. We owe a debt of gratitude to them for the work that they have done, and the unwarranted harassment and bullying of staff is unacceptable. I wish to place that on record.

It has been a long, difficult and frustrating process to get the Department and its Ministers over the period to provide the information that the Committee asked for. I find that regrettable and deeply concerning. The release of a heavily redacted report is one example of stonewalling that the Committee faced to extract even the most basic information which, more importantly, the public expected to be

made available for an investigation. In seeking to extend the termination of Red Sky's Housing Executive contract, it is clear, as the report tells anyone who wishes to read it, that the Minister acted in the interests of private individuals rather than his own ministerial responsibility to the public purse.

What has been fascinating for many of us has been the insight into a party-before-taxpayer mentality and a culture of bullying. Key players in the DUP have been linked with this report, from the First Minister to Nelson McCausland to Stephen Brimstone to Robin Newton to Sammy Douglas, and even the new MP, Gavin Robinson. It was clear that the DUP figures who attended the Committee are wedded to their party rather than to any sense of duty to the people they represent, and they have continually demonstrated through this investigation contempt for the Committee and for the pursuit of transparency and accountability on this issue. If Ministers in the DUP were trying to demonstrate that they have nothing to hide, they have absolutely failed and only raised the question again and again: what is being kept from the public? This report is a step towards finding out the truth of these events and the relationship between one political party and Government Departments and private contractors.

There are, however, others who will seek to paint themselves as crusaders on this event — Mr Allister behind me is one of them — against the excesses of the DUP in government with Sinn Féin. However, perhaps what this report and what Mr Allister will say will reveal that Mr Allister is more anti-DUP than a genuine voice of opposition. The reality is that at the very heart of this debate is the necessity to maintain integrity and accountability in public office. Nelson McCausland and others in his party have succeeded in dragging the name of the Housing Executive, DSD and this Assembly through the mud. This has rightly given the public a perception that, when it comes to issues of openness and transparency, there are key players at Stormont who stubbornly refuse to abide by even the most basic codes of ethics and standards. The task of the Assembly today is to restore public confidence and deliver accountability — a task that is made more difficult by the people who are involved in the report today.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will give way.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member not agree that the only way to restore accountability and to get faith from the public is for the Members who are named in the report to resign?

Mr Dickson: I wholeheartedly agree. Further, I also call on the Secretary of State to ensure that she enacts that appropriate piece of legislation that will bring total transparency to political donations. I challenge the Secretary of State to do that as one of the first actions in her position as new Secretary of State. Finally, we should not forget what this report is about. It is about delivering high-quality, value-for-money housing and maintenance for Housing Executive tenants and the taxpayer. It is a disgrace that we have to stand here today castigating those who hold office in the Executive and are responsible for the public purse, but, sadly, it comes as no surprise. I commend the report to the Assembly.

Mr Hussey: Mr Speaker, do you mind if I remain seated?

Mr Speaker: Certainly not.

Mr Hussey: Once again, we have listened to the report on Red Sky. At the time, I said that a red sky in the morning should be a shepherd's warning, and it is quite clear that some Members did not take the warning. Jenny Palmer, throughout the entire investigation, came across most clearly as the person who was willing to give evidence against the DUP. What was the reward for her honesty? She is to face disciplinary action. It was quite clear to anybody who watched the proceedings, whether on a television screen or in this Building, that there was, to repeat the expression that was used, stonewalling. Mr Allister was verbally abused; expressions were used towards him that were totally unparliamentary. Attempts were made to cover up what was clear for everyone to see.

Nobody from the DUP comes out of this with credit — not one of the Members involved. I was involved in the BBC programme, and I was shown an awful lot of documentation. I, as a member of the public, who was not a member of the Committee for Social Development, was totally appalled at what I saw. Anybody who saw the programme or who has watched the proceedings knows what is going on here. The phrase, "circling the wagons" has been used. Certainly, it appears to be a Custer's last stand in relation to Mr McCausland. He certainly does not come out of this with any credit at all.

Clearly, attempts have been made to provide a cover-up. The minority report is a joke. It is a joke because it is an attempt by the DUP to cover up maladministration. Nothing can come out of this for the good of politics; nothing can come out of this for the good of the DUP. I therefore urge the members of the DUP to reconsider their position. The facts were clear and the jury has found the Minister in the wrong. Mr Brimstone, with his memory lapses and responses of "I cannot say", was nothing short of a disgrace. If I were on the jury, I know what side I would be on. I find them guilty of a complete disregard of this Assembly and its workings.

Mr Speaker: Members, in order to facilitate the rescheduling of business from last week, the Business Committee agreed a half-hour lunchtime suspension, after which we will resume the debate. The next Member to be called will be Mr Alban Maginness.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.28 pm.

On resuming —

1.00 pm

Mr A Maginness: Much ground has already been covered in the debate, so I hope to avoid going over ground that has been exhaustively outlined. However, it is clear, when one takes the report in the round, that there is not just a smoking gun but a series of smoking guns in relation to the behaviour of Minister McCausland in relation to Red Sky.

I want, first of all, to compliment the BBC on its investigative reporting of the matter. It has done the public a good political service. However, I regret the fact that, despite the extensive and significant documentation that it provided, it did not provide oral evidence to the Committee. It would have been helpful had it done that, and, of course, its witnesses would have been open to examination by the Committee, and that would also have been helpful.

The central feature in the matter is the fact that the Minister met East Belfast MLAs and met Red Sky on 27 June 2011 and it was indicated to the Minister —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, indeed.

Mr Beggs: To be clear, would the Member accept that it was not a meeting with Red Sky? At that stage Red Sky was in administration and the administrators were not present, so I am not sure whom he actually met with, but they were using the label of "Red Sky".

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: Yes, indeed. I have used the term loosely and probably should have qualified that. I was going to go on to say that Red Sky was in administration and that the administrator, BDO, was not present at that meeting.

The point was that the Minister was advised by his officials against attending the meeting and that, despite that advice, the Minister attended the meeting. It is clear from the note of the meeting that the Minister stated that he would:

"like to have the administrator in place until the end of August to allow all issues relating to the handover of contracts to be considered"

and that

"... during this time, the proposed new company might also be able to progress matters."

The Committee came to the conclusion that that was inappropriate. I understand other political representatives being involved in meetings with a company that was in administration, but the Minister himself cannot simply say, "Well, I am an MLA. I am no longer a Minister when I go into this meeting". He is clearly a Minister. He is advised against the meeting, but he goes into the meeting and deals not with policy issues but with operational matters. They are matters that are within the purview of the proper public body — the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. In my view, it stretches the credibility of the Minister that he attended such a meeting.

On foot of that meeting, the Minister then refers the matter or attempts to refer the matter to the Housing Executive board and attempts to influence the board in relation to what is an operational matter. Of course, that operational matter was very important to the company that was in administration. If, for example, the Housing Executive had acceded to the Minister's view on the extension of the contract, it would have given that company a commercial advantage. That must, on the face of it, be entirely wrong.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, indeed.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree with me that, at that time, the main asset that the company owned was the tender and that, if the tender was allowed to be extended, it could be won or even transferred to some other company involving the previous directors, who had been discredited for their payments and invoicing to the Housing Executive?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, of course, and the Member makes an appropriate point. A reorganisation or reformation of the company in a different format would, of course, have been advantageous. That benefit, in my view, was clearly against the interests of the public and of those in the Housing Executive who were trying to carry out their work properly and impeded proper competition in the public realm. Therefore, it was wrong in relation to that, but the Minister's attempted influence on the Housing Executive was entirely wrong. It stands in stark contrast to the two preceding Ministers, Minister Attwood and Minister Ritchie, whom the Committee found to be at no fault whatsoever.

Mr McCausland: I totally reject the report. The reason why I did not reply to it in writing was that I did not want to give it any credence unnecessarily. It is high on innuendo and supposition but short on solid argument and evidence. Quite frankly, it is 1,100 pages long but not worth the paper that it is written on. In fact, it is a waste of good paper. The process lasted two years, and it was a waste of good time. I do not think any Committee has spent so much time to so little effect. The truth is that many Committee members had their mind made up before they started and were not going to let the evidence or lack of evidence get in the way of a predetermined outcome.

I noticed that Alban Maginness referred to the meeting on 27 June and to advice. The advice that I got was that the meeting was not inappropriate. It might be imprudent, in that someone might make mischief with it. On reflection, in retrospect, that is what happened. There are those who sought to make mischief of it, but the Housing Executive was well aware that the meeting was taking place.

Alex Maskey — I noted his words — said:

"Whether it was his intention or not".

So, whether it was your intention or not your intention, it does not matter; he had his mind made up already. There was a "possible

motivation", said Alex Maskey. Possibilities. Whether it is true or not, it does not matter. This was a predetermined outcome. Members chose what they wanted to believe to reach that predetermined outcome.

The fact is that I did not ignore the issues with Red Sky, but nor did I ignore the issues and shortcomings in other companies. The fact is that there was not an issue with just one company. Whatever the spread geographically or in scale, the fact is that the issues were not restricted to one company or to one district of the Housing Executive. Those issues occurred in more than one company, and we knew that they occurred in more than one district. The question I then asked was whether it was something that was endemic or systemic within the Housing Executive. I wanted to be sure that the Housing Executive was not transferring a contract from one company where there was a problem to another company where there might well also be a problem. That is why I asked the chairman whether he could give me an assurance that there were no problems in any other companies, and he gave me that assurance. The truth is that we knew that that was not right. We already knew that there was evidence that there was a problem in at least one other company. Indeed, I visited one housing estate where work that was clearly substandard was being undertaken by another company.

Mrs Kelly lauded the two previous SDLP Ministers. What I inherited from the two previous SDLP Ministers was Housing Executive tower blocks with mould growing thick on the walls. I inherited estates where issues had been ignored for a decade under the SDLP and where there were houses with no cavity walls or cavity wall insulation that condensation and dampness were penetrating. That is what the SDLP handed on.

I will deal with the issue of SDLP contracts. The fact is that we now know that the contracts drawn up by the Housing Executive were inappropriate. The monitoring of those contracts by the Housing Executive was inadequate. That was on the watch of the SDLP Ministers who were lauded and applauded by Mrs Kelly and under the chairmanship of Brian Rowntree. Thankfully, under the DUP, better contracts are now in place. New contracts are now in place. Fit-for-purpose contracts are now in place, and there is better management of them. If people want to look at issues of political interference, maybe I will look at some of the issues around the stock transfer at Rinmore in Londonderry. They might be worth exploring.

As we look at the report and the evidence before us, we see that this is simply a witch-hunt. It was carried out by people who had their mind made up before they started. Frankly, 1,100 pages later, nothing is proven, because there is nothing to prove. It is purely supposition and innuendo, short on solid argument and short on evidence.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: My time is up.

Mr Allister: I suppose that it was too much to expect that, even at this point, there would be any recognition of the wrongdoing in which Mr McCausland was caught out. Instead, of course, we got an arrogant attempt to defend the indefensible. The Red Sky escapade and the political involvement in it has to be one of the worst excesses of abuse of power that have been seen under devolution.

Often, a single piece of evidence is the key that unlocks many investigations and cases and their eventual outcome, and so it was in this case. It came from the minute of that amazing meeting of 27 June 2011, when the Minister, just into office, met his most senior DUP colleagues, including the First Minister, and the former directors of Red Sky but carefully excluded from that meeting the administrator of Red Sky and the Housing Executive. That minute records the key to this case, which is that, at the end of it, when the idea was spawned of buying an extension to the contract, the Minister is recorded as saying that the new company might also be able to progress matters during that time. The new company, of course, was to be the reincarnation of Red Sky, and the whole essence of the idea of extending the contract was that the new company might have time to get on its feet and take over where Red Sky left off. That is what the Minister let out of the bag at that meeting. From that moment, it was abundantly clear that the commercial interests of Red Sky and the political interests of the DUP had coalesced. That is the smoking gun in this case. It was the scene-setter for all that the Minister and his special adviser did thereafter — all the bullying and the attempts to intimidate the Housing Executive and their own councillor, Councillor Jenny Palmer. That has to be one of the most disgraceful episodes in this matter: the way in which Councillor Jenny Palmer was treated by her own party and the aggressive, bullying phone call from the special adviser, telling her what to do, because the party came first.

I think that all of us on the Committee who came to it with any objectivity could not fail to be impressed by the compelling, transparent honesty of Jenny Palmer and her courage in telling the truth. How shameful it was that, in one of the sessions, Sammy Wilson effectively said that she was a liar. That was a disgrace amongst many in the distracting attempts to disrupt the Committee. Contrast —

1.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: Would the Member agree with me that there were more red herrings than fact in Mr McCausland's contribution ?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: There was certainly no focus on the facts. There was dodging, ducking and diving, as ever. Was that not Mr McCausland at the Committee? Was that not exactly how he behaved? He could not remember, he could not say and he would not say.

If he was bad, my oh my, the special adviser was 10 times worse. I have encountered a lot of dodgy witnesses in my time, but I have to say that Mr Brimstone takes the biscuit. He takes the biscuit. He really was deliberately evasive. *[Interruption.]* He put himself in a position of faking memory loss and showed himself to be one in total estrangement from the truth and in flagrant breach of the solemn affirmation that he took to help the Committee and to provide all the evidence that he could. He patently did not, and he deliberately did not. There is no escaping that reality. His treatment of Jenny Palmer was beyond description. To think that it is she who faces discipline while he continues in his £90,000 a year job on the public purse. No doubt he is listening to the debate tucked away in a room somewhere. Might he hang his head in shame for the manner in which he treated his colleague, Councillor Jenny Palmer.

Speaking of Jenny Palmer's colleagues, where are her friends from Lagan Valley? Where are Edwin Poots and Paul Givan to speak up in her defence? Is it a case that, again, the party comes first? Will they vote to negative the report because the party comes first? In the name of decency and honesty, is there no one with the strength to stand up and say, "We believe — we know — that Jenny Palmer was telling the truth, and we are ashamed of how she was treated by her party"? That is what one

would expect from people faced with such a situation.

Mr Campbell: I begin by paying tribute to the staff, who were of great assistance throughout the marathon of the inquiry. The inquiry has gone on for an inordinate length of time and, contrary to the claims of some, there were those of us who repeatedly tried to get the Committee to speed up, but there were attempts, repeated attempts, by some to delay matters. We now know why, given the leak last week. I am prepared to give way to anybody man enough to say that they leaked it. Does Mr Allister want me to give way to him? I thought not. I will carry on from that.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Member to make a scurrilous and utterly unwarranted allegation in the House? If he has evidence, let him produce it. Either put up or shut up.

Mr Campbell: I have not started.

Mr Speaker: Let us keep our cool. It has been a difficult and sensitive discussion, and I think that Members have conducted themselves appropriately.

I will review Hansard, but I am quite certain that no allegation was made. There was an invitation, which you chose to respond to. I caution the Member that I am listening very carefully.

Mr Campbell: I take it that that intervention will be allowed for in my minutes; I hope so anyway.

Mr Speaker: It was a point of order not an intervention.

Mr Campbell: Thank you.

A number of bogus issues have been raised. There have been repeated attempts to lambaste Red Sky, but there has been no mention whatever in the entire debate of the disgraceful sectarian attacks on the property of Red Sky when it operated in west Belfast. There were repeated attempts to praise the BBC. Dolores Kelly said that we owed the BBC a debt of gratitude, and Alban Maginness said that the BBC did a good political service with this programme. This is the BBC that, despite repeated attempts by the Committee to get them to come before us, refused to come and answer questions — great at posing questions, not great at answering them. That is the BBC that the SDLP wants to praise.

The BBC knew about other companies apart from Red Sky. Months before the programme went out, the BBC was aware that there were other companies whose workmanship was shoddy. Did they include any of those other companies? No. Did the Committee ask them to? No, not one, because they wanted a scapegoat, and the scapegoat was Nelson McCausland. That is what they wanted.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: No, I will not give way.

Attempts were made to imply that the DUP made representations alone on the Red Sky issue. Not one person has mentioned that the former MP for East Belfast also wrote about Red Sky at the time. That was an Alliance MP, but I noticed that Mr Dickson did not refer to it, and neither did anyone else. Spurious claims have been made about what went on during the run-up to the actual programme.

Then, of course, we had a series of attempts to rewrite what actually happened in relation to the Red Sky issue. No one has had the bottle, if they believe that Mr McCausland misled the Committee or exceeded his authority, to say why he did it. Not one of them is prepared to say why, because there is and was no misleading.

We come to Mr Allister, the man who came onto the Committee in September 2003. He took no interest in DSD issues or Housing Executive issues until a member of the Committee was not just ill but so seriously ill that we all knew that he did not have long to live. What was the contempt that Mr Allister had for the House when he went, in the teeth of a report to the Assembly, and asked the late Mr McClarty whether he could take his position on the Committee?

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: No, I will not. What did he do? He went to the dying David McClarty and persuaded him to allow him to get onto the Committee for —

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Surely there is a limit to the concoction of facts that the House must listen to? The late Mr McClarty, many months before he sadly passed away — he did not pass away until about nine months after the inquiry started — was quite content and, in fact, agreed that we would swap Committees. I know that it agitates the DUP that I dared to be on the Committee to expose

what I exposed, but I will not have my integrity impugned or that of Mr McClarty, who dealt with this in the most professional and honourable way, as you would expect, as indeed I did.

Mr Speaker: I think the Member has a point. I will review Hansard very carefully indeed. I think that the Member who has the Floor needs to be very careful about making allegations that would be impossible in the context of this debate to substantiate or that would stand up. I think that you have strayed very close to the margin. I may need to refer back to this matter. However, you have the Floor and the opportunity, perhaps, to amend any comment you have made to make it more acceptable.

