



# Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 13 September 2016  
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# Assembly Members

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Allen, Andy (East Belfast)  
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)  
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)  
Archibald, Ms Caoimhe (East Londonderry)  
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)  
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)  
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)  
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)  
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)  
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)  
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)  
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)  
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)  
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)  
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)  
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)  
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)  
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)  
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)  
Chambers, Alan (North Down)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)  
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)  
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)  
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)  
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)  
Easton, Alex (North Down)  
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)  
Farry, Stephen (North Down)  
Fearon, Ms Megan (Newry and Armagh)  
Ford, David (South Antrim)  
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)  
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)  
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)  
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)  
Hanna, Ms Claire (South Belfast)  
Hazzard, Chris (South Down)  
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)  
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)  
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)  
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)  
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)  
Little Pengelly, Mrs Emma (South Belfast)  
Lockhart, Ms Carla (Upper Bann)  
Logan, Phillip (North Antrim)  
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)  
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)  
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)  
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)  
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)  
McCann, Eamonn (Foyle)  
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)  
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)  
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)  
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)  
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)  
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)  
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)  
McGrath, Colin (South Down)  
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McGuinness, Martin (Foyle)  
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)  
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McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)  
McNulty, Justin (Newry & Armagh)  
McPhillips, Richie (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
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Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)  
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
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Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)  
Palmer, Mrs Jenny (Lagan Valley)  
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)  
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)  
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)  
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)  
Seeley, Ms Catherine (Upper Bann)  
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)  
Smith, Philip (Strangford)  
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)  
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Weir, Peter (North Down)  
Wells, Jim (South Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 September 2016

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statements

### North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Meeting

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) plenary meeting.

**Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):** In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the twenty-second meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format, which was held in Dublin on Monday 4 July 2016.

The Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have agreed that I make this report on their behalf. Our delegation was led by the First Minister, Arlene Foster MLA, and me. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Minister Givan, Minister Hamilton, Minister Hazzard, Minister McIlveen, Minister Ó Muilleoir, Minister O'Neill, Minister Sugden, Minister Weir, junior Minister Fearon and junior Minister Ross. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD.

The meeting provided the new Governments in each jurisdiction with the opportunity to meet formally for the first time and exchange views on a wide range of issues of mutual interest and concern, especially in the light of the referendum decision to leave the EU.

In the opening discussion, Ministers welcomed the early opportunity for the new Governments to discuss the implications of the then recent referendum decision and for relations between both jurisdictions. At the meeting, the Council agreed that, as the mechanism for a UK exit from the EU becomes clearer, the implications of the referendum decision on North/South cooperation should be explored in detail under all sectors.

Ministers welcomed the development of the Irish Government's new Programme for a Partnership Government and the Executive's new draft Programme for Government framework and noted that building and maintaining relationships between each jurisdiction features in both documents.

At the meeting, the Health Ministers announced that they were jointly opening the cardiac catheterisation lab in Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Crumlin later that day. They also announced the way forward for the all-island congenital heart disease network. They said that they looked forward to working together to build on the good progress made by their Departments and committed to further scope opportunities for all-island cooperation in health and social care.

The focus of the meeting was very much on financial and EU matters, and the Council had a detailed discussion on the potential impact of the UK referendum result to leave the EU. In order to optimise joint planning and engagement on key issues arising from the referendum result, the NSMC agreed to work together to ensure that our interests are protected and advanced and that the benefits of North/South cooperation are fully recognised in any new arrangements that emerge as regards the UK's future relationship with the European Union. It also noted that there are a number of priority areas where implications arise, particularly the economy and trade; Northern and British and Irish relations; the common travel area; and the EU.

It agreed that a full audit will be undertaken in all sectors to identify the possible impacts, risks, opportunities and contingencies arising in the phases preceding and following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. It agreed that this work will in turn be submitted to ministerial sectoral meetings for consideration as to the strategic and cross-cutting issues arising and that final priorities will be agreed by the next NSMC plenary meeting for the pre-negotiation and negotiation phases. It agreed that a further

discussion on the implications of the referendum result will take place at the next NSMC plenary meeting and that the NSMC can provide a useful forum for ongoing discussion on relevant matters.

It reiterated the joint commitment of the Irish Government and the Executive to the successful implementation of the Peace and INTERREG programmes and agreed that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Executive's Finance Minister will consider the issue of securing European regional development fund (ERDF) funding for Peace and INTERREG, including through engagement with the European Commission. It agreed that the frequency of the briefings on relevant EU matters provided by the Irish Government for senior officials should increase and include consideration of issues arising from the referendum decision. It agreed that the Irish Permanent Representation in Brussels and the Executive Office in Brussels will continue and intensify their close working relationship and noted and welcomed David Cameron's clear commitment to engagement of the Executive in the negotiating process with the European Union. Ministers also provided updates on economic conditions, North and South.