Mr Campbell: Yes, Mr Speaker, I am happy to clarify and expand.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: Yes.

Mr Weir: The Member spoke about the views of Mr Allister on DSD matters: is he surprised that, in the TUV manifesto, there was not a single mention of housing?

Mr Campbell: It does not surprise me whatsoever. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Campbell: It does not surprise me, Mr Speaker. I know what happened. I know about the conversation between the late Mr McClarty and Mr Allister, and I stand over what I said.

Let us move on to what actually happened after he replaced Mr McClarty on the Committee. A number of issues were raised, and, of course, the sectarian attacks on Red Sky property were raised by the DUP and not by Mr Allister. They were never raised by him. Many issues were raised during the investigation and the report, including a series of investigations and quotes from senior Housing Executive officials about the severe under-representation of the Protestant community in the staff of the Housing Executive. That was never mentioned by Mr Allister, who came onto the Committee belatedly in place of a dying man. Not once did he raise those issues; not once did he raise the issues about sectarianism and how it affected the investigation. Of course, he went on in the Chamber to ask more questions about the price of mint imperials than he ever did about discrimination against Protestants.

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): In listening to the debate today and to Members' contributions in relation to the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Social Development Committee's phase 3 report, I well recall being in the Chamber almost two years ago, on Monday 8 July 2013, when the debate was very similar to that of today. On that occasion, the Assembly met for the purposes of debating a motion that expressed concern at the contents of the investigation by the BBC 'Spotlight' programme that was broadcast on 3 July 2013 and referred to allegations of serious and wrongful political interference in the Housing Executive. What has happened in the intervening two-year period? I ask Members to reflect on that issue. It was two years: what have we to show for it?

Following that debate and until today, the Social Development Committee has been conducting its inquiry in three phases resulting in three reports, the third of which has now been published and which we are debating today. When I came into office in September last year, I was well aware of the inquiry and the significant time and effort that was being spent on it by Committee members and my departmental officials. I am therefore glad that we are, at least, coming to this stage in the final debate on the outcome of the inquiry. As Minister for Social Development, I would now like to be able to concentrate on the priorities and responsibilities of my portfolio and on ensuring that I discharge my responsibilities, which are encapsulated in the business plan for my Department, to improve people's lives. There are many issues that the House could today have been adequately dealing with. We could have been debating the issues that fall within my Department's remit. The Social Development Committee, which was established to advise and assist on matters within my responsibility as Minister, would do well to continue to be engaged on those issues.

Let me turn to the Committee report. I received the full report with appendices on Tuesday 6 May and considered initially the Committee's conclusions and observations. However, as the report, as some Members have reminded us, runs to over 1,100 pages, I have decided that it is more appropriate for me to initially respond to this debate, and then I will undertake to provide a full written response to the Committee within eight weeks.

1.30 pm

Let me refer to some of the issues that were raised. In particular, I refer to the allegations made against my colleague and friend, the

former Minister Mr Nelson McCausland. If anyone has evidence of any impropriety, wrongdoing or misappropriation, it is surely their duty to bring it forward. I concur with what my colleague said in the House today, which is that what we have seen is something lacking in substance and surely in any great evidence.

In conclusion, I remind Members that, when I took up my responsibility as Minister for Social Development, I came into the Department at a time when the inquiry was in full flow. My concentration and focus will continue to be on working with the Committee, its members and the House so that, in fulfilling my statutory role, which includes responsibility for the Housing Executive, we continue to ensure that we give the best possible service to the people of Northern Ireland who live in Housing Executive properties. I therefore conclude by saying that I trust that the issue has now come to an end. I look forward to working with the Social Development Committee on the many issues that are of relevance to its day-to-day business.

Ms Sugden: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I draw to your attention something that I heard in the House about 10 or 15 minutes ago. Someone used my deceased predecessor's name to deflect attention from their dirty wrongdoings. I am quite disgusted by that. No one in the House knows David McClarty better than I did. I was part of the process of swapping Committees with Mr Allister at that time. Mr Allister made the request politely. There was no bullying. To suggest so disrespects not only Mr Allister but the late David McClarty. That was done in a way that best facilitated David and his constituents; he thought that he was better placed on the Committee for Employment and Learning. I am disgusted that a Member would use a deceased Member to advance their aims. I am not surprised; I am disgusted.

Mr Campbell: Further to that point of order, I thank Ms Sugden for confirming that Mr Allister did indeed approach the late David McClarty when he was very ill to take his seat on the Committee.

Mr A Maginness: You do not get it, Gregory. You do not get it.

Mr Campbell: That is what happened.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Campbell: And it is now confirmed.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Sugden, thank you for appearing in the Chamber to make that point. It is a matter now of the Hansard record. I will look at your comments as well when I review the situation. For now, we should proceed. Minister, I did not get the opportunity to thank you for your contribution.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Chair and me, I thank the Committee staff, who had an extremely difficult job. In fact, they ended up taking personal abuse, which is absolutely reprehensible.

I thank all those who participated in the debate. It is important to note that, throughout the inquiry, there was a painstaking and detailed process of evidence gathering and a careful consideration of different views around the Committee table. The Committee has drawn a number of conclusions throughout the phase 3 report. On the key issue of whether the Minister acted inappropriately, on the basis of the evidence that it received the Committee concluded that he did. The Committee also concluded that the Minister's actions were politically motivated. It is my view that, in any other circumstance, the Minister should have gone a long time before he did — and his special adviser. It is interesting to note that, while the DUP members were happy to castigate one of their own — Jenny Palmer, who came across as an extremely reliable, believable and credible witness — the special adviser has now, I believe, been rewarded with a move to the First Minister's office. The First Minister should have dealt a long time ago with Mr McCausland, who eventually went — maybe the light eventually dawned — and the special adviser. I just wanted to make that point.

Following consideration of the Committee's draft report, the DUP members of the Committee agreed that it did not in any way reflect their views, and, that being so, a minority report was produced and included in the appendices to the Committee report. I note that Members who disagree with the Committee position have largely drawn on the content of the minority report today. I contend that the process that the Committee followed during phase 3 of the inquiry and the production of a minority report to capture opposing views clearly disaffirms any claim of bias having played a part in how the inquiry has been conducted, concluded or reported on by the Committee. Apparently, some DUP Members are psychics: they could tell me how I felt before the inquiry started, how I felt during it and how I felt at the end.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No, I will not. I absolutely refute that. I went in with an open mind, as did my party members, associates and comrades, so they can dress it up whatever they want. We went in expecting to hear evidence and expecting to make a decision based on the clear and unequivocal evidence that was given. As I said, I contend that the process that the Committee followed during phase 3 of the inquiry and the production of a minority report disaffirms any claim of bias.

I do not intend to rehearse everything that Members said, but I will address some key points. Paula Bradley noted that two years of the Committee's time could have been better spent on other matters. I think that most people would agree with that, but it had to be done; it is as simple as that. She believes that certain members, in effect, had already made up their mind. I absolutely refute any suggestion that, in our case, that was the case. She went on, surprisingly, to refer to her support for the minority report. She said that the former Minister, in taking the action that he did, was attempting to achieve the best outcome for Housing Executive tenants and that his action was based on the advice available to him at the time. Mr McCausland, apparently, is a born altruist for taking that view.

On the other hand, Dolores Kelly had a different opinion. She believes that few people came out of this in a good light, with the notable exception of Jenny Palmer, who was castigated by her own party members. She was absolutely castigated. At one stage, Sammy Wilson did all but call her a liar, which, in the circumstances, is absolutely reprehensible. In showing integrity, Mrs Palmer had been vilified and was vilified by her party members. In Mrs Kelly's view, Paula Bradley has not taken an objective position, despite the inquiry being evidence-based, and the DUP members have put the party first. I would have been surprised if they had taken an objective position. Mrs Kelly said that the Assembly owed the BBC a debt of gratitude for exposing the actions of the Minister and special adviser on 'Spotlight', and she hoped that the report's recommendations were implemented to ensure proper accountability.

Roy Beggs referred to Mr McCausland not following the advice of his officials and meeting some of the former Red Sky management team to discuss Housing Executive contractual matters. He remarked on witness evidence from senior officials that they had not encountered such ministerial interventions in

their careers. He referred to the DUP circling the wagons. It has already done that. As I said, the special adviser has been moved into the office of the First Minister as, I presume, some sort of reward. Roy Beggs also emphasised that the gap in existing mechanisms for the accountability of Ministers must be addressed.

Stewart Dickson suggested that the debate could leave the institutions in a perilous state, given the position of the DUP in the report's findings. He applauded the actions of Mrs Palmer and remarked on her integrity as a witness. He placed that in contrast to the actions of the former Minister and special adviser. He commented that key players in the DUP were more wedded to the party line than they were to the people they represent.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: I will.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member share my surprise at the judgement of the First Minister, who, as I understand it, has recently elevated the special adviser to his office?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member —

Mr Speaker: May I caution against any response to that point? It is not relevant to the debate.

Mr Brady: I accept your ruling, a Cheann Comhairle.

Roy Beggs also believes that Mr McCausland has dragged the Housing Executive and the Assembly through the mud. He commended the report to the Assembly.

Ross Hussey noted that he had taken part in the 'Spotlight' programme and had been appalled at the evidence presented to him by the BBC. He said that Mrs Palmer's honesty had been rewarded with disciplinary action. He said that the minority report was a joke.

Alban Maginness said that there was a series of smoking guns in relation to Mr McCausland and Red Sky. He said that the BBC should have given oral evidence. He noted that the Minister attended the meeting on 27 June 2011 against the advice of officials and that the Committee concluded that to be inappropriate. He also noted, about this particular meeting, that the Minister referred the matter to the Housing Executive, despite it being an operational matter. Mr Maginness agreed with the

Committee that, had the Housing Executive board agreed with the Minister, this would have favoured a private organisation and impeded proper competition. He said that the Minister's actions stood in contrast to those of previous Ministers Attwood and Ritchie, but then you would expect Mr Maginness to say that.

Mr McCausland disagreed with everything in the report, surprisingly. He just thought it was a waste of over 1,000 pages. He talked about everything being the fault of everybody else but him. It was all to do with the Housing Executive, the chair of the Housing Executive and everybody else — Uncle Tom Cobley and all — but had absolutely nothing to do with him. As Minister, he was supposed to stop the buck, but unfortunately he created most of it.

Mr Allister noted that, even at this stage, there was no recognition of wrongdoing by Mr McCausland. He referred to this as the worst abuse of power under devolution. He said that the minute of the 27 June 2011 meeting was the key piece of evidence, in particular its reference to the new company, a reconstituted Red Sky. He stated that the commercial interests of Red Sky and the political interests of the DUP coalesced. He was of the view that the DUP treatment of Mrs Palmer was disgraceful and said that Mrs Palmer's integrity stood above this. He noted that the behaviour of Mr McCausland and Mr Brimstone at Committee was totally unhelpful, and that Mr Brimstone's treatment of Jenny Palmer was beyond description. He said that Mr Brimstone should hang his head in shame.

Gregory Campbell referred to the political nature of the report and highlighted the leaked report as evidence of this. He noted the attempts to lambaste Red Sky but not the sectarian attacks on the organisation.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Brady: Yes.

Mr Campbell: He is quoting me correctly about the leaking of the report. Has the Deputy Chairman of the Committee given any thought to whose interest it would have been in to leak this report in the week before the general election?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention —

Mr Campbell: Now there is one to think about.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Brady: As somebody who was involved with his own election campaign, I did not give it much thought. However, from Mr Campbell's point of view, it is my understanding that you probably wanted the report published the week before.

Mr Campbell criticised the BBC for not attending the Committee and for its lack of investigation into other companies. He said that spurious claims were made in the programme and during the Committee's consideration. He referred specifically to Mr Allister's role in securing a position on the Social Development Committee through discussion with Mr McClarty. As someone who knew Mr McClarty and regarded him as an absolute gentleman and of high integrity, I think that it is an absolute disgrace for the name of someone deceased to be brought into this contentious debate. Mr Campbell should reflect long and hard on raising that issue, because it was absolutely disgraceful.

Mr Campbell went on to refer specifically to Mr Allister's role in securing, as I have said, a position on the Social Development Committee, and he referred to the severe under-representation of the Protestant community in the Housing Executive. I have been on the Committee since 2007, when Mr Campbell was its initial Chair, and he seems obsessed with the make-up of the Housing Executive staff. It is my understanding that people get jobs on merit, not because of their religion or political beliefs. Mr Campbell needs to reflect on that as well.

The Minister asked what had happened in the two years since the first debate in September 2014. He was aware of the time spent on the inquiry by the Committee and departmental officials and looked forward to dealing with other issues under his remit. I am glad to hear that. He lamented that the time had not been spent on other important issues. I think that the Committee did as well, but as I said previously, this had to be done. He indicated that he would provide a written response to the Committee within eight weeks. He felt that the report lacked substance and he reminded Members that he would focus on working with the Committee to fulfil his statutory role. He ended by saying that he trusted that this report would conclude matters.

To address the issues as a Sinn Féin member of the Committee, my view is that the DUP has circled its wagons. Jenny Palmer came across as a very credible woman of integrity. She was

attacked constantly by Sammy Wilson in particular, and by Mr Campbell. It was an absolute disgrace, and I would hate to think what would have happened to her if she had not been a member of the DUP. I imagine that she would have fared a lot worse.

1.45 pm

Mr Brimstone suffered from selective memory losses all the time. One of the arguments put forward was, "Well, her vote wouldn't have affected the board anyhow, so why would we have said this and that to her?" Why bother ringing her in the first place if her vote did not affect it? They must have had some inclination that it was going to have some effect. Otherwise, it would have been a waste of time to make that infamous phone call.

Today's debate has been robust. Some Members have chosen to defend the former Minister — strangely enough — and the special adviser Mr Brimstone. Mr Brimstone has gone on to fresh fields and greater things now, so I presume that he will not be too worried about the outcome of this, although he should be, and will disparage the report and dismiss the evidence. Other Members have acknowledged the efforts of the Committee to conduct an objective, evidence-based inquiry and agreed with the findings of the report.

For many, the division of opinion will not be surprising. In fact, it may just reinforce the negative perceptions that the public have of our political system. I dare say that the wider public will not be divided on the need for holders of public office to be accountable for their actions, and that is currently sorely lacking for Ministers, at least when allegations are made in the context of the ministerial code of conduct. As I said, it is my view that the Minister and, indeed, the special adviser should have gone a long time before they did.

If there is one thing that we can agree on, it is perhaps that the glaring gap in the current procedures for holding Ministers to account needs to be addressed. That is in the recommendations of the Committee's report. As the Chair said, there are lessons to be learned from this inquiry for individuals, Departments and our political institutions. We should all be big enough to recognise that and strive to put that learning into practice. I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, as this is the first opportunity that I have had as Speaker to address this issue, I remind the

House that it has long been the practice, as the previous Speaker indicated on many occasions, that it is completely out of order for Members to make gestures — finger-pointing, in particular — during debates. That occurred on a couple of occasions across the House today. I chose not to respond to it on this occasion, but I am giving a very clear reminder to the House that that will not be tolerated in future. It is not part of the debate. This was a very sensitive and difficult discussion. In the main, I think that Members deserve credit for the way in which they conducted the discussion.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 55; Noes 32.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Mr F McCann

NOES

Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for Social Development on phase 3 of its inquiry into allegations, arising from a BBC NI Spotlight programme aired on 3 July 2013, of impropriety or irregularity relating to NIHE managed contracts and consideration of any resulting actions [NIA 222/11-16], which deals specifically with decision-making relating to the award, modification and cancellation of NIHE maintenance contracts to establish any impropriety and, in particular, whether the actions of Ministers were appropriate.

Mr Speaker: Members, as Question Time starts immediately at 2.00 pm, the House will take its ease while we change the top Table.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Voluntary Exit Scheme: DOE Applicants

2. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the number of staff from his Department who have applied for the voluntary exit scheme. (AQO 8149/11-15)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) voluntary exit scheme (VES) agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive was launched on 2 March 2015. Applications to the scheme were invited from all eligible staff across the NICS. Applications closed on 27 March, and 459 staff from my Department, across all grades and disciplines, expressed an interest in the scheme.

The scheme will operate in the 2015-16 financial year only. Staff who are selected will be released in tranches commencing on 30 September 2015, with further exits on 30 November 2015, 29 January 2016 and 31 March 2016. The numbers released under the scheme will be constrained by the budget available to fund compensation payments and the need to manage the exercise in a way that will maintain essential business continuity across Departments.

Owing to the voluntary nature of the scheme, my Department will not know the exact numbers leaving until staff are selected and have accepted the exit terms. Applicants will be advised on 26 May whether they have been selected or not, and those leaving in the first exit tranche on 30 September 2015 will be confirmed. Compensation quotes will be made available on 16 June to staff leaving in the first tranche, and staff will have until 30 June to confirm their acceptance.

Staff leaving in the later exit tranches during 2015-16 will receive the same three months' notice.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. How will he ensure that the same level of service is maintained with a reduced workforce through the voluntary exit scheme? Will he also give a firm commitment that there will be no compulsory redundancies?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the question. I have said from the outset that there will be no compulsory redundancies from my Department. I reiterate that here today and give that assurance to the Member, the House and the staff of the Department.

As to how we retain the necessary expertise in the Department, I have concerns about the impact that the scheme will have, with significant numbers of staff leaving all Departments in a short time. Although we will potentially have to stop doing some things in order to live within the reduced budget, or certainly change the way in which some services are provided, it is essential that the staff remaining in the Department be given the necessary skills and knowledge to continue to provide the required services.

My officials will use the three-month-notice time frame of each exit tranche to assess the impact of losing such experienced staff and to consider how best to manage the reduction and compensate for any loss of experience and knowledge. We must maximise and develop the skills of those staff remaining and provide succession training and development opportunities to minimise the adverse impact of losing experienced staff with such expertise. The purpose of the voluntary exit scheme is to make reductions to staff costs. There is a need for all the business areas of my Department, and of all Departments, to evaluate their work programmes and to determine the priorities and resourcing required.

Ms Lo: The Minister may be aware that I have just come from a Committee meeting with Queen's about funding for the NGO sector, which is facing huge uncertainty, not only this year but more so next year through the new Department. In his briefings to the Committee, the Minister has not given any assurances or explanations of how the savings will be used. Will the Minister give us a commitment that any savings from the voluntary exit scheme will be used to fund the voluntary sector and the likes of Queen's, which are doing the work of the Department in discharging some of its statutory duties?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Chairperson of the Environment Committee for her question, but I reject the assertion that I have not given assurances to the Committee of my commitment to the NGO sector. A question is tabled later this afternoon on that precise topic. I recognise fully the value of the work of the NGO sector and have given it assurances of that recognition. I have pledged to work with that sector throughout this year. I recognise and share some of its concerns about what the future may hold in a new Department; that is why it is vital that we work with the sector this year to establish environmental priorities.

The Chairperson is quite correct that I cannot at this stage say what money realised through early exits will be spent on, as we do not know what, if any, money will be realised through these exits. They are an outworking of the Stormont House Agreement, and we have yet to see that implemented and see how it works out. However, while there are other pressures on my Department — the Member previously raised that of road safety, the budget for which I have had to halve this year as a result of the Budget settlement — I am keen to redirect some money to the sector, should money be saved. There is also the rates support grant, which goes to less well-off councils, which have been disproportionately adversely impacted on by this Budget. I would like to reinstate that, not to mention the listed building grant, which has been completely decimated. There are a lot of areas that we have to spend money on and, unfortunately, not a lot of money to spend on them.

Lord Morrow: The Minister has intimated here today that the number of staff who have declared an interest in the exit scheme is 459. Is that above or below his expectation? How does that equate in monetary terms?

Mr Durkan: Unfortunately, at this stage, I cannot put my finger on how that will translate into monetary terms. As I have said, those staff are from across all grades in the Department.

As to my expectations, the initial figure that I had given was 500 staff, which was then revised to 400, so it is somewhere in between. Clearly, I do not want anyone to lose their post. I outlined in my previous answer to Ms Lo the need to manage these exits in such a way that service remains as was, although perhaps some, including Lord Morrow, would like to see service improved in certain areas in the Department. If money is realised, I will look at where it should be allocated. However, we do not know whether these 400-odd people will

leave, whether their bids will be accepted, or whether they will accept the offer made to them.

Mr Dallat: As the lone ranger who came to the aid of the DVLA workers in Coleraine, my question is this: will this voluntary exit scheme in any way help those people who still have not found permanent positions?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I believe that lessons can be learned and, indeed, were learned from the voluntary exit scheme that was run to deal with the Driver and Vehicle Agency situation in Coleraine last year. In fact, it was almost used by the then Minister of Finance and Personnel as a model for this wider VES scheme. One point I have raised with Executive colleagues is that we should look at the VES scheme as an opportunity to rebalance the distribution of Civil Service posts across the North and that it should not be seen as an opportunity or as an excuse to further centralise functions.

Mr Cree: Obviously, all Ministers will have difficulty in maintaining experience levels. When does the Minister hope to know how much money will be available for the voluntary exit scheme?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Cree for that supplementary question. As outlined in previous answers, we do not know yet. It is hoped that we should know, by the end of June, how much will be realised. At that stage, we will also have a better grasp of when these savings will be realised at different stages throughout the year. At that stage, I will be looking again at how to disseminate that money, and we will, hopefully, in turn, be able to provide a bit more certainty to the likes of the NGOs to which Ms Lo referred and those in other sections of the Department about their budgets for the remainder of this year.

High Hedge Complaints

3. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the effectiveness of the High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 as a means of resolving disputes between neighbours regarding high hedge complaints. (AQO 8150/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 came into operation in March 2012 and, whilst the legislation was introduced by my Department, responsibility for its implementation rests with councils. As my Department does not have a role in the

regulation of hedge cutting or in resolving related disputes between neighbours, I am unable to comment on the effectiveness of the legislation at this stage. However, I intend to undertake a review of the High Hedges Act once sufficient time has been given to allow its full implementation within the new council structures. I anticipate that public usage of the legislation and its effectiveness at helping to resolve neighbour disputes will be an integral part of that future review.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer and for his honesty, and I welcome the fact that the review will take place. If my memory serves me right, the Assembly set down the fee of £350, and that is what I want to lead on to. In my experience, through my office, I have found that that figure has been a great deterrent. When the Minister is looking at his review, will he look at that figure again? Also, is this means-tested?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I can assure her that the review will be all-encompassing and comprehensive and will include issues such as the fee and, indeed, whether that fee or any new fee should be means-tested. I am grateful to hear from the Member that it is her view that the fee is a deterrent, because it is evident to me from looking at statistics around the Act that there is at least one deterrent. My Department did liaise with councils during 2013 and acquired initial figures that indicated that around 800 queries about high hedges had been received, but only 8% of those actually materialised into formal complaints. Of that 8%, only 67% resulted in the issue of a remediation notice. I do not know whether that was perhaps due to potential shortcomings in the legislation or, indeed, the fee, or, possibly, a combination of both.

2.15 pm

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It was brought to my attention within the last week by a lady from the Tamlaght Road area of Omagh that light is being blocked from going into her kitchen, which is having a very detrimental impact on her amenity. What advice does the Minister have for that lady, who cannot afford the £350 fee?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, his interpretation of a high hedge might be different from mine. *[Laughter.]* My advice to the lady in question would be that she contact her local council at the outset. As a

constituency MLA, I have often encouraged, and even on occasion facilitated, mediation between neighbours to carry out that kind of necessary work informally.

Mr Swann: I can assure the Minister that his interpretation of a high hedge is definitely different from mine. *[Laughter.]* But if he was familiar with the legislation, he would know that it is stipulated there.

Will the Minister commit to reassessing the fee? The same issue has been raised with me. The £350 fee deters many from going through this process to the extent that they see the legislation as pointless.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I gave the assurance to Ms Bradley, and I will repeat it: the review will be all-encompassing and will include fees for the pursuit of complaints made under this legislation. It is vital that, when we do manage to get legislation through this House, it is not pointless but matters to people and helps them. Unfortunately, as I said, while the statistics show that we have managed to help some people through mediation and the alleviation of disputes between neighbours, in my opinion, there is a lot more that could be done. It is well known that good fences make good neighbours. You could just as easily say that high or bad hedges make bad neighbours. It is up to me as Minister with responsibility for this legislation and to the councils with responsibility for implementation to ensure that we make it work as well as we can or change it to make it better.

Carrier Bag Levy

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of the Environment, given the recent cuts to his departmental budget, for an update on the support he is providing to environmental projects from the carrier bag levy. (AQO 8152/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department has suffered a higher percentage of cuts than any other Department. I am therefore determined to ensure that the carrier bag levy moneys are used to best effect. The net income from the carrier bag levy after administration costs is estimated at £4.2 million for 2015-16.

I have already agreed allocations totalling £2.15 million for environmental grants and schemes, to include £0.52 million for the natural heritage grant programme, £0.6 million for a community waste fund and £0.3 million for local clean-up

and air-quality grants. However, further to my pledge to do as much as I can to try to lessen the pain for environment groups, on 23 April, I set up a workshop, which was held in Crawfordsburn Country Park, to discuss how best to allocate the remaining carrier bag funding through a new natural environment fund. The workshop was attended by 22 environment NGOs, and I listened carefully to the concerns that emerged. Those organisations needed more money to tackle the acute environmental priorities facing us in the North, such as safeguarding our most valuable sites and landscape, protecting our priority species and encouraging access to the countryside. For that reason, I have increased the remaining allocation for the fund from £1 million to £1.25 million. The new fund opened for applications on 1 May.

Finally, I also agreed that, of the remaining £0.8 million of unallocated carrier bag income, £0.3 million should be channelled through a new challenge fund targeted at schools and community schemes, and £0.5 million to the listed building grant scheme, specifically targeted at projects that provide facilities for community access and use, including churches.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer. May I commend him for trying to fund as many NGOs as possible, given the very brutal settlement that he received in his budget allocation? Has the Minister put in a bid, in the June monitoring round, to allocate moneys to environmental NGOs?

Mr Durkan: Yes, he certainly can take this opportunity to commend me.

I have received significant correspondence and Assembly questions, from all political parties, supporting the funding of environmental NGOs (ENGOS), and I look forward to the same level of support from the same parties as I try to do exactly what the Member has suggested by putting forward a bid in the June monitoring round.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister give examples of environmental projects in my East Londonderry constituency that might benefit from the funds from the carrier bag levy?

Mr Durkan: I referred to £0.3 million of the money going to a new challenge fund that will be open to bids from schools and community groups. It is similar to the previous challenge fund, which was availed of by numerous projects in the East Derry constituency.

As for the other money, I know that the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust does a lot of work that encompasses some of the Member's constituency and other constituencies. The trust has already been a recipient of carrier bag levy money and is participating in the process in the hope of obtaining further funding from that source.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister clarify whether the Ring of Gullion project, which had its funding pulled, will benefit from the carrier bag levy and, if so, to what extent?

Mr Durkan: The Ring of Gullion lost funding altogether as of 31 March in the last financial year due to the funding cycle that it was in. Over the past couple of weeks, I made the decision, and gave the direction, that it be afforded funding for three months from the end of March to the end of June. During that time, those involved in the project are also participating in the process that I established, and I know from engaging with them personally that they are hopeful of a positive outcome. I cannot predetermine the outcome of that process, as I am sure the Member will appreciate.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. I had hoped to ask about the June monitoring round as well, so I will adapt my question: does the Minister feel that River Care Ltd in Cookstown, which works in the Ballinderry river, will be eligible under the funding that is now available?

Mr Durkan: I have visited some of the projects being done in the area and see it as very valuable work. I am not sure whether the group to which she refers is included in the 22 groups that have participated, and continue to participate, in the scheme. I will check that and get back to the Member as soon as possible.

Mr Lunn: I heard Mr Maginness's commendation of his Minister a few moments ago, but I must say that, on the ground, the impression is that the Minister's engagement with environmental NGOs in the run-in to the Budget was haphazard to say the least. Is the Minister satisfied that he fully engaged with those organisations before taking these budget decisions?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I have no problem putting my hand up and saying that my engagement with the ENGOS was not perfect. However, I think that I engaged with the sector reasonably well as far

back as the draft Budget, when I was the only Minister to vote against it. The ENGOs formed part of the public consultation exercise, to which I encouraged them to respond. They all responded to the draft Budget, and maybe that played a role in changing some parties and Ministers' minds as to whether they supported the Budget. The Member will appreciate the uncertainty facing all Ministers with their budgets and their difficulties juggling them, contracted though they were, and deciding how best to spend the reduced resources at their disposal.

I have been fortunate enough to be able to avail myself of the carrier bag levy money. I think that, subsequent to my budget being announced and the impact that it was having on ENGOs, they will be reasonably happy with how I have engaged and will continue to engage with them throughout this year in advance of the restructuring of Departments.

Cyclists: Road Safety

6. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of the Environment what measures his Department is taking to improve road safety for cyclists. (AQO 8153/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The road safety strategy recognises cyclists as a vulnerable road user group and includes a range of actions that relate to cyclist safety. A new cyclist safety television campaign, Don't Forget, was launched in April 2014. Cyclists and drivers are encouraged to take personal responsibility for their behaviour on the roads and to give other road users due consideration. The core message is to respect everyone's journey. The campaign messages are addressed more fully in the online campaign available on NI Direct, where each scenario in the ad is developed, and more detailed advice is provided to drivers and cyclists alike. The campaign has been supported by outdoor, digital and social media activity.

A cyclist safety education pack based on the television campaign has been developed and made available to all schools and other interested organisations. It includes an eight-minute DVD that provides a wealth of advice for cyclists. Clips from the DVD on the use of cycle lanes and HGV and cyclist blind spots are also available on YouTube.

Each year, my Department offers the cycling proficiency scheme (CPS) to every primary school in Northern Ireland. Following a review of CPS, my Department has developed an

enhanced CPS, which began to roll out to schools in February this year. New resources for that have been delivered to all participating schools and are also available on the teachers' network, C2k. The enhanced CPS is being delivered to 542 primary schools.

In anticipation of the launch of the Belfast bike scheme, my Department ran a cyclist safety social media campaign, one of many it has rolled out over the last 12 months, on its Share the Road to Zero social media pages, delivering advice to cyclists and drivers alike as they share the road.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned the Belfast bike scheme, and I am sure that he is aware that, when people hire a bicycle, they are not provided with a helmet. On a recent visit to Utrecht in the Netherlands, I saw thousands of cyclists, and I counted four people wearing a cycling helmet. Will the Minister outline the Department's view on cycle helmets?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I also take the opportunity to commend the work of my ministerial colleague Danny Kennedy in bringing forward and launching the Belfast bike scheme, which, by all accounts, has been a tremendous success to date.

Obviously, safety is and should be a key consideration when it comes to anyone getting on a bike, and the issue of cycling helmets has raised its head, if you like, before in the Chamber. Predating my time, not only as a Minister but as a Member, there had been attempts to bring forward legislation or a Bill to make it mandatory for cyclists to wear helmets. I believe that that attempt withered on the vine when it looked at how things worked in other jurisdictions such as Holland, where it was proven that more fatalities occurred when cyclists were wearing helmets.

From a personal perspective, I know that if my son is going out on a bicycle, I will insist upon his wearing a helmet. I believe that it is up to the individual, but if it were up to this individual, cyclists would wear helmets.

2.30 pm

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

Californian Drought

T1. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he is aware that the drought in California is entering its fourth year, is likely to become more severe and that NASA has predicted that droughts in south-west America will last for 40 years, and whether he thinks that has any relevance to Northern Ireland. (AQT 2471/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the question. I have often criticised topical questions and said that they should maybe be renamed "typical questions", but Mr McCrea's question is certainly far from typical.

I believe that the impact of climate change is global and that therefore it is of relevance to people not just here in Northern Ireland, but everywhere. It is for that reason that I hope to pursue and bring forward legislation on climate change before the end of this Assembly term.

Mr B McCrea: I commend the Minister for being able to follow my train of thought. There is a climate change issue. The science is absolutely unforgiving. We have a really serious problem throughout the world, and it is something that Northern Ireland needs to realise it should not reject its responsibilities on. I am interested to hear from the Minister: what specifically can we introduce in Northern Ireland that will play our part in tackling climate change?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I think that it is fair enough to say that good work has already been done to mitigate and adapt for climate change. We need change in legislation to give legislative support to those efforts, not just by my Department — although, as Minister of the Environment, I retain responsibility for climate change policy — but by all Ministers and Departments. Everyone in this Chamber has a responsibility. We should start off by practising what we preach. I look at DRD, for example, and wonder whether more could be done to use LED street lights and initiatives such as that so that we can reduce our own greenhouse gas emissions and carbon footprint when we are telling our constituents to do just that.

Planning Applications

T2. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the situation relating to planning applications, given that the Department had introduced a streamlined

process in recent years but that there now appears to be a backing-up of such applications with the setting up of the new councils. (AQT 2472/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. The transfer of the majority of planning functions to the 11 new councils has been a massive task. We are talking here about the transfer of over 400 staff and over 6,500 live applications. While, touch wood, the transition has been relatively smooth, I cannot stand here and tell you that it has been seamless. There have been minor issues in places with the transfer of staff and cases. However, I have outlined previously in the Chamber the benefits of planning going to local councils. I believe that, given time — and hopefully it will not take much time — for the new systems to bed in, the Member, all Members and, most importantly, members of the public will see improvements in the processing of planning applications and in the timeliness of their processing.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his response. However, I know that in my own area of Mid and East Antrim council, there are site visits that are three to four months outstanding at this stage. Will the Minister take an opportunity to look at the situation?

Mr Durkan: If the Member, or any Member, comes to me about specific problems with specific applications, I will be happy to follow those up with the relevant council. However, I do not want to be in a position where we are micromanaging councils and constantly looking over their shoulder. I have said on numerous occasions in the House that there would be a need for a degree of hand-holding as the new councils find their feet and get to grips with what is a huge new responsibility for them. It is worth outlining again that we have also transferred 400 highly qualified and motivated planning staff. They are now working for the councils. In many cases, it will be the same planning officers who deal with the same applications. Therefore, I am certainly hopeful and optimistic that they will get the show back on the road very soon.

Natural Environment Fund

T3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications have been made to the natural environment fund and what criteria will be used to sift them. (AQT 2473/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I refer back to my answer to a listed question from Mr Maginness, and even that was pre-empted by a supplementary question from Ms Lo. Those questions related to the natural environment fund, which opened on 1 May.

To my knowledge, to date, there have been 22 applications, or 22 groups are involved in the process. As for the criteria, we are looking at the work that they do. I am determined to ensure that the carrier bag levy, where the money from the natural environment fund will come from, is used to best effect, particularly in these austere times. We are looking at the management of our areas of outstanding natural beauty, protection of species and access to the countryside, among many other things performed by our valuable and valued ENGO sector.