The Council noted the continued commitment of the Irish Government and the Executive in the Fresh Start Agreement to investing in infrastructure, which will support cooperation and unlock the full potential of the economies of both jurisdictions. Ministers noted the progress report by senior officials from relevant Departments in both jurisdictions addressing the Fresh Start commitments, including work on the A5 western transport corridor, noting that the A5 is on schedule to start in 2017, and the review of options for the Ulster canal and the Narrow Water bridge. Ministers noted that the group of senior officials will continue to meet regularly to maintain a strategic overview of the projects and commitments set out in Fresh Start and to explore funding opportunities for economic and infrastructure investment. The Council agreed that a further update on the Fresh Start section E commitments will be brought to the next NSMC plenary meeting.

The next item on the agenda was the north-west gateway initiative, and Ministers noted the continued engagement between officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Executive Office, with regional stakeholders regarding the direction and priorities for the north-west region. Ministers agreed that senior officials from relevant Departments in both jurisdictions should meet with the two councils as part of the framework

and noted the continuing commitment to a meeting of Ministers from both jurisdictions to take place in the north-west. Ministers noted the additional Fresh Start commitment to support the north-west gateway initiative through the establishment of a north-west development fund and welcomed the contribution by the Irish Government of €2.5 million and the commitment of match funding from our Executive. Finally, Ministers agreed that the next plenary meeting would be held in Armagh in November.

**Mr Nesbitt:** The Irish Government's commitments through Fresh Start section C are explicitly linked to their capital plan for 2016-21 called 'Building on Recovery'. This makes no fewer than 45 references to the benefits of public-private partnerships (PPPs), and, yet, for many years, the Minister's party has been implacably opposed to PPPs, calling them "folly" and saying that "they just do not work". There are dozens of such quotes. How does the Minister square that circle?

**Mr McGuinness:** The Member is quoting the Irish Government's position on all these matters. As we go forward, we do so on the basis that the different projects we will be engaged in will be cost effective. To do so with a closed mind would be folly of the worst kind. At the same time, this does not commit us to anything that would, in any way, undermine the quite reasonable position that we, as a party, have taken. Remember that when I am at the NSMC, I am not there representing Sinn Féin. I am there representing the Executive alongside the First Minister. In the course of our engagements with the Irish Government, and, inevitably, with whatever projects we commit ourselves to, there will always have to be some sort of compromise between us on how we can get projects on the road. It would have been the same with you had you been our First Minister.

**Mr Stalford:** A lot of the predictions made regarding the economic impact of the decision on Brexit have come to nothing. A recession is defined as being two consecutive quarters of negative growth. Someone in the Chamber said that we had been plunged into a recession and that is clearly not the case. In maximising the opportunities presented by the decision, will the deputy First Minister outline to the House what message the Executive will be conveying to overseas investors about Northern Ireland being a good place to do business?

**Mr McGuinness:** I know that the Member is new but the questions we are answering here

are about the plenary session of the North/South Ministerial Council that took place in Dublin. This question is outside that format but it is a reasonable one. We, as a political party, with the DUP in the new governmental arrangements, have a duty and a responsibility to work together to make this place work, and we are absolutely dedicated and committed to doing that. My track record — for example, working with the late Rev Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson in attracting foreign direct investment — is second to none. That work will continue. The First Minister and I will continue to do our jobs to bear down on unacceptable unemployment levels, and we have had some success in that in recent times. We will continue our engagement with North America in particular.

The Member talked about us not having had a recession and that it is not doom and gloom at the moment. Obviously, in the context of Brexit, it is early days. We do not know what the outcome of the negotiations will hold for us as a region. The First Minister and I, even though we are on different sides of the debate and the argument on Brexit, still have a responsibility to lead the Executive, deliver first-class public services, provide employment and ensure that we are giving leadership to the people we represent. That is important and I am absolutely determined to do it.

**Mr P McGuigan:** Will the deputy First Minister provide an update on elements of the Fresh Start Agreement relating to the North/South Ministerial Council?

**Mr McGuinness:** The Irish Government were very much involved in the Fresh Start negotiations from a distance and made very important commitments during the course of those negotiations. The successful implementation of the Fresh Start Agreement is vital and they have a role to play in that. It laid out an agreed way forward and we must work hard to ensure that it is fully delivered.

I am particularly pleased that work on the A5 remains on target and that, subject to completion of all the statutory processes, the project could start next year. Narrow Water bridge is an important project in the Newry and Louth areas and there is real desire in those areas for the bridge. I have met numerous delegations to discuss the bridge and I hope that we can find the funds and a way to make the plans a reality.