Mr McQuillan: How can we marry that with the numerous wind farms that are being erected around the environment that we are trying to protect? That is where they aim to put most of the wind farms. How can we marry the two together and make sure that both can live together?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I have to outline that we do not aim to put wind farms anywhere. Applicants come forward with proposals to put wind farms in certain locations and the DOE, or now, largely, the councils assess whether those locations are suitable. In assessing the suitability of locations, there are factors that should be considered. If there is an area of outstanding natural beauty or an area of special scientific interest, they will need to consider how much detrimental impact a wind farm or a wind turbine is likely to have. That should also be weighed up against the wider economic and environmental benefits of renewable energy, which are recognised quite categorically in our Programme for Government. There is definitely a balance to be struck. I am confident that that balance can be and is being struck.

Council Services: Increased Costs

T4. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he thinks it acceptable that, in addition to rates increases, some people who have been transferred to a new council area are also being levied additional charges for a council service, particularly in light of the fact that the review of public administration was to ensure better service provision and long-term cost savings. (AQT 2474/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. Finance was certainly a consideration and a motivation behind the review of public administration. I have always said that reform was not just about doing things cheaper and that it was also about doing things better. It has to be better not just for local and central government but for the ratepayer and the citizen. I possibly need a bit more detail on the hikes that Mrs Cochrane referred to. My predecessor was able to secure from the Executive some £30 million by way of a rates convergence scheme so that, where two areas with hugely different rates bases come together, one would not face a huge hike in the rates, purely on the basis of convergence. To my knowledge, that has been successful. Obviously, local government has a major role to play here as well. As I said, I would be happy to hear of the examples from the Member.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that the rates convergence scheme has cushioned the blow for some constituents, but what advice can you give to those who have been informed that they must now purchase a new bin that will fit the refuse vehicles of the new council area that they now find themselves in, so that they can have their waste collected?

Mr Durkan: The collection of waste is a hugely important issue, and where you have councils with different waste policies and waste collection policies converging, this was always going to present as an issue. My Department has been able and will be able, to a much lesser extent this year, to assist some councils as they roll out new waste collection schemes. I think it is important that we look at waste management in even broader terms, rather than on a council-by-council basis. To that end, I have made known my desire or preference to see a move away from the current three waste management partnerships to, maybe, one, which would overlook waste management right across the North.

NGOs: Funding

T5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of the Environment whether, given the recent removal of funding, he can provide assurances about the future and long-term sustainability of NGOs in the environmental sector. (AQT 2475/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. Once again, I am happy to provide him with assurance of my commitment to the survival of this hugely important and, indeed, vital sector. I spoke earlier of the huge

environmental challenges facing us as a region. I also spoke of the huge challenges facing my Department as we face into the voluntary exit scheme and the very real prospect of losing skills, expertise and experience from certain areas. In my opinion, that makes the NGO sector and our partnership with it more important than ever.

Mr Ó hOisín: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he and his Department assure us that they will work towards multi-annual funding, so that we avoid a similar crisis at the end of March next year? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Durkan: My Department will still, just about, be here by the end of March next year. This is something that Ministers should not just look at in terms of their own Departments. It is something that all Departments should look at, to be able to give the certainty to groups to allow them to get on with the valuable work that they are doing. You see this in many sectors, not least, I suppose, in neighbourhood renewal areas and projects, where so many worthy projects and organisations are constantly chasing funding. They are spending as much time applying for funding and keeping the wolf from the door, if you like, as they are actually performing the function that they are getting funded for in the first place. To me, that is completely unsatisfactory, not to mention how unsettling it is for the staff of those organisations.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Mr Gardiner to please be brief.

Smoke-free Zones

T6. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment to explain how smoke-free zones in Northern Ireland are determined by controlled orders. (AQT 2476/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I could possibly be briefer than Mr Gardiner, and say no. The designation of smoke-free zones is done in collaboration with local councils. The Member will be aware that it has been the subject of a recent debate in the Chamber, around a cross-border study into the impact of burning fuels. I expect the report to be brought before the House shortly on that piece of work, which is being done in collaboration with the Government in the Republic of Ireland. At that opportunity, I will fill the Member in on the smoke controlled zones.

2.45 pm

Finance and Personnel

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I congratulate the Minister of Finance and Personnel and welcome her to her first new Question Time. We will start with listed questions. Questions 2 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Welfare Penalties

Mr Beggs: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her appointment.

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for her assessment of the consequences of ongoing welfare penalties on public spending. (AQO 8161/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker and Mr Beggs, for your congratulations.

The Executive's 2015-16 Budget is predicated on the implementation of welfare reform halfway through this year and the subsequent return of 50% of the £114 million reduction applied by Her Majesty's Treasury. Delays in implementation will reduce the funding returned to the Executive, while failure to progress the Bill at all will mean that the £114 million reduction will apply in full.

Her Majesty's Treasury has not indicated the level of reductions beyond 2015-16. However, the Social Security Agency's estimates of the forgone UK Exchequer savings of not implementing welfare reform in Northern Ireland are significant and will increase in the coming years, reaching £366 million in 2018-19. Clearly, the removal of those sums will have a significant impact on budgets and would necessitate further cuts at a time when we can least afford to reduce public spending.

Mr Beggs: The Minister outlined that a range of other funds were dependent on the Stormont House Agreement being delivered. Can she advise us of the options for presenting a balanced Budget, which, I understand, has to occur before the summer recess, if that agreement is not made? What options exist for the Northern Ireland Executive?

Mrs Foster: Of course, we had a balanced Budget when the Stormont House Agreement was made. There were a number of elements to that, not least the implementation of the reduction of corporation tax and the ability to deal with the £100 million that was loaned to

the Northern Ireland Executive. At the moment, given that the Stormont House Agreement has not been implemented, there is, as I think my predecessor made clear to the House at the last Question Time, a £500 million hole in the Budget. There is a very short window of opportunity to deal with that. Given that I have been in post for less than 24 hours, that is something that I have grasped pretty quickly. We have around two weeks to deal with the matter, or we will have to look to contingency planning in relation to the Budget. I certainly do not want to go down that route, so we will have to grasp the nettle very quickly.

Mr McMullan: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her appointment. Does she understand that the majority of children in poverty live in a household where one or two parents are in work, and, in the light of that, will she ensure that those families are less dependent on welfare by providing those in the public sector with a 1% increase in their basic wage?

Mrs Foster: Of course, we want to prevent more people falling into poverty. If we cannot agree a Budget in the House before the summer recess, we will put more vulnerable people into poverty. I think that everyone in the House would agree that that would be totally and entirely unacceptable. We must move ahead with welfare reform, and we must implement the Stormont House Agreement. It is there and it has been agreed, so let us get on with it and let us work to make sure that Northern Ireland has a Budget, like every other part of these islands.

Mrs Cameron: I join others in congratulating the Minister on her new role. I am sure that she will do tremendously well. Following on from her last answer, can she tell us whether there a time limit by which welfare reform must be implemented?

Mrs Foster: I indicated that the next two weeks are absolutely crucial. Her Majesty's Treasury has removed £114 million from our resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) budget this year to compensate for the additional costs being incurred by the Exchequer as a consequence of welfare reform not being implemented in Northern Ireland. That funding will be returned to the Executive this year on a pro rata basis but only following the implementation of welfare reform locally. If we do not agree welfare reform, we have to deal with that penalty and all the other consequences that flow from the fact that we are not implementing the Stormont House Agreement — and there are many of those.

Mr Allister: If the punitive intransigence of the Minister's primary partner in government continues, how can she introduce a workable and viable Budget (No. 2) Bill in June? If she cannot, what happens?

Mrs Foster: If we get to that stage — I very much hope that we do not and that good sense prevails — as he will know, the legislation allows for contingencies in such a case. If we cannot bring forward the Main Estimates and move ahead with the Budget Bill, there are contingencies in legislation, but I have to say that they are pretty dogmatic and nuclear. If we get to that stage, we will be in a very severe situation. He knows the contingencies that I am talking about, the most dramatic and draconian of which is section 59(1) of the Northern Ireland Act, where the permanent secretary in the Department of Finance and Personnel steps in. I very much hope that the House recognises that that is not a place where we want to be come the end of June.

Departmental Budgets

Mr McGimpsey: I, too, welcome Mrs Foster to her new post.

3. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether all Departments, including their arm's-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies, have balanced their budget to prevent overspend. (AQO 8163/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is incumbent on all Ministers to ensure that their Department and the arm's-length bodies for which they are ultimately responsible have balanced their budget and are not at risk of overspend. Indeed, the public expenditure system works on the premise that they will do so. I will know the actual position for 2014-15 only once the provisional out-turn information, which Departments are due to provide me with later today, has been analysed. I will report that to the Assembly in due course. However, I can say, from the latest forecast out-turn information provided, that only one Department — the Department for Regional Development — is forecasting an overspend in its 2014-15 budget.

Mr McGimpsey: I refer also to the danger of Departments underspending. There is also the danger in the current financial climate that we may be forced to send money back to the Treasury. Will she give us some comfort and assurance on those points?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated, I await the provisional out-turn data from all Departments, but, if an underspend of the degree reported in the press materialises in the Department of Justice, I will expect full and detailed information on how that occurred. If a Department reports an overspend, it is an issue, but it is also very much an issue for us if there is a significant underspend. As Mr McGimpsey rightly points out, the last thing that we want to do is hand money back to Treasury at a time when we very much should be spending every penny we get.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister comment on the underspend reported in the PSNI budget? I congratulate her on her new appointment.

Mrs Foster: I thank him very much for his congratulations, as I thank all the Members who have taken the time to congratulate me. Some of them more in the know have taken the time to commiserate with me.

The underspend in the PSNI budget was the one that I was referring to in respect of the Department of Justice. If it is as has been reported — obviously, I will wait for the out-turn information coming to me — I will want to understand and get behind how that kind of mismanagement could occur and what caused it to occur. Are there difficulties between the Department and the PSNI with transparency or with how they deal with each other? I will want to understand why that has occurred, if, indeed, it has occurred.

Mr B McCrea: May I offer the Minister my commiserations or congratulations, depending on which is appropriate? The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has a significant number of arm's-length bodies. Many of those bodies are telling us that they do not yet know how the voluntary exit scheme will affect them, or if it will be available to them, and that that makes it very difficult to budget. When will such information be available?

Mrs Foster: I presume that DCAL's arm's-length bodies are included in the general voluntary exit scheme; if they are not, this, obviously, will not apply. Of course, the scheme is predicated on welfare reform and having the money to spend on the voluntary exit scheme. If it goes ahead, and if we have the money, I understand that those who have applied for the scheme will receive letters at the end of May or the beginning of June to tell them whether they have been successful and, if they have been successful, the terms for their

leaving the Civil Service or, indeed, their arm's-length body.

Rates

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for her assessment of the impact of the review of non-domestic rates on the small business sector. (AQO 8164/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is difficult to give the Member my assessment of the impact of the non-domestic revaluation precisely on the small business sector because, as the Member will be aware, businesses are classified as small or micro with reference to employee numbers — those with 49 employees or fewer. There are almost 118,000 such businesses in Northern Ireland, but only 57,000 rateable commercial properties. However, I can say that many, if not the majority, of small business ratepayers have benefited from the revaluation. That is particularly the case in the retail sectors, although I readily admit that some are paying more. It all depends on their relative success or decline since the last revaluation, as evidenced in open market rents.

It is also worth pointing out that the Executive have continued to support business ratepayers, despite a shrinking public purse. This year, a package of support worth up to £30 million will see the impact of rates convergence effectively removed from any business ratepayer through an 80% subsidy. Since 2010, over 33,450 businesses have received more than £62 million through the small businesses rate relief; and, since 2012, 375 new businesses have benefited from the introduction of the empty premises rate relief scheme. More than 5,500 businesses, many of which are small businesses, have saved over £330 million in rates since the decision to continue industrial derating was made. All those rate relief schemes have been extended for 2015-16. Likewise, the regional rate set by the Executive has been frozen in real terms.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister, if congratulations are appropriate, on her appointment to the Finance Ministry. I am sure that DETI's loss will be Finance's gain. I want to continue on the review of non-domestic rates on the small business sector. I am aware, and it has been quite public, that some of the elevated rates have been very pronounced — some almost 300%. Will the Minister or, more importantly, her Department, carry out any analysis of how those have gone up so substantially in a number of cases, if, indeed,

there is a reason behind it, or what support can be put in place for those who have taken such a substantial hike?

Mrs Foster: I hope that I outlined in the main answer that we have put in place a range of supports over the past period. There has not been a revaluation since 2001. We are now seeing that revaluation come in, based on 2013 rental values. Of course, many businesses and individuals will want to appeal the rateable valuations that have been given to them. I understand that they are in process. I am sure that many others will want to do that through the statutory process.

3.00 pm

I will, of course, want to look at extreme examples at either end to see if there is a reason why, back in 2001, they were assessed at a particular level and then in 2013 at a completely different level, and what happened in between to make that happen. If the Member has any specific examples, I am more than happy to look at them. Those who are dissatisfied with the new non-domestic rate should appeal. That is absolutely the first thing that they should do to make sure that the appropriate level has been set. Should there be any specific examples, I am more than happy to look at them.

Mr McQuillan: I also congratulate the Minister and agree with Mr McGlone that DETI's loss will be Finance's gain. Minister, in your answer, you mentioned appealing. How do people go about appealing valuations?

Mrs Foster: They need to appeal through the appropriate statutory process. While I know that some businesses will want to engage the services of other valuers or estate agents, there is no necessity to do that. They should point out that they do not believe that the rateable valuation is fair and that they want it to be looked at again, and it will be looked at again. If there is disagreement at the end of that process, the issue can ultimately go to the Lands Tribunal for a decision. Nobody likes paying rates — I have heard my predecessor say that on a number of occasions — but we must ensure that the system is fair. It is not a property tax. It is a tax to allow us to reflect services that benefit people, and we want it to be fair.

Mrs Dobson: I join in welcoming the Minister to her new role. Minister, you may be aware that I have raised concerns and requested appeals on behalf of small businesses across my

constituency with your predecessor. The extent of the rise has come as a sharp shock for too many small businesses. What further measures and actions will you take to ensure that this sharp shock does not become a fatal blow?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her comments. It is important that anyone who is dissatisfied with any part of the new assessment enters the statutory process as quickly as possible and not leave doing so for longer than a year, because we do not want them to be unable to gain any back payment if they are successful. So, they should look first at whether it is a fair estimate of what they could have rented their property for on 1 April 2013. If they do not believe that it is a fair estimate, they need to appeal that decision. As I said, if they cannot come to a decision with Land and Property Services (LPS), it will go to the Commissioner of Valuation and ultimately to the Lands Tribunal.

Financial Transactions Capital

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the uptake of financial transactions capital. (AQO 8165/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A wide range of projects have been allocated financial transactions capital (FTC) funding including the agri-food loan scheme, GP practices, a range of housing schemes, the Ulster University relocation project, the Northern Ireland Science Park, the Arc21 project, and a number of smaller schemes within DETI and Invest Northern Ireland. In addition to those schemes, FTC funding has been set aside for the proposed Northern Ireland investment fund. This means that we have provisionally allocated all available FTC funding for 2015-16.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer, congratulate her on her new posting and wish her every success in it. It is disappointing that all of the funding has been allocated for 2015-16. What, then, is in the fund for any transactions coming forward for infrastructure improvements?

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland investment fund is there for infrastructure projects. If they come forward, money can be allocated from the Northern Ireland investment fund. It is good that all of the financial transactions capital has been allocated, because it means that we are not handing any of it back to Treasury.

However, it has been allocated provisionally at this stage.

Indeed, if any very good applications come forward, we can look at moving around that financial transactions capital, particularly in relation to the Northern Ireland investment fund. I am happy to have a discussion, if the Member has anything in particular that she is thinking about.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, join the choir of congratulations to the Minister. I enjoyed my time as her Assembly Private Secretary in DETI.

Can she give some detail on how the private sector can engage with government to take advantage of the financial transactions capital?

Mrs Foster: The financial transactions capital allocations require a sponsoring Department, so a Department has to be involved in any engagement. Should the private sector wish to engage with government on financial transactions capital, it should contact the relevant Department or, indeed, the Strategic Investment Board, which will then engage with the Department on the feasibility of the project. As I indicated to Mrs Kelly, once the Northern Ireland investment fund is operational, there will be a separate process for engagement and accessing its funding for strategic infrastructure or, indeed, any other type of development. It is a very good mechanism to try to channel funds into the private sector, and I think that it will work very well.

Construction Sector: Economic Performance

Mr Easton: I also congratulate the Minister on her new position.

6. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for her assessment of the current economic performance of the local construction sector. (AQO 8166/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Thanks to the Member and, indeed, to all the other Members who expressed congratulations.

There are positive signs of growth in the Northern Ireland construction sector, with an overall increase of 3.9% in output over the last three months of 2014. Housing output increased by 8.5% in that quarter and infrastructure increased by 3.6%. That is the highest level of growth reported for over two

years and, overall, marks a 7% increase compared with the last quarter of 2013. The construction industry's turnover in the 12 months to 31 December 2014 was almost £2.2 billion, with over 53,000 people employed in the sector. Our local construction industry has demonstrated great versatility and resilience over the last eight years, with many firms winning major projects in Great Britain and beyond. Approximately 60% of the turnover of the top 20 locally based contractors was generated in Great Britain in quarter 4 of 2013. For the top five contractors, that figure was closer to 90%.

The ability of local firms to compete for and win work outside Northern Ireland is evidence of the quality of the local construction industry. That said, I recognise the challenges that the construction industry has faced in recent years. The positive signs in these latest statistics are welcome, but continued government investment in infrastructure and rises in public-sector expenditure will clearly be important. I note that the Executive's capital budget for 2015-16 is £1.16 billion, and a number of major construction projects are under way. The Omagh hospital, Altnagelvin radiotherapy unit and the Ulster Hospital generic ward block are three such examples.

Mr Easton: What measures have been taken to ensure that the procurement pipeline for government infrastructure projects is available to the construction industry?

Mrs Foster: That is a very important issue and one that has been raised with me in my former position as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It is very important that the construction industry has early visibility of forthcoming procurements to allow it to get ready and, indeed, to work with other companies so that they can make a good bid in terms of the procurement. Central Procurement Directorate published guidelines on 16 April this year mandating publication of information on the system by Departments for the appropriate infrastructure projects. That is a really good step forward. It will allow small and large companies to see what is coming down the line, and they can then work together to bid into the procurement. I think that that will be very helpful.

Mr Rogers: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her new position.

Minister, what extra can be done to support and stimulate the SME construction companies? I appreciate that you are only into the job, but

this is more of a suggestion than anything else. Given that VAT is zero on new builds, would you consider a reduction in VAT to, say, 5% on home improvements that are, say, under £15,000? That would unlock a lot of capital and do a lot for the smaller companies in the construction industry, but, in the long term, the Exchequer would still get the same money back.

Mrs Foster: I only wish that the Executive got the VAT receipts back, but we do not. VAT is a reserved matter dealt with by Westminster, so it would have to be considered in that context. I am sure that the 14 MPs who actually go to Westminster would like to raise it with their colleagues over there.

On what more we can do for small businesses, particularly in the procurement arena, I know, from my former job, that the InterTradelreland project Go-2-Tender is a very powerful tool that allows companies to bid not only in this jurisdiction but in the Republic of Ireland so that they can get involved in government procurement. That has been really helpful, and it allows companies to network with each other so that they can see opportunities to work together and make that successful bid. That, I think, will grow, and I am sure that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will want to continue to support that very powerful InterTradelreland project.

Digital Delivery: Public Services

7. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline how she plans to increase the number of public services delivered through digital means. (AQO 8167/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department is leading the digital transformation programme, which seeks the complete delivery of 16 digital services by 2016 to achieve 3.5 million transactions by March 2016. The programme is on target to meet those milestones, with seven digital services having gone live since March 2014. As of 31 March 2015, just over two million transactions had been carried out online using the new digital services delivered through the transformation programme. The majority of transactions were made by citizens carrying out family history searches using the Genealogy NI service, with almost 1.7 million free searches and 236,000 paid searches completed.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer, and I, too, wish her well in her new Department. Minister, you undoubtedly

are aware that there are those who do not have a connection or access to the Internet, and, perhaps, there are those who do not have the skills either. Can you tell us what you propose to do, or what your Department is doing, to address that issue?

Mrs Foster: Yes, indeed. He will know that we have been trying to deal with the lack of access to broadband through a number of schemes available through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, including the broadband fund, which is working its way through the system and will be complete by the end of this year.

As for getting more people online, I understand that 80% of the citizens of Northern Ireland are online and used to working online, but there is still that 20%, so he is right to point that out. The digital transformation service in DFP includes a digital inclusion team, which is working with partners across the public, private and third sector to provide training and support services to those who cannot currently access or use online channels. Where appropriate, services will include assisted digital provision. That entails a trained NI Direct operator completing online transactions on citizens' behalf to allow them to use the provision. We are engaged in work to help those not currently online.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. In keeping with other Members' sentiments, I wish the Minister well in her new role. Can the Minister outline which public services could be met through digital delivery?

Mrs Foster: The 16 x 16 digital transformation programme includes applying for a rate rebate; applying for a driving licence; applying for free school meals and school transport; applying for fishing licences; registering a birth, death or marriage; and online DARD CAP grants, subsidy applications and payments.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to topical questions. Question 3 has been withdrawn.

3.15 pm

Voluntary Exit Scheme

Dr McDonnell: I take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister on her promotion and express the hope that the personal generosity

for which she is widely known will show itself in the Department of Finance.

T1. Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in a spirit of goodwill, whether she has had a chance to look at the voluntary exit scheme and how it is progressing and to give the House details of the application rate. (AQT 2481/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is on record that over 7,700 people have applied for the voluntary exit scheme. Obviously, it is all predicated on our having the available money to complete the voluntary exit scheme, which is part of the Stormont House Agreement, and dealing with welfare reform. However, leaving all that aside, if all that is in place, it is hoped that letters will go out to applicants by the end of this month or the beginning of next month to set out exactly what they can expect if they have been successful.

Dr McDonnell: You said that 7,000 people have applied. If I recall correctly, the target was in the region of 3,000. How will those people be selected? Will the Minister assure us that large numbers of people in one Department or one section of one Department will not leave, thereby crippling that service?

Mrs Foster: The Member has put his finger on the appropriate issue. The business needs of Departments will be right at the top of the agenda when selecting people for the voluntary exit scheme. We will want to ensure business continuity in all Departments and that services to the public will continue, as much as possible, as they were. That is very much what we look at with the voluntary exit scheme.

Foreign Direct Investment

T2. Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given the recent good news about foreign direct investment, which, unfortunately, tends to increase the divide between rural and urban areas, what she is doing to redress that problem. (AQT 2482/11-15)

Mrs Foster: That is probably a question for my successor in DETI. As for good news from Invest Northern Ireland, I had the very happy experience of handing over to Mr Bell at the Invest NI staff conference today, where we were told that, against a target of 25,000 new jobs in the Programme for Government, we had achieved over 37,000 new jobs. In the breakdown of assistance to locally owned firms

and external firms, the majority of the money goes to locally owned firms. Some of our best-known firms have been working very hard to provide jobs here in Northern Ireland. Some of the most recent jobs have been in Randox in Antrim, with 540 jobs, Dunbia in Dungannon and a new firm, Eishtec, in Lurgan. A good geographical spread of jobs has been provided across Northern Ireland.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for that. Has she any thoughts about reallocating Civil Service jobs from the city to rural areas such as south Down?

Mrs Foster: Some of those experiences, especially in the Republic of Ireland, have not been particularly positive. As you know, some Departments have been engaged in looking at this issue. Indeed, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development hopes to relocate her headquarters to Ballykelly very soon. It is, of course, up to individual Ministers to bring forward proposals for their headquarters, their staff and their agency headquarters, and we will look at that against a business case.

Non-domestic Rates: Valuations

Ms Sugden: I join everyone in congratulating the Minister on her new role. I hope that she can bring the same success to the Department of Finance and Personnel as she did to DETI.

Like Mrs Dobson, I requested a meeting with the Minister's predecessor to discuss the revaluation process of non-domestic rate relief. I hope that the new Minister will not be as reluctant to meet me to discuss that.

T4. Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide her with a scoring mechanism for how we get to the net annual value of each property, as it seems that we currently apply a qualitative process to a quantitative outcome. (AQT 2484/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her comments. As I indicated to Mr McGlone, it is a process whereby valuations are based on the rent payable in 2013. If individuals or businesses feel that that is not a fair rent, of course they should appeal the assessment and take it further. I will not be able to get involved in each of the appeals — at the moment, over 1,000 have been registered — but I will be interested to hear generally about either side of the scale to see what has made that happen, and I am happy to look at those examples.

Ms Sugden: Mindful of the number of appeals and the number that have been upheld, is the

Minister planning to review the rates revaluation process?

Mrs Foster: The Member is probably aware that my predecessor put in place a business rates review, so he is looking at the whole process of rates and whether it needs to be looked at again. Is there a different way of gathering in that money, if I can be so crude, to help us to deal with public services in Northern Ireland? Certainly, I will take that business review forward to see what, if anything, we can do differently.

Corporation Tax

Mr Craig: I also congratulate the Minister on her promotion. Hopefully, she will be equally beneficial to some of my projects.

T5. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the position regarding the reduction of the rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland. (AQT 2485/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments. I was happy to help him with the broadband at Annahilt, which was a huge issue for him and, indeed, his constituents.

Royal Assent has been given to the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015, so it is now in place. Of course, devolution of the tax is contingent on the Stormont House Agreement being implemented in full. Therefore, I am back to the same issue of the implementation of welfare reform and the full implementation of the Stormont House Agreement. The business community, which I have worked alongside for seven years, will not forgive the Assembly or the Executive if we do not achieve the devolution of corporation tax after a very long campaign to bring it here to Northern Ireland and to make a difference not just for businesses in Northern Ireland but for the growth of the economy in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we must grasp that nettle and deal with it in the short window that is available to us.

Mr Craig: Thank you, Minister. Will you have further talks with the new Government in Westminster over the issue and how we get around the impasse that we have?

Mrs Foster: I will be happy to speak to new colleagues in the Treasury. I look forward to working with the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who will be my principal contact in Westminster, and with other colleagues.

However, let us be under no illusion: the impasse is here in Belfast in the Assembly, and we need to deal with it and deal with it quickly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Bronwyn McGahan is not in her place.

Ministerial Meeting: Chancellor of the Exchequer

T7. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of her new role, what requests she will make of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Britain to meet as soon as possible to discuss the bleak economic outlook that looks to be heading our way as a result of Tory policy. (AQT 2487/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I will meet the new Chancellor of the Exchequer for the United Kingdom, who is the same as the old Chancellor of the Exchequer. We will obviously want to talk to him about the settlement for Northern Ireland, and I very much look forward to that engagement.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Minister for her answer. What is her analysis of the touted £30 billion in cuts heading this way for this jurisdiction and what impact that will have on our public services?

Mrs Foster: The cuts that are heading this way, as the Member puts it, from the Conservative Government will be nothing compared with the position if we do not agree welfare reform, we do not have a Budget and we have to come to the legislative contingencies that will cover us. I do not think that the public of Northern Ireland will forgive us if we cannot deal with budgetary and welfare reform issues. Many times, we hear Sinn Féin talk about the vulnerable in our society, but everybody will be vulnerable: every person in this country will suffer if we cannot agree a Budget.

Financial Transactions Capital

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate the Minister too.

T8. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether all Departments applied for financial transactions capital and whether it will definitely all be spent or is there still a bit of leeway. (AQT 2488/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I cannot speak for other colleagues, and I certainly will not give a guarantee that it will all be spent, but a number

of Departments, principally those with large infrastructure issues, have applied. My former Department in particular applied for some large energy projects, and I very much hope that those will be able to avail themselves of financial transactions capital because that will really assist in moving forward some of the issues in relation to energy.

Mr Kinahan: Does that mean, Minister, that none will be handed back and that there are enough people queuing up to use it so that none will ever be given back to the Treasury?

Mrs Foster: Again, I cannot answer for other colleagues, but there will be a certain flexibility through the Budget exchange scheme at the end of the year. At the moment, provisionally, all the financial transactions capital has been allocated, so I am hopeful that we will be able to deal with this useful tool for engaging with the private sector in Northern Ireland and allowing it to have access to financial help.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Fra McCann is not in his place. Mr Nelson McCausland is not in his place. As the next period of questions does not begin until 3.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then.

3.30 pm

Education

Sure Start

1. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Education how he will ensure that the quality of the Sure Start service is maintained with the reduction in its budget and the extension of the programme for the 25% most deprived wards. (AQO 8075/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): To date, the Executive's Budget has been reduced by the Westminster Government by £1.5 billion over the last 5 years. As a direct result, there are significantly reduced finances to spend on the front-line services provided by the Department of Education. I have protected the Sure Start budget as far as possible so that the original proposed reduction of £2 million has been reduced to £1 million. It is anticipated that the reduction will be realised as far as possible from areas in service delivery where greater efficiencies can be realised, with the aim of protecting front-line services. The focus will be on ensuring that the services that have most impact in achieving better outcomes for children are maintained and protected.

From 2012 to 2015, Sure Start services have been gradually extended to the 25% most disadvantaged wards. During that time, a further £4.4 million has been invested by my Department. Four new Sure Start projects have been created, and 14 projects have expanded their catchment areas to extend services to an additional 21 wards. These services will be maintained. Expansion of service delivery is almost complete. Work is ongoing to effect the expansion of services into the two remaining wards. Funds are available in the budget to enable this work to be completed.

The quality of service provided by Sure Start projects is paramount. The achievement of the objectives of the programme will continue to be closely monitored. An outcomes framework is also in place and is the basis on which DE assigns targets to the programmes, progress against which is an indicator of achievement of the anticipated outcomes of the programme.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that over 30% of children present with language acquisition problems in preschool years and the importance of the language development programmes that currently take place, will any of those invaluable language development programmes be under threat as a result of the funding cut?

Mr O'Dowd: I have made it clear both to my officials and, consequently, to the deliverers of Sure Start that I want front-line services to be protected. I want the most vulnerable to continue to receive services through the Sure Start programme. I continue to monitor the situation, requesting further information from my officials through the Sure Start programme board, and I will continue to ensure that we protect our services as much as possible at the front line. The reality, however, is this: continuing cuts to the Executive's Budget mean continuing cuts to the education budget. It is frightening to look at the proposals coming from the Conservative Government in Westminster. Their continuing cuts to public spending will have a detrimental impact on all our public services here.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his responses so far, and I look forward to working with him. What progress has been made on refining the criteria used, in particular, for over-subscribed programmes in Sure Start to ensure that early intervention is better targeted?

Mr O'Dowd: I congratulate the Member on his appointment as Chair of the Education

Committee; I also look forward to working with him in the months ahead.

We recently carried out a strategic review of the Sure Start programme. I am currently studying the report, which was carried out in conjunction with the Department of Health, the delivery body for Sure Start. The recommendations cover a wide range of issues, including matters that the Member touched in his question. When I have finished studying the report, I will publish its findings and move forward to see how we continue to improve the delivery of services through Sure Start. We still spend around £24 million on the project. When it was first put in place, the total spend was around £9 million per annum; it is now up to £24 million. That is quite a significant investment. It has had a significant positive impact to date, but we want to ensure that we get value for money in the truest sense of the word in delivering the project into the future.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I note that the Minister is reviewing the findings of the independent review of Sure Start. I will maybe push the Minister on when the review and recommendations will be published.

Mr O'Dowd: Unfortunately, I cannot give the Member a definitive date, but it is quite a substantial and detailed report, and it is only right and proper that I give it due consideration before acting on it further.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a committee member of Horizon Sure Start.

James Heckman, a Nobel prize-winning economist, has written extensively on the value for money of early years investment. My question to the Minister is this: why has he chosen to cut early years investment, which brings benefits to the entire community, yet he is able to find money for a new post-primary Irish language school for 14 pupils?

Mr O'Dowd: I have not chosen to cut funding for early years: that was imposed on us by the Conservative Party, which has a minuscule mandate here. We continue to invest over £200 million in early years projects across the North. My Department is investing quite a significant amount of money in early years projects moving forward. We have seen year-on-year cuts to the block grant, which means that there will be year-on-year cuts to the moneys that the Department of Education has to spend.

I remind the Member and others that just before Christmas 2014 there was a debate in the House that called on the Department of Education to protect classroom spending. I stood at this Dispatch Box and said to everyone gathered that education was much broader than the classroom and was also about early years, youth services and community involvement. In fact, there was an amendment tabled by my party colleagues to that effect. The Assembly voted to protect classroom services, as did the Member. The Member can now stand in front of me and pontificate about early years services, but he voted that classroom services were more important than early years services.

Certificate in Religious Education

2. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the requirement on teachers in nursery and primary schools in the Catholic maintained sector to possess a Certificate in religious education. (AQO 8076/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not employ teachers. It is the policy of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) that teachers seeking employment in a Catholic maintained primary or nursery school must hold a teachers' certificate in religious education. In 2013, my Department agreed to undertake a review of teaching employment opportunities. The aim of the review was to investigate concerns that the requirement to possess the certificate could lead to inequality in the employment of and opportunities for teachers. Whilst the review concluded that there was no statistical evidence to suggest that the requirement for the certificate had resulted in inequalities of employment, it did, however, identify barriers in accessing the certificate that may lead to inequalities for those who wish to obtain it.

CCMS has since amended its appointment scheme to allow teachers who do not hold the certificate and who would otherwise be made redundant to be redeployed into a Catholic maintained school and then be required to secure the certificate within three years of redeployment.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. We hear that it is still needed after three years.

The Minister said on 9 February:

"In the teaching of the sacraments, I believe that there are other ways of achieving that

objective and goal for the Catholic sector rather than every teacher having a certificate." — [Official Report, Vol 101, No 7, p29, col 2].

That position lasted 24 hours before the Minister completely contradicted it. Who sets the policy? Is it Balloo House or Connolly House, or is he changing his mind?

Mr O'Dowd: I wonder what the lines of communication are like in the Ulster Unionist Party. Your colleague Sandra Overend asked me the exact same question at the last Question Time. I know you were all busy with elections and that there was canvassing going on etc, but at least you could talk to each other. I gave an answer to Sandra Overend, and I will repeat it to you: to err is human; to forgive is divine. I made a mistake in my answer to what I believe was a topical question. I corrected it the next day, as I should do and as the Speaker requires of me. Everyone received a letter that day or the following day. That is practically verbatim the response I gave to Ms Overend, I think, four weeks ago.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister outline what progress has been made in recent years to ensure greater access to the certificate in religious education?

Mr O'Dowd: Following the review carried out by my Department, measures have been taken, including the provision of fee reimbursement for distance learning courses for the certificate. Stranmillis University College has been assisted by St Mary's University College to explore how the institutions might collaborate to provide Stranmillis students with the opportunity to obtain the certificate. Stranmillis has advised my Department that it now provides information on its website on how to access the certificate and that it will facilitate support seminars with designated tutors for students who are completing the certificate through distance learning. Therefore, there have been several significant steps taken since my Department carried out the review following concerns expressed by a number of Members, and those will assist people of all denominations and none to achieve the certificate. I advise Members who continue to have concerns to sit down and talk the matter through with CCMS. It is the employing authority that adopts the use of the certificate, so, if Members have concerns, sit down with CCMS, express those concerns to CCMS and talk the matter out.