I also think the commitment to the north-west is vital. We are all aware that the region suffers due to a legacy of underinvestment and the lack

of connectivity between the area and Belfast or Dublin. Senior officials are taking forward work to consider what impact, if any, Brexit may have on the delivery of these projects and others that are specified in the Fresh Start Agreement. All the conversations thus far clearly indicate that the Irish Government are as exercised as we are to ensure that we fully implement the Fresh Start Agreement, including the commitments that they have made.

**10.45 am**

**Mr McPhillips:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and for providing an update on the latest meeting and the implications of the vote to leave the European Union that were centre stage at the discussion. Can he outline what discussions there have been on setting up an all-Ireland forum to consider the implications of Brexit, and does he agree that no single party in the Chamber has the power to veto the establishment of such a forum?

**Mr McGuinness:** It has been the subject of some public discussion recently, and I understand that, while the Taoiseach was at a political event in England at the weekend, he clearly indicated that he intends to take the process forward. My sense is that it will happen with an open door for everybody entitled to be there — all the relevant stakeholders and political parties will be invited to attend. It is also the right of any political party not to attend if it so wishes; we cannot force people to do what they are not willing to do. We wait with interest to see the establishment of the forum. My party is very much in favour of it, and such a forum could be held without injuring anybody's political allegiance.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the deputy First Minister for bringing the report to us. What does intensifying their close working relationship entail with regard to the Irish Permanent Representation and the Northern Ireland Executive office in Brussels? How long do you expect that intensive relationship to last, and will the Northern Ireland Executive maintain its office in Brussels after the UK leaves the European Union — if it ever does?

**Mr McGuinness:** The Member's last comment is as relevant as anything else that has been said in the Chamber today. Who knows what lies ahead with these matters? We have committed to intensifying our relationships with the Irish Government and the Executive office in Brussels. That is the common sense thing to do, given the huge challenge that will face us all, if article 50 is triggered at some stage early

in the new year. When the First Minister and I met with Theresa May, she made it absolutely clear that she was not going to trigger article 50 this year but that she would do so early next year because she would not allow others to accuse her of being slow to move forward with Brexit, whatever Brexit means; many of us wonder that. It is very important that the Executive office in Brussels is utilised to the full and that our engagement through it, with the Irish Government and Brussels, is intensified.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the deputy First Minister for the statement this morning. He referred to welcoming the Executive's commitment to engagement in the UK's negotiations with the European Union. How does he see this engagement with Her Majesty's Government progressing, following the recent visit by David Davis?

**Mr McGuinness:** In the discussions that we had with David Cameron and Theresa May, they made it absolutely clear that we would be involved. Obviously, the mechanism of how we do that has yet to be agreed, but there are a number of options, including the Joint Ministerial Committee in London, which the First Minister and I attend with the First Minister of Wales, the First Minister of Scotland and, on occasion, the British Prime Minister. That is one option; there are others. It has yet to be negotiated with the British Government, and that is something that the First Minister and I will turn our attention to. It is obvious that others in Scotland and Wales are exercised about this as well.

To be honest, when Peter Robinson and I attended previous meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee as First Minister and deputy First Minister, we, along with Wales and Scotland, were overwhelmed by the seriousness with which the British Government took the views expressed by the devolved Administrations. If that is to be the mechanism, there will have to be a fundamental change of attitude by the British Government, and we will test that in the time ahead.

**Mr Boylan:** Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. I will take his advice and stick to the statement. I refer to paragraph 9 on health: will the Minister give us a wee update on cross-border cooperation in health?

**Mr McGuinness:** As I said in my opening statement, the meeting dealt with health in a positive and important way. In the aftermath of the meeting, Health Ministers from the North

and South went off to be involved in the initiatives that they have agreed on children's health and on heart conditions, North and South, through joint working processes. The fact that they committed themselves during the conversations that they were involved in to further exploration of how we can, on an all-island basis, improve our people's health is very important.

We all know that great work has been done at the South West Acute Hospital, with patients from Cavan and Monaghan being treated there, and that there will be a very important initiative in the north-west at Altnagelvin Area Hospital when the new radiotherapy unit opens in a few weeks' time for the treatment of people from the north-west — from Derry, Tyrone, north Sligo and Donegal. These are all common-sense, important initiatives that can quite easily be undertaken without endangering anybody's political allegiances.

The sensible view taken by our Health Minister and previous Health Ministers, including DUP Ministers, speaks volumes for their very open-minded approach to ensuring that we work in a common-sense way not only to lower costs but, in a very effective way, to deliver a first-class health service for the people whom we represent.