Mr McCausland: All primary-school teachers receive some element in their training that presumably equips them to teach religious education as part of their normal training. Can the Minister tell us what is contained in the preparation of the certificate in religious education that is additional? Is it purely preparation for the Roman Catholic sacrament of confirmation, or are there other elements involved?

Mr O'Dowd: I confess to not being an expert on the Catholic certificate. As I said in my response to Mr Sheehan, if Members have concerns about the Catholic certificate or want to have more information about it and why CCMS believes it to be important to its sector, I suggest that they sit down with CCMS and talk the matter through.

Mr Rogers: Following on from Mr Sheehan's question, Minister, what discussions have you had with your DEL colleague to ensure that students in Stranmillis and students who are doing PGCEs have equal access to the certificate?

Mr O'Dowd: As I set out, following the review that my Department carried out in 2013, it is clear that both St Mary's and Stranmillis are working together to facilitate people of all denominations and none to obtain the certificate. There is an opportunity for distance learning on the matter as well. I have had no direct discussions that I can recall with Minister Farry on the matter, but, following the review that I commissioned in 2013, there has clearly been cooperation between the teaching colleges and others on it.

Shared Education: Finance

3. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed £500 million allocation to shared education by the UK Government. (AQO 8077/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question. Initial discussions have taken place between officials in the Treasury, the NIO, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Education to establish which projects can potentially be funded under the £500 million capital investment. Discussions will continue, and we hope to achieve a successful conclusion.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. How will he ensure that the money will provide added value through increased outcomes for shared and integrated education rather than be

used just to prop up under-pressure capital schemes?

Mr O'Dowd: I can assure the Member that, for all parties to the discussions, it is certainly in their mind, if not foremost in their mind, to ensure that we receive value for money from investing quite a significant amount of capital in our education system. However, any school that we invest in into the future will have to be a sustainable school. It will have to be a school that has shown that it can meet the sustainability figures and will create a sustainable learning environment for the young people attending. All those things are in the melting pot and are being discussed. I just want to reach the point at which we have a successful conclusion and can start using the funds to develop and enrich our education estate further.

I have to say that I do not see any investment or further money coming our way being used simply to prop up a significantly depleted capital budget in my Department. Any money that I use, I will always use wisely.

3.45 pm

Mr Cree: Her Majesty's Government's contribution of £500 million of new capital under the Stormont House Agreement is subject to those projects being agreed, as I understand it, between the Executive and the UK Government. Can the Minister explain how he thinks that will work in practice, who will be involved in it, and whether, in fact, the Northern Ireland Office and the Executive have to agree together all the projects?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said in response to the original question, the NIO, the Treasury, the Department of Finance and Personnel and my own Department are talking to one another about how we set out the parameters of this project and how we deliver it. It is clear from that context that we will all have to agree the broad framework; however, whether we have to come down to agree to each individual project is a matter for further discussion. At this stage, what we want to agree is the broad parameters of how the money can be invested going into the future. Then, we will get down to the fine minutiae of the negotiations, dotting the i's and crossing the t's.

Mr Dallat: How can the Minister ensure that shared education goes beyond the annual outing to the Balmoral Show in the same bus and, in fact, genuinely awards schools that

bring their children together to work and be educated together?

Mr O'Dowd: I encourage everyone to visit the Balmoral Show. It is a fine day out and a good insight into the rural community and the investment that the rural and farming communities give to the economy.

I understand where the Member is coming from. Hopefully, we will bring legislation before the Assembly in the near future. I am preparing a paper to submit to my Executive colleagues, hopefully before the end of this month, which will receive agreement to bring forward draft legislation to set the objectives and goals of shared education. It has to move beyond sharing a bus. It has to move towards talking about and learning from one another and respecting one another's cultural points of view, and the best way of doing that is for young people to learn about one another from one another.

Primary Schools: Carryduff

4. Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education, given the increasing demand for places in Carryduff primary schools, how he is planning to mitigate the steady increase in demand and the yearly oversubscription to these schools. (AQO 8078/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Anticipating the educational needs in an area and planning to meet them through a network of sustainable schools is the key objective of the area-planning process. The aim is to ensure that we have the right type and size of schools in the right places to meet pupils' needs.

It is the responsibility of the planning authorities to plan for primary-school provision in the Carryduff area and to bring forward proposals for my consideration. Recently, I have had representations from the local community regarding their concerns about maintained primary provision in this area. I therefore asked the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) in January 2015 to work with the former South Eastern Education and Library Board, and with other sectors in the area, to put a plan in place to deal with the issues raised and to keep me updated on progress.

CCMS has confirmed that, in the last few months, it has reviewed the position in the Carryduff area. It states that the number of unplaced children in the area is not sufficiently high to enable it to bring proposals to the Department for an increase in primary-school

provision. However, CCMS will review that position following the end of the admission process for September 2015.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his answer. Similarly, in south Belfast, we see a huge shortage of nursery and playgroup places. Is there any plan to address that oversubscription?

Mr O'Dowd: First, we need to define "huge" oversubscription. We have just witnessed the first round of placements in preschool settings, and the vast majority of children were placed in that first round. We are now involved in the second round, whereby parents have been provided with a list of available places. We are encouraging parents to respond and to identify places on that list that are suitable for their children. That is the process that we are involved in at the minute.

At departmental level, we are also engaged with the Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs) in each of the areas and are asking them to continually monitor the situation and provide us with up-to-date data about where additional places may be required. I have sufficient funding to provide additional places where they are required.

Mr McKinney: As the Minister will be aware, Carryduff and the wider area has grown substantially and there is major pressure on school provision there. That pressure will grow even more with further planning permission being granted and further housing planned. What longer term plan is the Minister engaged in to ensure that the provision of educational places is there for those who want to move into that area?

Mr O'Dowd: As I outlined to Ms Lo, the responsibility rests jointly with the CCMS and the south-eastern region of the Education Authority. We have an area planning process in place and look forward to the projections of numbers in areas. All managing authorities are under no doubt that they have to ensure that they are planning for educational provision a number of years into the future. We often hear of area planning in the context of schools closing, but it also works in the context of expanding individual schools or building and providing completely new schools in new areas to meet demand.

There was particular pressure in the Catholic sector in that area and the CCMS has reported back. It stated that, while there is a pressure, it does not, at this stage, need to be dealt with

through what is known as a development proposal or a significant increase in places. It may and can be dealt with through temporary variations. We have told the CCMS that it needs to constantly review the situation and plan as much as it possibly can, and it has indicated that it will do so.

Education Maintenance Allowance

5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Education how much his Department contributes towards resourcing the education maintenance allowance. (AQO 8079/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question. The education maintenance allowance (EMA) scheme was jointly introduced in September 2004 by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. DEL holds the budget for the payment of the allowance, but I allocated £1.85 million in 2013-14 and £3.6 million each year from 2014-15 to fund the bonus payment element of the scheme. In addition, I have created a small budget that the Department allocates to schools to help fund the cost of administering the scheme. That was £318,000 in 2014-15.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister believe that welfare reform will have an impact on the EMA eligibility criteria?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I do not believe that it will. A refinement of other benefits that are linked to free school meals entitlement may be required if and when welfare reform is agreed, but EMA is based on family income rather than individual income and should be able to fit into any welfare reform that is proposed.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far.

An dtig liom iarraidh ar an Aire, ó thaobh sainmhíniú oideachais roinnte de, cad é an tábhacht a bhaineas le grúpaí socheacnamaíocha, chomh maith le grúpaí creidimh, a bheith san áireamh? What is the importance of including socio-economic groups as well as religious groups in any shared education definition?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I am not sure whether the Member is referring to question 6. Are we moving on to the next question rather than —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 6.

Shared Education: Definition

6. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Education what factors, other than religious identity, are included in his Department's current definition of shared education. (AQO 8080/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: OK. The draft legislation definition of shared education, which is subject to public consultation, references those of different religious beliefs or political opinions, as well as those who are and are not experiencing socio-economic deprivation. Prior to finalising the definition, I am considering the inclusion of political opinion following feedback from the public consultation. 'Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education', expands on the legislative definition with a practical description that is based on the definition endorsed by the ministerial advisory group on shared education and that includes all section 75 categories.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms McCorley for a supplementary question.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but it was my mistake. I asked my supplementary question in place of the substantive question. I am happy with the Minister's response.

Devenish College

7. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Education for a progress report on Devenish College. (AQO 8081/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In January 2013, I announced the Devenish project to replace Devenish College and facilitate the amalgamation or closure of Lisnaskea High School. The business case for the project has been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel at an estimated capital cost of £23.2 million. A tender has also recently been approved by my Department to take forward enabling works to facilitate the new build. That work will commence shortly. Procurement is under way for an integrated design team to take forward the design for the new school, and it is anticipated that that team will be appointed later this month. Planning permission and other statutory approvals will have to be obtained before the appointment of a contractor to carry out the build. It is currently expected that the

new build will complete in November 2018, and it will provide a modern place of learning and teaching for the future pupils of Devenish College.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answer. Having listened to it, I think there are some positives in what he said. However, it is still disappointing that he is now talking about 2018 for completion. Of course, the Assembly has only one year of its term still to run, so it will not happen in this term. Can the Minister assure us a bit more definitely that he is real about this programme and that we are going to see this one carried through? It has been on the agenda for a long, long time, as he is aware.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the fact that I have moved Lord Morrow from a point of believing that this would never happen to one where he thinks that there are some positives in it. I am very positive about this project. It is not unusual for capital programmes to roll from one Administration into another, but you have to plan moving forward. We are awarding the contract; a design team will be appointed in May 2015; and we are moving forward. Completion by November 2018 means that construction work will have to start at some stage in 2016. I have moved this project on more than anyone else has. It has come to the stage where it is definite that it is moving ahead. In fact, some enabling works are already taking place on-site because the topography is quite difficult and we have had to spend a not insignificant amount of money in preparing it for the new build. I am confident that Devenish College can look to the future with great confidence.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Patsy McGlone is not in his place.

Preschool Places: Lagan Valley

9. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education how many applicants in Lagan Valley did not receive a funded preschool place at the first stage of the allocation process. (AQO 8083/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The preschool education advisory group of each region of the Education Authority is responsible for ensuring that there is adequate preschool provision in local areas. The chief executive of the Education Authority has advised me that, at the end of stage 1 of the preschool admissions process, 62 children were unplaced in the Lagan Valley constituency area; 1,649 applications were received; 1,552

children were offered a place; and 95 places remain available. A new provider has been introduced for parents to consider at stage 2 of the process and, if necessary, additional sessions can be provided at other settings.

It is important to point out that those figures represent the end of stage 1 of the preschool admissions process only. I have made available sufficient funding to meet the projected need for preschool places for the 2015-16 academic year, and I have strongly encourage parents of children who have not received the offer of a funded preschool place to consider all preschool provision that remains available and to provide a range of preferences at stage 2 to increase the chances of securing a place for their child.

For the 2014-15 admissions year, 99.9% of children whose parents stayed with the admissions process received the offer of a funded preschool place.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to be brief with his supplementary question.

Mr Givan: Each year, Minister, there is this scenario, particularly in the north Lisburn part of the Lagan Valley constituency. Surely something is going wrong when, every year, this situation is repeated. Will he undertake to review the provision in some of the highly sought-after places that people are applying for in the Lagan Valley constituency?

Mr O'Dowd: It is a matter for the PEAG in the area to review the places. One part of me understands why the media concentrates on those children who did not get in, but look at the figures. There were 1,649 applicants, and 1,552 children were offered a place in the first round. None of those parents will come into your constituency office and thank you. Quite rightly, parents who do not get a place will say that it needs to be sorted out.

4.00 pm

We are only at stage 1. There is another stage to go through. We will continue to work with parents in your area and monitor the situation through the PEAGs. I have committed to providing the finance to ensure that, if there are insufficient places, we place children in the nearest suitable location for them and their parents. It is not a case of finance, we have the finance.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We are out of time.

Mr O'Dowd: We have to go through a very complicated system, and we are continuing to work at it.

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

Nursery Provision: East Belfast

T1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education how many funded nursery schools in East Belfast were oversubscribed for 2015/16. (AQT 2491/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I know that these are topical questions, but, in fairness, it is impossible for me to have all that information in front of me. I am more than happy to provide the Member with the information. The picture across all constituencies is that the vast majority of children have been placed. In areas referred to as hotspots, we are continuing to monitor the situation through the PEAGs.

As I said to Mr Givan, this is not about finance. We will provide finance where it is required to provide new places, but we are only at the first stage of this process. There is another stage: parents have been asked to come forward with further preferences on a list that has been provided. I emphasise again that all the places on the list will not suit the parents to whom it is sent. It is a generic list that is sent from the regional offices of the authority. I encourage parents to stick with the process, and we will continue to move this forward.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response. I can advise him that a number of nursery schools in East Belfast are oversubscribed for 2015-16. After round 1, I received a number of calls from parents seeking help — right across East Belfast, from the Newtownards Road to Dundonald — because their children had not been offered a place. What work is he doing to improve application guidance and provide additional accessible nursery places in East Belfast?

Mr O'Dowd: So, neither of us know the number — we can confirm that. However, we know that the vast majority of pupils have been placed. There is a difference between nurseries being oversubscribed and insufficient places being available in an area. It may well be the case that parents do not get the nursery school

places that they bid for. Nevertheless, we have made changes over the years. For instance, until a year ago, a nursery school could accept only 26 or 52 children, or perhaps a further three. I have now increased that so that they can take in a further four, if the demand is recognised by the PEAG.

We have also brought in extra community and voluntary places. The community and voluntary sector is an important provider of PEAG places and of broader community and voluntary work. We have to be careful when calling for more nursery school places, because that is often code for taking them off the community and voluntary sector and giving them to nursery schools, which results in a decline in the community and voluntary sector straightaway. It is an important source of income for those providers.

There have been significant changes over the last three or four years. In my first year in office, I carried out a review of preschool provision, and it has improved beyond recognition since then. As I said in answer to the first question, the vast majority of pupils have been placed. Only 25% of that placement, by the way, relates to social deprivation. The outcry about priority being given to areas of social deprivation does not stack up when you look at the figures. You will continue to be lobbied, and rightly so, by parents whose children have not received places, but we are only at stage 1, and the process has not been completed. As I said, 99.9% of parents who stuck with the system last year had their child placed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Steven Agnew is not in his place. I call Mr Fearghal McKinney.

GCSE Scoring System

T3. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Education what consideration is being given to changing the GCSE scoring system to match the new system in England, given that many Northern Ireland schools do both English and Northern Ireland board exams, and whether he agrees that a mixed scoring system is confusing for students and employers. (AQT 2493/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have in place an examinations review body. I have asked it to carry out further work to look at all aspects of our examination system: its quality; how we compare with other jurisdictions in these islands; and how transferable and portable our exams are. That

work continues, and I will continue to take advice from the review body.

I am clearly aware of the changes to the scoring metrics in England, but it will not present a significant problem to our students. Remember this: students from throughout the world travel to universities in this group of islands, so our universities are very used to dealing with different examinations and scoring systems. We will continue to liaise with universities, particularly in England and Wales, on the matter. I am confident that, as we move forward, there will be no detrimental impact on our students.

Mr McKinney: While the Minister and the institutions might have confidence, how does that confidence translate to those taking the exams, who may view the resultant decimal as being different from grades A, B or C?

Mr O'Dowd: It is a matter of communicating with our schools through careers advisers and senior management. All those things continue to happen. As I said, I will continue to keep the matter under review. I am taking advice from an expert group about the examination system. We have taken each step very slowly — rightly so. The expert group is made up of educationalists, further and higher educationalists, the business sector and others who take a very rounded look at our examination system.

When Secretary Gove was in place in the Department for Education, I said that they had moved too quickly, and I am still of that view. If we take this at an informed pace, there will be no detrimental impact on our students.

Nursery Provision: Lisburn/Moira Area

T4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Education whether he will give a commitment to review nursery provision in north Lisburn and Moira, given that there has been a lack of such provision for five years. (AQT 2494/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has taken the unusual step of not being in his place but in somebody else's place.

I assure the Member that these matters are under constant review at PEAG level. Lisburn has thrown up a number of issues throughout the years, and we have been able to react to them in the short, medium and long term. I have every confidence that we will also be able to react in the weeks and months ahead to

those. I undertake to write to the local PEAG to seek further confirmation that it is keeping the matter under constant review and ask what plans it has now and for the future.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his commitment. There is something wrong with what the PEAG is doing. If it were a short-term issue over a year or two, I could understand, but, for the past five years, we have had difficulties. People have been told that they have places up to 16 miles away from their locality. Minister, when you speak to the PEAGs, will you be forceful with them on the issue? We need medium- to long-term planning in Lagan Valley.

Mr O'Dowd: I reaffirm to the Member that I will engage with the PEAGs on the matter, although I do not think that I have to speak to them firmly. I will press home the concerns that have been raised by representatives in the House today.

Early Years Funding: East Londonderry

T5. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Education whether, in light of the recent announcement of cuts to early years funding that sent shock waves through the community, he has any words of comfort to pass on to groups such as the Harpur's Hill Children and Family Centre and the Aghadowey Pre-school Playgroup in East Londonderry. (AQT 2495/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I do not wish to hand out words of comfort that are meaningless. However, I have my budget under review, and I will be making bids to the June monitoring round. If I secure funding from my budget or the June monitoring round, the item at the very top of the list is early years.

However, we will have to change how we deliver the early years fund. It has operated as a closed fund since 2004, which means that only those groups that were involved in 2004 can continue to apply. There are many organisations within your constituency, mine and those of other Members that cannot apply to the fund, and which are equally deserving of places. I have received criticism of the early years fund from that perspective. I will seek further funding for that project, but it will have to be delivered on different criteria. Certainly it will be targeting areas of greatest need.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I agree with what he says; there are other people who need funding. Does he agree that early years funding is very important in a child's education? Maybe it is one of the last places that we should be looking at to cut, no matter what our budget is saying.

Mr O'Dowd: When I delivered my budget at the Education Committee, I said that we were now among the sacred cows. There is no fat left in the system that we can go to, trim off and say, "That will have no impact on communities. It will have no impact on education. It will have no impact." I am down to the bone; I am among sacred cows. I am making decisions around funding that I never thought I would have to make. That is why I am so concerned about what is coming at us from the current Conservative Government. If there are further cuts, they will be to the detriment of our young people and our economy, whether I am in Education or whether there is another Education Minister.

Lisanelly Education Campus

T6. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the Lisanelly education campus. (AQT 2496/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am pleased to advise that the Department is making steady and significant progress on the Lisanelly programme. The contract for the construction of the first school on site, Arvalee School and Resource Centre, has been awarded to Woodvale Construction, and work has begun on site. The opening remains on track for September 2016. The main campus, which comprises the five post-primary schools, remains on schedule to open in 2020.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the budgetary constraints, is the Minister confident that the project will be completed on time?

Mr O'Dowd: The Lisanelly programme has been within this Programme for Government and previous Programmes for Government. I have no doubt that it will continue into 2020. I have secured funding for this year to move the project forward. I have no doubt that capital funds will be available for it next year. The project is at such an advanced stage and is of such educational, societal and economical significance that I have no doubt it will continue to be in Programmes for Government and that successive Ministers will continue to support it.

Foyle and Ebrington College

T7. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Foyle and Ebrington college in the Waterside, Londonderry. (AQT 2497/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It too is making significant progress. I believe that I am attending an event in the next number of weeks in relation to the opening of the site for development. That is a very welcome development in your constituency, providing new facilities for Foyle and Ebrington.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his answer. I agree with the comments that he has made. There have been a number of complications throughout the project. Can the Minister foresee any other complications that could delay the project further?

Mr O'Dowd: Let us hope not, but when you go into a major development, all sorts of things can crop up. I expect that, at this stage, site searches will have been done and, if various varieties of knotweed are there, they will have been identified and that all the problems that can arise when you put a major capital programme on site have been identified. I expect a relatively smooth journey towards completion of the project, and I look forward to the official opening in the next number of years.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Members may take their ease while we change the top Table.

Mr McGlone: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the House for missing my question earlier. There was no deliberate intent or slight to the House on my part; it entirely slipped my mind.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Noted.

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

Motion made:

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

4.15 pm

Adjournment

Suicide Prevention: Londonderry

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes and all other Members who speak will have approximately seven minutes. As this is the first occasion that the Assembly will hear from Mr Gary Middleton, I remind the House that the convention is that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Middleton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a great honour to give my maiden speech to the House as the new MLA for Foyle. First, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my party and constituents for their encouragement and support thus far.

Sadly, it gives me no pleasure to discuss the topic of suicide, specifically in my own constituency in Londonderry. The issue of suicide prevention is a matter of huge public importance. Every one of us in this Chamber will have known someone who has taken their own life or attempted to do so. I, of course, am no different. It is something that is close to my heart, and my sympathies go out to all those who have been bereaved through such tragic circumstances.

A 2014 University of Ulster study of 1,671 suicides and probable suicides in Northern Ireland from 2005 to 2011 showed that 77% of those who died were male and 23% female. Just half of those who died by suicide were known to have a mental health disorder. Despite high levels of contact, a considerable proportion of suicidal people appear to be undiagnosed and untreated for their mental health problems. The 2013 figures show that there were 303 registered deaths by suicide, with provisional figures for 2014 showing that there were 268 suicides. Whilst it is welcome that, in Northern Ireland overall, there has been a decline in the number of suicides, some constituencies are seeing a rise and an increase in calls to organisations that help people who have suicidal thoughts.

One death by suicide is, of course, one too many. Suicide is preventable. We all have a stake in suicide prevention. The collective efforts of Departments, local organisations, mental health practitioners and related professionals can reduce the prevalence of suicide in our communities. Evidence suggests that access to crisis support, intervention and education can have a major impact in reducing the levels of suicide and preventing it.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank all organisations that are working with individuals on their mental health and any difficulties that they may be facing in their lives. Thanks also to our health professionals for the essential service that they provide. Many in our society may never require these services; it is only when we need help ourselves that we truly realise and appreciate their importance.

In the Foyle constituency, we are all too aware of the effects of suicide. Lives are lost, families devastated and communities broken. Between January and March this year alone, two bodies were recovered from the River Foyle by Foyle Search and Rescue. They have also taken one individual out of the river alive and 13 away from the river edge and bridges, while also having 17 causes of concern. I am sure that you will all agree that these figures are deeply concerning. Thankfully, with the work of Foyle Search and Rescue, lives are being saved and interventions put in place.

Suicide cannot be fully prevented until we understand why an individual has suicidal thoughts and what the causes are. According to health professionals, most often, suicidal thoughts are the result of feeling like you cannot cope when faced with what seems to be an overwhelming life situation. Individuals face a sort of tunnel vision, where, in the middle of a crisis, suicide appears to be the only way out. Individuals need help and support. Issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, relationship breakdowns, addictions, bullying and even financial difficulties can have a serious effect on our mental health. It is worth noting that any one of us can face these types of issues during our life and find ourselves in crisis. We must work together to ensure that the necessary services and help are available for those who need it.

As Members of this legislative Assembly, I believe that it is our duty to ensure that we do all that we can to assist suicide prevention. I believe that there are a number of ways in which we can work towards that. The first is by publishing the new suicide prevention and mental health promotion strategy. I know that

that is under development, and I look forward to hearing from the Health Minister where that is at.

The second is by increasing public awareness through media campaigns. We have seen the impact of those types of campaigns on road safety, and there is no doubt that they have helped to increase the public's understanding around road traffic collisions and therefore helped to reduce the number of traffic-related deaths. We should further develop those types of campaigns in the area of mental health awareness and suicide prevention. Many individual organisations, schools and youth groups have already done so and are actively promoting the importance of looking after your mental health. In my constituency, the Cathedral Youth Club in the Fountain will shortly release a DVD to raise much-needed awareness among the youth sector and to teach our young people that there is always help available no matter how difficult the situation is.

Thirdly, I believe that further safety measures are required along our river edges and bridges to support the work of organisations and, of course, to help individuals. Additional CCTV would be of significant importance, along with additional signage to help those who need assistance and to make them aware of the services that are available. When interventions are made on the river edges, one of the main concerns is what assistance is then available for the individuals affected. Many would say that there are, at times, only two choices: either the A&E department or the police station. In light of that information, I plan to further work with the Health Minister and meet him to discuss the service provision in the Londonderry area for those who find themselves in difficulty and, indeed, whether a detox facility would be feasible. I want to pay tribute to all those who have been campaigning. There is a strong campaign on the ground in my constituency to raise awareness, seek support for additional services and maintain the services that we have.

I believe that it is now time that we all work together to eradicate suicide. With this being Mental Health Awareness Week, it is timely that we are having this Adjournment debate. I hope that we can take stock from the debate and move forward together towards a brighter future for all.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for the opportunity to speak on this topic. However, it is a difficult and emotive subject for all of us but one that,

nonetheless, requires the House's reflection and, indeed, action.

I want to take the opportunity to welcome and congratulate the new Health Minister on his appointment. I appreciate his attendance today and look forward to his response on this very important issue.

As the Member said, suicide is an issue that blights and has blighted our island, and almost every city and, indeed, village knows the pain of losing people through suicide. Right across the island and right across our health systems, mental health protection is considerably lower down the importance scale, and that is a challenge for our society in moving forward. The European average spend on mental health is around 12% of the budget, and there is an onus and responsibility on us to bring our budgetary lines into line with that average. It also needs to be reflected that the gap between suicide rates in deprived areas and less deprived areas can be as much as 73%. As the Member pointed out, the child poverty statistics for Foyle highlight that, in some areas, more than 60% of children are living in poverty. There is a direct correlation with some of these issues.

We should reflect on the statistics. In 2011, there were 39 deaths by suicide in the Western Trust. In 2013, there were 51. So, there is a challenge in our city and region. The Member quite rightly mentioned the University of Ulster study, which showed that 77% of all suicides that were looked at were by males and 23% were by females. There was evidence of alcohol consumption in at least 41% of the cases. That is across the Six Counties, but, nonetheless, we need to be mindful of that figure.

Another figure that was quite stark was that just over half of those who died by suicide — 50.1% — were known to have a mental health disorder. That is a direct correlation that needs to be reflected on.

When I reflect on my city, I think that, generally, although addiction is not always linked to suicide rates, it is nonetheless important for us to reflect that the nature of addiction has changed. For many generations, addiction in most cases was to either alcohol or drugs. Now it is polysubstance. Therefore, interventions, responses, rehabilitation and detoxification need to be altered accordingly.

There has been much very vocal debate, as the Member said, about the need for a detox facility for Derry. Detox, however, is only one very

specialised part of treating the issue. Our city needs support for early intervention work that tackles the root causes of addiction, and it needs crisis intervention models. We collectively need to understand and target early the root causes of mental health problems and addiction, and we need to look at models of crisis intervention and at the crisis intervention services when those gaps appear.

Over the last year, Sinn Féin has established an addiction task force in the city. To date, 20 statutory, voluntary and other organisations have signed up to the urgency of that task force. The aim of the task force is very clear: to provide the evidence-based case for the city. In essence, it will examine what works — as the proposer said, a lot of services work — where the gaps are and how we can address them. That intervention is often about a crisis intervention model or what is increasingly being called a safe space model, where a young person can go with trained counsellors in a safe environment until the next intervention is agreed and not missed. That is a similar model to what is proposed through the FASA project in Belfast.

I will make this point about detox: what is ironic about the debate is that Derry has a purpose-built detoxification unit based on our doorstep. The White Oaks facility in Muff in County Donegal was purpose-built for detox in its layout, yet it is not in operation. I appeal to the new Health Minister to bring freshness and a fresh approach to the debate. I throw out an invitation to the Health Minister to visit the facility, which has been purpose-built for that function. I look forward to the Minister's response on that.

Addiction does not respect gender, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion or borders. It is vital that, as part of the debate in dealing with addiction issues, we reflect on and move towards making the facility in Donegal operational.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): A number of additional Members have shown considerable interest, so I ask remaining Members to restrict their comments to five minutes.

Mr Durkan: I begin by congratulating Mr Middleton, first, on his elevation, if you can call it that, to the Assembly but, more importantly, for bringing this extremely important and emotive subject to the Floor.

The scourge of suicide is not exclusive to our constituency. However, it is a problem that is extremely pronounced in the city of Derry.

Suicide is, as I said, a massive scourge on society today. It takes lives, and it breaks lives. I can and will speak from personal experience of the devastation that a suicide brings to a family and the awful repercussions that it has across communities. Those who lose a loved one to suicide can never have full closure. In the darkness of night or even at random intervals throughout the day, you are haunted by questions to which you will never get answers. Should I have seen something? Could I have done something? Would things have been any different had I said something?

4.30 pm

We, as legislators and leaders in our community, need to do all that we can to ensure that more lives are not lost and that more families are not left with those unanswered questions. We can do something, and we must do something. We must ensure that the groups and services working hard and working well on suicide prevention are supported and that people are made aware of them. Good work is being done by many organisations in our constituency, not least by Foyle Search and Rescue, Zest, Community Action for Locally Managing Stress (CALMS) and, of course, the Samaritans. There are many others, as well as community-based initiatives such as Sports Against Suicide, for which I recently participated in a fundraising and awareness-raising charity boxing match.

Good work is also being done by the statutory agencies. I, along with my colleague Pat Ramsey, recently met the Public Health Agency to hear about the initiatives that it hopes to bring forward aimed at reducing the harrowing suicide rates in our city. However, that work needs to be told to the public and needs to be sold to the public. Without doubt, the perception out there is that we, as a Government, are not acting and are certainly not acting fast enough to tackle this awful blight.

There is a groundswell of opinion in Derry around the need for a detox centre, and both Members who have already spoken referred to that. That debate has to take place in public, and we need the health professionals to outline and illustrate the services that exist and how they can best be availed of. We have to ensure that our agencies — our statutory agencies in particular — work in a joined-up manner. Recently in our constituency, a young man was rescued from the Foyle Bridge by the police, who just took him home. Twenty-four hours later, he was in the Foyle. There are serious gaps here that need to be filled and can be filled.

Maeve spoke about the need for increased investment in mental health, and, of course, there is a massive correlation between unemployment, economic inactivity and poor mental health. Members do not need to be reminded about the dire economic situation in our constituency. One thing that we can all do — I am not putting the onus on the Minister, as this is something that we all have to do — is work to tackle the stigma attached not just to suicide but to poor mental health. People need to be told and reminded at every opportunity that it is OK not to be OK, that it is OK to ask for help and that there are people whom they can ask to help.

I again congratulate Mr Middleton for bringing the issue to the House. I am keen to work with the Minister on it. I attend regularly the ministerial working group on suicide, and it is something that we all have to work on together across Departments, across parties and across communities.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I add my thanks to Gary Middleton for securing a debate on what is obviously a very important subject. To use his maiden speech in that regard is good testimony to how he sees the issue of people who take their own life, particularly in Derry and the rest of our constituency. It is good to see the Minister here. It is possibly his first engagement with the Assembly in his new role, and that highlights the need for the subject to get this type of attention.

There is absolutely no doubt that the subject of people who take their own life affects many, many people and families. As other Members have said, it is very complex, and we have to be very sensitive and take great care when we discuss it. It is hard to speak for other people, but in our daily work and daily life, we know many people who have been affected directly by it. We see how it devastates families, and Mark H Durkan spoke poignantly and movingly about his personal experiences. To come to a forum like this and speak in that way is remarkable. I want to put that on the record.

I think that all of us this week would have received the briefing paper from the Bamford Centre at Ulster University. We know from daily life, our work, and particularly those on the Health Committee, that we are bombarded with statistics. While they help us to identify the problem, sometimes, particularly on an occasion like today, statistics may dehumanise what is a personal and human problem. However, the paper provided an insight into the complexity of people who find themselves in a

position where for them the only way out of a problem is to end their lives. When you see the breakdown in the statistics, perhaps there is a tendency for us to make assumptions. There is a complex mix of reasons why people find themselves in that position, so when we are looking for solutions or remedies, we also have to look at that complexity.

Resources will always add to our ability to combat suicide. We have heard from experts such as clinicians and people who work in statutory provision, as well as in the community and voluntary sector, that they all have a common theme, which is early intervention. All of us have a contribution to make, be it supporting clinicians, families or other initiatives to ensure that there is early intervention.

Mark H talked about a situation in Derry when a lad was rescued by the PSNI at the point of taking his own life. However, the police themselves, even in public comment, said that they had nowhere at that time to take that person. It is that type of intervention that we have to turn our attention to.

Mark H Durkan also talked about the stigma of mental health and people perhaps finding it difficult to discuss, even with family or friends. In recent times, we have seen high-profile people in sport, music or other professions talking about suffering from depression and dealing with mental health issues. That allows us all to realise that dealing with that issue is not down to the circumstances that you find yourself in. Depression pervades the lives of many people. Dealing with the stigma does not take much resource, but it can have a great impact.

Mr Hussey: I, too, welcome Mr Middleton to the House and thank him for bringing this subject to the Floor.

Like Mr Durkan's, my family has experienced suicide. That word on its own puts a shiver down your spine. I welcome the Health Minister here today and wish him well in his new role.

Is suicide preventable? In some cases, the answer is no, and we have to accept that. Yes, we want a suicide prevention strategy, but we have looked at that over the years. I have quite a few documents here. I will not read them all, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you have given me only five minutes, but I will do my best to get through as many as I can.

Is it a mental health disorder? Is it identifiable? Can you point at somebody and say, "Well, that person may or may not commit suicide"? You

simply cannot do it. I have spoken to people who attempted suicide, and they will tell you that at the point when they make their mind up to commit suicide, everything in their world is rosy. They have dealt with all the issues in their head. Therefore, they have tidied everything away, and suicide is the option; they are gone. Of course, for those who are left behind, it is a horrible experience. My mother, who recently passed away, took the concern she had over my brother's death to her grave. What if she had done something else? My mother could not have stopped it. Nobody could have stopped it; but that stays with the family.

What are the causes? If we knew all the causes, we would know all the answers. Certainly, bullying is one of them. There are also legal highs, alcohol, depression, debt, marriage breakdown and work-related issues. We will see that more and more as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sets in to members of the security forces, for example, or perhaps to those who were involved in various actions over the years. People then have time to reflect, and some of their actions or some of the things they have seen come back to haunt them.

Sexuality is another one of the points that can cause someone to decide to commit suicide. I had a look at the Rainbow Project, which is based in Londonderry and in Belfast, because I decided when I was going to research this that I was going to look up as many documents as I could. It has a very interesting document by Malachai O'Hara called 'Through Our Minds: Exploring the Emotional Health and Well Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Northern Ireland'. It states:

"The policy context in Northern Ireland relates to the historic Mental Health Promotion Strategy 2003-2008 and the current refreshed version of the Suicide Prevention Strategy – Protect Life, which ran from 2006-2011 and has been refreshed from 2012-2014."