**Mr Logan:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Was a single electricity market mentioned?

**Mr McGuinness:** Absolutely. The issue of the single electricity market is important for all of us, and it is a high-level commitment. There are processes being undertaken, North and South, in relation to the statutory obligations of fulfilling whatever conditions are required to ensure that that goes forward. That represents a huge challenge to all of us, particularly when we hear people in the manufacturing sector talk about the high costs that they have incurred as a result of the failure to put in place the single electricity market. We recognise that they are clearly working with the view that those costs could be radically reduced against the backdrop of a more effective way of delivering electricity. That represents another big challenge for us in the time ahead, and the Executive and the Irish Government are looking closely at it.

**Mr Aiken:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his words. When communicating with Ministers during the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, were you able to express some of the differing perspectives that the Northern Ireland Executive have to the Irish Government? When

you were doing that, what was the response from the Irish Government?

**Mr McGuinness:** The Irish Government are as experienced politicians as we are in the North, and they know that, during the referendum debate, the DUP and Sinn Féin were on different sides of the argument. There was complete understanding on the Irish Government Ministers' part that that was the case. As in everything else, when we find ourselves in the situation that we are in at the moment, with the real prospect that article 50 of the Lisbon treaty will be triggered and there will be a very intensive negotiation, we have to work in a common-sense, practical way to ensure that we defend the interests of the people we represent, North and South. Brexit obviously has profound implications for the South, and they have expressed that publicly. I believe it has profound implications for us in the North, but we all have to work together.

I think a clear signal of our ability to work together is the joint letter that the First Minister and I sent to Theresa May identifying areas of real concern to us. I am sure that those concerns are shared by the Irish Government. It is important that we have the Irish Government as an ally in relation to the arguments that we intend to make in the time ahead, whether it be around the issue of funding or the issue of a hard border. We have identified those issues in the letter that we sent to Theresa May. I think that clearly indicates to the Irish Government that we are working together to make the best of what is a very difficult situation for all of us.

**Mr Allister:** Since the essential burden of the meeting related to Brexit, may I ask for clarity on a central issue? Do the deputy First Minister and his half of the Executive accept the reality that the United Kingdom, including all of its parts, is leaving the EU? Without that unequivocal acceptance, the supposed agreed approach in the joint letter to the Prime Minister is an empty sham. Can the deputy First Minister, without evasion, answer that simple question: do he and his Ministers, whether they like it or not, accept that we are leaving the EU?

**Mr McGuinness:** I am not here to speak on behalf of one half of the Executive; I am here to speak on behalf of the Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I am aware of the outcome of the Brexit vote. I know that overwhelmingly in England they voted to leave. I know that in Scotland they voted to remain. I know that, here, the people of the North voted to remain. That represents a

real issue that the British Government and the European Union have to take under consideration. I am for staying in Europe, but, if the British Government trigger article 50 and are then involved in a negotiation to exit Europe, I as a responsible politician have a duty and a responsibility to work with the First Minister and the other Ministers in the Executive to make the best fist of what we can in relation to defending the interests of the people whom we represent.

## **British-Irish Council: 22 July 2016**

**Mrs Foster (The First Minister):** Mr Speaker, in accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the 27th summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which took place in Cathays Park, Cardiff, on 22 July 2016. The deputy First Minister and I attended the summit, and he has agreed that I make this statement also on his behalf.

The British-Irish Council was established as part of the multi-party agreement reached in Belfast on 10 April 1998. The Council plays a valuable role in developing and furthering links between its eight member Administrations. It provides a dynamic forum for exchange of information and collaboration on policies of mutual interest, and it fosters positive, practical relationships across these islands.

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

This was an extraordinary summit of the Council, hosted by the Welsh Government and convened specifically to consider the outcome of the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. The heads of delegations were welcomed by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Carwyn Jones AM. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD. The UK Government delegation was jointly led by the Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Rt Hon Alun Cairns, Secretary of State for Wales.

The Scottish Government delegation was led by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon. The Isle of Man Government were led by the Chief Minister, the Hon Allan Bell MHK. The Government of Jersey were led by the Chief Minister, Senator Ian Gorst, and the Government of Guernsey were led by the Chief Minister, Deputy Gavin St Pier. A full list of delegation members is attached to the copy of this statement provided to Members.

## 11.00 am

Council members offered their condolences to the people of France following the terrorist attacks in Nice in July and to victims of conflicts around the world.

Member Administrations discussed the result of the referendum and reflected on the implications for each individual BIC member Administration, including those Administrations that are not part of the European Union, as well as for the Council as a whole. The Council noted that implications arise in a number of priority areas, in particular, the economy and trade, the common travel area, relations with the European Union and the status of all citizens affected by the change. It further noted that the process for implementing the referendum outcome would become clearer in the coming months.

During discussions, Ministers collectively reaffirmed the importance of the Council as a key institution of the 1998 agreement and an important and unique forum to share views, enhance cooperation and strengthen relationships amongst all member Administrations at this time. They reiterated their commitment to facilitating harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships among the people of these islands. It was agreed that the Council should be fully utilised to ensure that all member Administrations work together to this end. The Council also agreed that an update on developments following the referendum result, including for the BIC work sectors, would be facilitated at the next BIC summit.