Therefore, we have the various strategies. There is the shOUT report, 'The Needs of Young People in Northern Ireland who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender'. It says that they are at least three times more likely to commit suicide or to attempt suicide, two and a half times more likely to self-harm, five times more likely to suffer from depression and 20 times more likely to suffer from an eating disorder than their heterosexual counterparts. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) figures show that, in 2013, 14,968 deaths were registered in

Northern Ireland and that, of these, 303 were suicides, the second-highest number on record in Northern Ireland.

I looked at some of the debates that have taken place in the Chamber. In one, it was mentioned that each year around 300 people commit suicide in Northern Ireland, with the figure increasing every year since 2006. Some 72 teens and young men took their own lives in Northern Ireland in 2011, while 165 died by suicide in the Republic. A report by the Samaritans shows that the age range starts at 10 to 14 and that the majority of the people who commit suicide are between 16 and 40. We know all these facts and figures, but that does not bring us to a resolution.

Mental health issues have been raised, and people will say that suicide is caused by a mental health disorder. That is perhaps the case at the point when they commit suicide, but, up to that point, it is invisible and will not be seen. Again, I thank Mr Middleton for bringing this to the House this afternoon, and I thank the Minister for his attendance.

Mr Clarke: I join others in thanking Gary Middleton for using this opportunity for his Adjournment topic, and I think that it is fitting, given the topic, that so many Members are present.

This is not necessarily a constituency-based concern; indeed, it is a concern across the Province. I did not want to say this, but I have to say that I am glad that it was a young man who proposed the topic, because the tone of the Chairperson of the Health Committee disappointed me. Two other contributions, by Mark Durkan and Raymond McCartney, talked about stigmatising people. Much of the contribution of the Chairperson of the Health Committee was about drug and alcohol abuse and addictions.

I suffered from depression about 26 or 27 years ago. I was neither an alcoholic nor a drug addict, but I went for help and sought the help that was required. For me, this typifies some people's attitudes towards suicide, and labelling and stigmatising those who suffer from depression and people who are on the brink of taking their own lives.

I wanted to speak today because, when I looked at social media this week, I learned that a young girl in my constituency had committed suicide. I do not believe that she had alcohol or drug problems. She was a young girl, I am sure, who was living with the pressures of life. I have to say that her family were very brave.

They said to the minister, "Give a sermon that will help people understand exactly what the family and friends are going through, so as to try to prevent other young people doing the same". What worried me today when listening to the Chairperson was that we are stigmatising. The sooner we can get away from that, the better.

4.45 pm

I would never look at it from the point, as Ross said, that, if someone is on the point of suicide, there is nothing you can do and they have got their things in order; I do not think we should ever stop trying. We should never stop trying, because one death is one too many. Gary referred to his constituency, but this is right across the Province. In my constituency, it was just one after another last year, all of them young people. I definitely would not stigmatise them. They are all going through the pressures of life. You can talk about statistics and you can talk about reports, but what we need to do is try to reach out to these people and not write them off.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will give one way in one minute.

We should encourage them to go to each and every agency. If they have not got help from one agency, they should go to another. After one of the deaths in my constituency last year, the young people themselves organised all the aspects from the health agencies, and all the different organisations were there. Some made the criticism that they were difficult to get. We all have a job to do and a role to play. The more we can do to encourage people to seek those organisations out, the better. We should never write them off. I give way now.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned social media and, more latterly, a spate of suicides involving young people. Quite a few years ago, a lot of work was done on media guidelines and how suicide had been reported in the Derry area. My concern was that there had almost been a deification of young people, in particular, who had taken their own life. The media have tightened up on that, but would the Member share my concern about the understandable outpouring of grief from other young people through the medium of social media, be it on Facebook or Twitter? Some young people who might never have had a nice thing said to them or about them see lots of nice things being said about a contemporary

and think, "Maybe if I died, people would say nice things about me".

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

Mr Clarke: I accept what the Member says. There is a danger with that. Of course, social media can also be used as a form of bullying.

I am trying to be positive and focus on the outcome. Where we get that message, we need to encourage people to be positive. We need to remind people that taking their life will not help those who are left behind. I did not know the individual I read about last week, but I was led to read her story about how the family bravely went to the clergyman and encouraged him to tell the story as it is to the young people it affects. Yes, they may have fixed their problem, but they have increased the problem coming behind them tenfold. They have brothers and sisters, a mother and a father and a wider circle.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for giving way, but I question his analysis of what I said. Those were Ulster University figures, and they were used to reflect the fact that only 41% of the cases looked at involved alcohol consumption. I make that point. The issue about addiction was raised in the context of the case made by the Member who introduced the topic about detoxification for Derry. The very point that was made was that detox is only part of a solution, and, if the Member reflects on my comments, he will find that they were very clear about early intervention and crisis.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate your clarification. Your party colleague hit it on the head much better. My concern was that your contribution was more about alcohol. I appreciate and accept your clarification that it is not only about alcohol or drugs. There are many aspects.

Really, what is key for me in all of this is the need to prevent any stigmatising of this illness. We need to assist people, give them direction and support them wherever we can and encourage our young people. For me, Gary Middleton as a young man should be seen as a peer for young people and someone to look to for securing this debate. It was very courageous of him to do so in his first contribution here today.

Mr Campbell: I, too, pay tribute to my colleague Gary Middleton for his maiden speech. It is an exceptionally important but

exceptionally difficult topic on which to make a maiden speech.

I wish to say a couple of things. Very often in the Chamber, we engage in very important topics that divide. The divide is sometimes subtle, sometimes very stark. This is a non-divisive issue that transcends communities and crosses all sorts of boundaries and communities.

Down through the years and in recent times, I have had to go to a family home after a young man or young woman — pre-eminently, it is young males — has taken his or her life. Inevitably, the conversation in the wake house, as we call it, turns, usually at the instigation of the family, to the fact that they saw nothing, detected nothing and saw no change in behaviour. They saw nothing that could have given them an early alert that something was wrong. They just did not see coming what hit them in the early hours of the morning or at whatever time they were told of the passing of their son. It seems to me that, as a society, we need to reflect on that and do whatever we can.

Hopefully, the Minister will refer to the suicide prevention strategy. We all need to understand that those facing suicide are in an exceptionally dark place and feel that there is no way out. We have heard discussions about what might be the root of the problem, but the main issue is that, whatever the problem, they feel that there is no solution. That is usually, but not always, why they end up taking their life. They need to know that, whatever their problem, somebody will be there to help them — whatever it is, there will be someone there to help them.

I will conclude with this, as I do not want to delay the proceedings. I came across the issue at first hand, as many of us have. I was not as close to it as, for example, Mr Durkan; I know that he has personal experience. Many of us have had second-hand experience. I had direct experience about two years ago when, out for an evening stroll along the Peace Bridge in Londonderry, a young man, before my eyes, tried to take his life by going into the river. I saw the excellent work that Foyle Search and Rescue did in coming to his aid and bringing him out, but I also saw the trauma felt by all of us who were doing whatever little we could do to help as we saw the drama unfold: someone trying to take their life. As they struggled in the water, there was nothing any of us could do because there was such a distance and height between us and the person in the river. Then the boat came to his rescue. Only when that happens to you do you begin to see the extent of the trauma that there would have been had

that suicide attempt been successful. It has been replicated on hundreds of occasions.

I feel that this has been a worthwhile debate and hope that the Minister will respond positively. I hope and pray that we all, as a wider community, offer the prospect of hope and help to all those afflicted by the potential of suicide.

Mr G Robinson: As a member of the Health Committee, I congratulate Gary on securing this debate on a very emotive and important issue and on his very commendable maiden speech. I express my heartfelt sympathy to all families who have been affected and left behind by a loved one whose death was in the most tragic circumstances. In the debate, we must all be mindful of those relatives.

I recently saw figures that showed that two bodies were taken from the River Foyle this year. There were numerous operations by Foyle Search and Rescue and its colleagues in Bann Rescue, which saved the lives of other individuals. I express my sincere thanks to those in Foyle Search and Rescue for the difficult and dignified work that they carry out so efficiently and professionally.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency figures make grim reading. One figure shows that, in 2013, there were 303 suicides in Northern Ireland, with 115 in the western part of Northern Ireland, including my home town of Limavady. In 2013, there were 56 road deaths, but the resources targeted at minimising the road death figures are wisely spent and value for money, as proven by the fact that, in 2000, there were 171 road deaths. That proves that adequate resources made available to prevention and education campaigns can have a positive effect on highly specific areas of difficulty. Can we find similar resources to help to address the appalling figure of people taking their own lives? That would benefit all of Northern Ireland, not just Londonderry.

I also believe that we may be able to utilise voluntary organisations to help on the ground with a local approach to suicide prevention. Indeed, we should employ every possible resource to tackle that growing problem. Remember that behind every tragedy is a human story and a human being. It is the ongoing effects of tragedy that make me realise how important it is that we address suicide. The distress for everyone begins with someone's decision to end their life, so that has to be the starting point. For me, prevention is better than seeing lives lost and families forever

changed by an event that we may be able to avoid.

In my constituency of East Londonderry, suicides have increased and, as in Londonderry, there are river bridges. Perhaps we should take note of places that are used for this purpose and in some way provide a monitoring service at those locations — CCTV, perhaps, if none is already there.

The reasons why people end their lives are sometimes told by a note, or the reason may be apparent. If trends can be found as to what leads individuals to end their life, we must try to ensure that preventative help is available at all costs.

The entire topic of suicide has no easy answer, as individuals appear not to discuss their feelings with families or friends. Could organisations be available to step in? The organisation that comes to mind is Samaritans, whose work has saved many lives over many years. It should be congratulated on its specialised and traumatic work.

In conclusion, I repeat my thanks to the voluntary organisations and their staff, who do excellent and difficult work. I also appeal to anyone who has suicidal tendencies to come forward and speak to someone — maybe a relative, an organisation, a doctor or a social worker — who, hopefully, can help the individual.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I begin by joining colleagues on all sides in congratulating Mr Middleton on bringing this difficult but important subject to the Floor. I consider it an honour, in my first business as Minister of Health in the House, to be able to respond to Gary's maiden speech. I look forward to many similarly good contributions from Mr Middleton down through the years.

As was made very clear through contributions from all sides, suicide is a major concern not just for the people of Londonderry but for society right across Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, we have around 280 deaths each year as a result of suicide. Academic research estimates that, for every suicide, there are at least six members of the close family who are deeply affected and up to 60 other people who know the deceased and are touched by the death. That indicates that, over the past 10 years alone, some 17,000 people in Northern Ireland have been profoundly affected by suicide, and at least 10% of our population know someone well who has died by suicide.

Sometimes it is perhaps easy just to talk about figures and statistics like that.

5.00 pm

I have to pay particular tribute to the contribution by Mr Durkan, who has an all too real personal experience of this. I think that we are all very grateful for the very difficult contribution that I am sure it was for him to make to the House on this subject. Indeed, others highlighted their own experiences as well. We do not have to go too far. Sometimes I think that people look at us up at Stormont here and think that we do not have the experiences that the wider world would have. I think that Mr Durkan's experience and the experiences that were highlighted by Mr Hussey, Mr Campbell and others show that we do understand, we do know and we do see it in our own lives and communities.

Suicide is a burden which impacts unequally, given the fact that the suicide rate in the most deprived areas is almost twice the Northern Ireland average and three times that of the least deprived areas. The link with deprivation is well known and may go part of the way to explaining why Londonderry, together with north, west and east Belfast, experiences higher suicide rates than the rest of Northern Ireland. Emerging evidence also indicates a link between the legacy of decades of violence in Northern Ireland and high levels of suicidal behaviour here. Those areas that experienced the worst of the Troubles tend to correlate now with the areas that have high suicide rates.

I should add that there is also a gender aspect to this — again, an issue that was highlighted by many Members. Men are three times more likely to die by suicide than women. Indeed, the majority of people who die by suicide are not known to mental health services. We all know that men are reluctant to seek help, and one of the biggest challenges that we face is encouraging men who are experiencing emotional or mental problems to seek appropriate help.

Provisional figures for 2014 show an 11% reduction in suicides in Northern Ireland. Whilst this is encouraging, taken with the fact that suicide rates did not rise here over the recent recession, and may be an indication that our prevention efforts have had some success, we need to be cautious as rates can fluctuate from year to year and, clearly, the number of deaths remains much too high.

Suicide is a hugely complex issue, as Members have discussed at length. The factors that lead

someone to attempt suicide are likely to have their roots in a chain of events and experiences that have begun years previously, which are themselves shaped by broader socioeconomic influences. Suicide is the result of highly complex interactions amongst various risk factors and protective influences which vary from one individual to another. The key to reducing suicide in our society is to minimise the risk factors and maximise the protective factors. This means addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, substance misuse, family breakdown, violence, bullying and mental health stigma. It also requires building greater social connectedness, improving educational outcomes, promoting tolerance and enhancing mental health from the very early years.

Clearly, this goes way beyond the health sector. Indeed, there is a wide range of activity ongoing across Departments to address these issues. This activity is reported and updated at the regular meetings of the ministerial coordination group on suicide prevention, which Mr Durkan referenced. Suicide prevention is now on the radar of practically every Department in Northern Ireland, and it is essential that this approach continues to be strengthened.

The overriding aim is to improve the social circumstances and emotional resilience of potentially vulnerable individuals, thereby equipping them to deal with adverse life events in ways which are not self-destructive. There is also a broad range of programmes in place under the Protect Life strategy to tackle suicide and self-harm. Training is provided for GPs and those who are likely to come into contact with people who are vulnerable to suicidal behaviour. The aim is to identify those who are at risk at an early stage and ensure that they receive the help that is necessary to overcome their difficulties. This help can be provided by mental health services, addiction teams, primary care or the community and voluntary sector, according to the individual's needs.

The reduction of stigma remains a critical part of our strategy. People who have suffered from poor mental health often cite the associated stigma as one of the main barriers to recovery. We therefore work with the media to encourage responsible reporting of suicide and mental health. There is no doubt that inappropriate reporting can contribute to the general sense of hopelessness that is felt by vulnerable people. Media guidelines are in place to prevent this, although we still struggle to get it across to many people in the public eye that the term "commit suicide" is itself inappropriate and hurtful to bereaved families. I will use this opportunity to highlight that the more sensitive

term "die by suicide" is preferable when discussing this topic.

We also take steps to make mental health services as safe as possible through learning from adverse incident reporting and implementing the recommendations from the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide. Timely, comprehensive and accurate data on suicide and self-harm is essential to identify trends and inform the development and delivery of prevention services. The self-harm registry is in place at every hospital emergency department in Northern Ireland. The registry provides valuable information on all aspects of self-harm and that information has been used to improve the response to patients who self-harm.

A sudden death notification process, which was developed by the police and the health sector, is now in place. This unique system provides early notification of suspected suicides, with the aim of providing bereaved families with immediate access to information and support. The sudden death notification process is being tested in the rest of the UK, with a view to making it a national surveillance mechanism. The process was developed out of early work between health care and the PSNI in Londonderry that was designed to provide a multi-agency response to suicide clusters in order to prevent further deaths. This multi-agency approach has broadened and there are now suicide cluster community response plans in every trust area in Northern Ireland. The latest activation of a community response plan in the Londonderry area was in March in response to a number of deaths on the river.

It is important that we turn specifically to Londonderry, and there is a clear need to address the reputation that the River Foyle is attracting as a suicide location. Previous investigations into technical options to improve safety at the Foyle Bridge proved inconclusive. However, the Public Health Agency has been working with partners to consider how technology, culture, arts, recreation and innovation could be used to change local people's perception of the river and its bridges to encourage a more positive interaction. I am pleased that a very innovative bid has been made to the UK Technology Strategic Investment Board for a £2 million grant to implement the first phase of a project drawing on experience from work on a bridge in South Korea, which, unfortunately, had prevalence for suicide. We await the outcome of that bid, and I am hopeful that it will be successful. We remain aware of the high level of need within the Londonderry area. For example,

Lifeline has responded to crisis calls from some 1,300 people from the area in the past three years alone, over half of whom were referred to crisis counselling. Recent statistics from the self-harm registry have also shown particularly high rates of hospital treated self-harm in the Derry area.

To address that need, almost £5 million has been invested in mental health promotion and suicide prevention initiatives in the Western Trust over the last five years. The majority of those programmes have been available to residents in Londonderry and the wider trust area, rather than being focused on one particular setting. That has included the SHINE community-based self-harm project, which has informed the commissioning of self-harm prevention across Northern Ireland. Planned investment for 2015-16 comes to almost £600,000, although budgets have yet to be confirmed. Other local developments have included the establishment of a liaison and support service for families who have been bereaved by suicide and the state-of-the-art crisis treatment centre Grangewood, which was opened in 2012.

The Public Health Agency has invested over £200,000 on direct initiatives to address the issue of suicides at the River Foyle. This has included substantial investment in Foyle Search and Rescue to support its work on suicide prevention, as well as rescue and recovery. The fact that Foyle Search and Rescue has stopped over 2,500 potential suicides and rescued over 300 people directly from the water is a credit to that charity and I join with other Members in paying tribute to it.

Looking ahead, a new initiative has been established to bring the 2019 International Association of Suicide Prevention biennial conference to Londonderry. My predecessor and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have supported that. The issue of a detox centre was raised by many Members. I do not have time to go into as much detail as I would like to, but it is certainly an issue that I want to familiarise myself with, along with some of the issues and opportunities that the Chair of the Health Committee mentioned.

I would argue that it is not possible to treat suicide in the way that we treat an illness. Suicide is a behaviour; it is not a condition. However, it is not an inevitable behaviour. We in the health sector can treat some of the underlying risk factors, such as depression, addiction, and intoxication. Others can help address the wider societal risk factors. Only by acknowledging that and working across

government and in partnership with other sectors will we defeat suicide.

Adjourned at 5.09 pm.

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