As a final item of business, the Council noted that the next BIC summit would be hosted again by Wales in November 2016.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister. With regard to Ministers collectively reaffirming the importance of the Council as a key institution of the 1998 agreement, what other elements of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement does the Minister now affirm?

**Mrs Foster:** That question is not relevant to what happened at the meeting in Wales. That meeting was formatted to discuss the outcome of the European referendum in the United Kingdom. Part of the benefit of meeting in that format is that we get to speak to those member Administrations that are not members of the European Union and to learn from their experiences in how they deal with members of the European Union. I found it very interesting to hear from Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of

Man as to how their protocol 3 rights are dealt with in Europe and how they manage to deal with other issues on which we have been able to deal directly with Europe because of our membership of the European Union. However, they have managed very well outside the European Union. That is of interest to me, and I intend to have further discussions about that with Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. It was a very useful meeting, and that, of course, is what the statement is about.

**Mr Stalford:** Will the First Minister outline for the House just how important she considers the role of Executive Ministers to be in ensuring and maintaining confidence in Northern Ireland as a destination for investors?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his question. It amazed me slightly that some Members of the House — not just Ministers — took the opportunity after the European Union referendum to talk down Northern Ireland as a destination for foreign direct investment. They should hang their heads in shame, frankly. For them to call themselves unionists is quite beyond me.

As an Administration, we will continue to seek further foreign direct investment because our proposition has not changed. Our talent, our young people, the skills that we have, the fact that we have a low-cost base to do business out of and have attracted so much foreign direct investment over this past period stands us all in good stead. I look forward to working alongside my Executive colleagues to present a positive front for the future of Northern Ireland and what we can do for all our people.

**Mr Lynch:** I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she expand on the key concerns expressed by the various Administrations on the Brexit outcome?

**Mrs Foster:** Those are concerns that we share as well. Just because I campaigned for Brexit does not mean that there will not be short-term issues that need to be dealt with. However, in the medium to long term, I believe that it will be right for the United Kingdom to be outside the European Union. That does not mean to say that we do not have to deal with short-term challenges. Of course, we set out those short-term challenges in our letter to our Prime Minister on 10 August, and those challenges are shared across the Administrations. Of course, we will have the additional challenge of having a border with the European Union once we leave Europe, and we intend to make sure that that does not present an impediment to

trade and to people wanting to visit Northern Ireland in the future. I look forward to continuing our discussions with colleagues in Westminster. Of course, it is for the United Kingdom Government to negotiate the terms of our exit from the European Union, but as the deputy First Minister said in relation to the previous statement, we intend to have a full and active voice at the table to get what is best for all the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr McPhillips:** I thank the First Minister for her statement. Coming from the border constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I know that there are genuine concerns that there will be a hard border following the vote to leave the European Union, which will negatively impact trade, investment and travel arrangements. In light of that, David Davis, the Minister responsible for negotiating the exit from the EU, has said that they do not have a solution for the border. How confident is the First Minister that there will not be a hard border, considering the ambiguity that currently exists in Westminster?

**Mrs Foster:** I remind the Member that there was never a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Those of us who were the subject of a terrorist campaign wished for a hard border at times, however, that did not occur. If he is talking about the military presence in the border area, that was completely different from what may be needed in the future for customs. The reason it was there was to deal with a terrorist threat at that particular time, and there will be no return to that because of what we have achieved here in this place to present a positive and peaceful Northern Ireland.

We can negotiate with our colleagues in the European Union about what is best for both sides of the border. As I said, we will continue to work with our colleagues not only in the United Kingdom Government but in the Republic of Ireland Government so that we can work out what is best for each side of the border. That, to me, is the best way to move forward in negotiations. Of course, negotiations will take some time; they may well be protracted, but we should not be lacking in ambition for what we want to see for Northern Ireland moving forward. People who continually look for challenges and problems, instead of looking for opportunities and ambition, really do depress me at times. It is about time people had ambition for the place they represent, instead of talking it down.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, First Minister. Given that one of the ambitions of many through the Good Friday Agreement was to secure additional citizenship rights for people in Northern Ireland, and given our unique citizenship position in Northern Ireland, what efforts will you make, along with the deputy First Minister, to protect those rights as negotiations continue towards Brexit?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his question. As he well knows, the Belfast Agreement of 10 April 1998 is an international agreement that was signed by two sovereign Governments: the United Kingdom Government; and the Republic of Ireland Government. Therefore, the contents of the Belfast Agreement, though some of us would like to change some elements in it, still remain in place.

**Mr Logan:** What was the First Minister's reaction to suggestions by some that the joint Executive letter to the Prime Minister was, in some way, a softening of this party's position on the exit from the EU?

**Mrs Foster:** I have heard many things since the European Union referendum but that was probably the most bizarre. It ranked up there with the time that I was with the deputy First Minister at the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister before the election and was accused of being a "Remainer", which was bizarre in the extreme, however, these things come to us all.

Look, there will be short-term challenges ahead. I am not going to shy away from those, but I fundamentally believe that the medium- and longer-term interests of this part of the United Kingdom and all of the United Kingdom are best served outside of the European Union. To those who do not think that it is going to happen and who say, "What does 'Brexit means Brexit' mean?", I say that it means that we are leaving the European Union institutions. It does not mean that we are leaving Europe. It gives us a huge opportunity to move forward as a country.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the First Minister for her statement. Following the referendum result, what message will she be offering to potential overseas investors in Northern Ireland?

**Mrs Foster:** I will be saying to potential first-time investors in Northern Ireland that we have a very good proposition for them here. The deputy First Minister and I have been pleased to make some announcements since the

Assembly election and the European Union referendum took place about people coming to and investing in Northern Ireland. There is much more that we can do around all of that. Indeed, he and I intend to go to China towards the end of this year to talk about trade but also to look for investment opportunities from China into Northern Ireland. We will continue to support the work of our Economy Minister. I am very passionate about wanting to create more and better jobs. It was part of the five-point plan that I stood on in the Assembly elections and is something that I will continue to push vociferously.

**Mr Aiken:** I congratulate the First Minister very much for the use of the word "ambition". It is vital that we have ambition for Northern Ireland going forward. I would ask her to read our fantastic document, 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU' — [*Laughter.*] — which very clearly looks towards ambition, as we see ourselves becoming a gateway to Europe. She needs to look very carefully at some of the key ideas in it.

When you were having discussions with the First Minister of Scotland in particular, did you consider the idea of setting up a Northern Ireland council, similar to the Scottish Standing Council on Europe that has been set up to promote the interests of Scotland, as we move to deal with issues to do with the EU? Would that not be a good opportunity for Northern Ireland to make its case very strongly?

**Mrs Foster:** I intend to continue the work that we have already started regarding the EU. The deputy First Minister and I asked Invest Northern Ireland to set up a stakeholder group, which has already met on a number of occasions, to speak directly to business about where concerns and opportunities lie when it comes to our exit from the European Union. That is something that we did very quickly.

I will not say that I have had the benefit of reading it, but I have read the document that was published to much fanfare yesterday. I am not sure whether it is the official Ulster Unionist document, the official Opposition document or the continuity Ulster Unionist document. I do have the document, however, which is entirely uncoded — no surprise there. It is also a document that brings forward propositions that are some six to 10 years old. A Northern Ireland-wide enterprise zone was first mooted by his party when it stood under the umbrella of UCUNF back in 2010. However, at that particular — [*Interruption.*]

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

**Mrs Foster:** It is very difficult to take some of this back, is it not? It is very difficult to take back the fact that, since 2010, there has not been one suggestion as to how we would progress with that enterprise zone for the whole of Northern Ireland, even though it was first talked about then.

We also have a tripling of investment for infrastructure, despite the fact that the deputy First Minister and I were roundly criticised for borrowing money. We were asked where that money was coming from and whether we were borrowing it. There seems to be very little detail on that issue.

There is, of course, the talk of an awakening of constitutional arguments around Irish and Scottish nationalism. I think that we can say that that was dealt with last week. I still find it bizarre that a unionist party would seek to talk about those issues.

**11.15 am**

Then, bizarrely, it talks about some "pre-Brexit legacy project" for:

*"people born in the north east of this island."*

What is that about? Does it exclude me? I live in the south-west of Northern Ireland; this talks about the north-east of the island. In any event, I am sure that other Members will want to look in great detail at the Ulster Unionist document.

The thing about the Ulster Unionist Party is that it opted out. It opted out of the Executive, and it opted out of helping to make decisions for the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is left to the Executive and to the deputy First Minister and me to present the best way possible for the people of Northern Ireland, and we will do that.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the First Minister for the statement this morning. Will she tell us how she considers the Northern Ireland economy to be performing in the aftermath of the referendum?

**Mrs Foster:** Despite all the predictions, I think that the economy has been presenting itself well. Of course, we are assisted in that, particularly those who want to export, with the lowering of the pound, which was getting to an overvalued stage. As I say, we will continue to look at the talent of our young people as our best natural resource, and we will talk about the fact that this is a good place to do business in

terms of costs for businesses. Then, of course, we look forward to the proposition of lowering our rate of corporation tax in April 2018, when we will have the talent, the cost and the tax offering. We have a very strong proposition, and we will continue to sell it.

**Ms Hanna:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The summit notes refer to the status of EU citizens, which was raised in the letter that your colleague mentioned. How does the First Minister envisage the movement of labour if we are outside the European Union and the status of EU citizens who are not from this island?

**Mrs Foster:** Of course, that will be a matter for negotiation between the Prime Minister and the European Union. All four freedoms will have to be looked at, including the movement of people. The Prime Minister has been very clear that she has listened to the vote and to the message that it gave about the free movement of people. Therefore, I expect that she will have something to say about that.

In negotiations, one does not show one's hand because one ends up in the position where everyone knows that that is the bottom line. I presume that this is something that we will have very close negotiations on, particularly at our joint meetings with the United Kingdom Government. We look forward to those discussions because we here in Northern Ireland value the contribution made by those who have come to Northern Ireland to work. I know that that is true for many companies across Northern Ireland. We will continue to value their contribution as we enter this period of negotiation between our own Government and the members of the European Union.

**Mr Attwood:** I acknowledge that the First Minister recognises that there are short-term challenges arising from the Brexit decision. She may want to review the Hansard record from yesterday and the comments of her Economy Minister, who appeared to bury his head in the sand about the short-term challenges.

The First Minister said in an earlier reply that the Northern Ireland Executive wanted a "full and active voice" for all of Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiations. Of course, the deputy First Minister said in reply to an earlier question that you have not heard from London yet about what the role of the Northern Ireland Government might be in those negotiations. Can you advise the Chamber of, or lodge in the Library, what proposals you have put to London so that the Northern Ireland Executive are not

marginalised in the London negotiations with Europe on Brexit?

**Mrs Foster:** Let me say to the Member that I was here for the deputy First Minister's answers, and that is not what he said about our negotiations with London. The Prime Minister visited here in the last week of July, and we were very clear with her that not only would we have a voice in what happens in the European Union exit but that it would be a direct voice at the table so that no unintended consequences could occur for the people of Northern Ireland in the leaving of the European Union.

We will have a direct voice at the table. Whether that is through a mechanism called the Joint Ministerial Committee or some other mechanism, we, jointly, are very clear that it will be a direct voice because we feel strongly that, to represent the people of Northern Ireland at the table, we must be there and we must be heard.

**Mr Allister:** Does the First Minister accept that, to have a positive impact on the national negotiations on Brexit — I stress that they are national negotiations — it is a prerequisite that the Executive are all pulling in the one direction on the issue and that this voice at the table cannot serve Northern Ireland if one part of it is saying out of one side of the mouth, "We agree with Brexit", and the other part is saying, "We do not accept Brexit", such as we had yesterday from the Finance Minister and in the equivocation of the deputy First Minister this morning? Will the effort to get a positive outcome for Northern Ireland not be impeded unless the Executive are all pulling in the same direction and accepting the reality that we are leaving the EU?

**Mrs Foster:** The reality is absolutely that we are leaving the EU. Already this morning, we have heard the suggestion, not from the party opposite but from other parties, that article 50 will not be triggered. That is certainly not my sense when I speak to David Davis and Liam Fox. I know that my colleague had a meeting with Greg Clark when he came to Northern Ireland. It is certainly not my sense of where the Prime Minister is in relation to these matters. We are leaving the European Union. It is, therefore, imperative that we represent the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland — I believe that we will — in getting what is right for them. That is our primary focus. It was my focus the day after the referendum, it is still my focus, and it will continue to be so.

**Mr Nesbitt:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Speaker take a view on the First Minister's answers? When I asked a question, she declined to answer on the basis that that matter had not been discussed at the summit in Cardiff, yet later she gave her critique of a document that could not possibly have been discussed in Cardiff because it was published only yesterday. That is not the consistency that we expect of our First Minister. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order. I will consider the point of order and refer it to the Speaker. I also remind Members that Ministers give the answers that Ministers give. That is very often the case.

### **Intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation on Criminal Justice Matters**

**Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice):** I wish to make a statement regarding a bilateral meeting under the auspices of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on cooperation on criminal justice matters held in Dublin on Monday 4 July 2016. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order, please. I ask Members to leave quietly. The Minister is on her feet.

**Ms Sugden:** This was the first occasion on which I represented the Executive at these meetings with Frances Fitzgerald, the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality. The bilateral meeting provided an opportunity for Minister Fitzgerald and me to make acquaintance and to foster new and closer working relationships between our two jurisdictions. The intergovernmental agreement provides a helpful framework for supporting North/South cooperation on criminal justice matters. I am committed to developing our cross-border relationships for the good of the people of Northern Ireland. It is my intention to keep the Assembly informed of meetings held under the auspices of the agreement.

I expect that most Members are familiar with the mechanics of the intergovernmental agreement. Briefly, there is a requirement for our respective Justice Ministers to meet annually and agree a collaborative work programme. The intergovernmental agreement's work programme runs from summer to summer. Our meeting on 4 July provided an opportunity to review progress against the 2015-16 joint work programme. It

was pleasing to note the positive progress that has been made in a number of areas and the good collaborative working that has been built up by the criminal justice agencies, North and South.

The backbone of the agreement is the work of the project advisory groups, of which there are five and which bring together practitioners from criminal justice agencies from both sides of the border who have experience of delivering operationally at the front line. The project advisory groups serve to facilitate and promote the exchange of ideas and best practice approaches to problem-solving to our mutual benefit. I will highlight just a few examples.

We have seen the benefits of such collaboration through the excellent work between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána to increase capacity among officers in dealing with diverse communities both North and South. Whilst we both acknowledge the progress that there has been, the Tánaiste and I believe that there is potential for more learning in that area. We have therefore asked this to be considered as part of the 2016-17 work programme.

The value of our cross-border relationship is also evidenced through the excellent cooperation between the two probation services. For example, the agreement of offender behaviour programmes for high-risk offenders recently saw the first group of offenders completing the programme in Dublin. It is now planned that both services will meet to review progress and assimilate learning. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland also took part in a conference earlier this year organised by the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Ireland to help inform the delivery of a national programme in the South. Later this year, Dublin will host the joint annual public protection seminar, which I shall attend, as will Frances Fitzgerald. This is the seventh such event since devolution and a testimony to the success of the collaboration between our probation services.

Meanwhile, good engagement between criminal justice agencies and with voluntary sector partners continues to improve the experience of victims at court through the vehicle of the victim project advisory group. Ongoing support between the co-chairs has also been particularly beneficial in the implementation of the EU victims directive. Support and guidance is being provided to our Irish counterparts on the use of intermediaries in court following the success of our scheme.

Relationships established between our respective forensic services facilitated visits to Northern Ireland to participate in the development of the forensic service strategy for Northern Ireland and the exchange of information on drug trends. Best practice interaction in relation to DNA is also ongoing, with good on-the-ground arrangements in place. The strong rapport between the two youth justice services continues, with regular exchange visits taking place. Good relations between our Youth Justice Agency and an Garda Síochána in the sharing of information and development of best practice also supports the management of young offenders who seek to exploit the border for their own criminal purposes. Each of the project advisory groups has continued to promote and support cooperation across the broad spectrum of criminal justice agencies on both sides of the border. Frances Fitzgerald and I are committed to ensuring that that continues.

In going forward, the Tánaiste and I have commissioned our officials to develop a work programme for the year ahead. Building on the progress made last year, we recognised further potential under the existing themes. We have asked the five project advisory groups to develop activities that will further promote engagement in those areas. Frances Fitzgerald and I will consider the revised draft work programme when we meet later this month. It is my intention to provide a further progress report to the Assembly after that meeting and when we will publish the 2016-17 work programme.

I also want to take the opportunity to update Members on the joint agency task force. I welcome the progress made towards tackling serious and organised crime by the cross jurisdictional joint agency task force in the last six months. The task force, which was established under the Fresh Start Agreement, has carried out a series of operations tackling areas such as rural crime, child sexual exploitation and human trafficking for labour exploitation. An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, together with other statutory agencies, have worked collectively in a partnership approach on both sides of the border. The results have included a number of arrests, the seizure of illicit goods and the return of stolen items to their owners. The task force will continue to report regularly to the IGA on its ongoing work as required under the Fresh Start Agreement.

Given that when we met on 4 July we were in the initial wake of the UK referendum to leave Europe, Frances Fitzgerald and I also had a

short discussion on Brexit. We shared the view that the need to maintain close working relationships in the justice field is more important now than ever. We have commissioned a programme of work that will allow us to better understand the implications in the criminal justice sector of the decision in the recent referendum. Since devolution, the criminal justice agencies on both sides of the border have worked hard to develop a culture of cooperation and mutual support. I want that relationship to continue. Brexit will undoubtedly challenge the unique arrangements that we have on this island. However, I trust that the good relationships that have been established will position us to continue to work together to achieve the best possible outcomes from any future negotiations. That is crucial to protecting the safety and security of all the people on this island.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she referred to fostering new and closer working relationships and developing a culture of cooperation and mutual respect. She referred to five advisory groups. In her efforts to address crime and corruption, did the discussions include cross-border financial crime and corruption, which is becoming an increasingly important area, particularly in light of the recent allegations that were made in the BBC 'Spotlight' programme regarding the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA)?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his question. At the meeting of the intergovernmental agreement group, the Tánaiste and I discussed a number of issues including those that affect the border. Most prominently, hate crime, rural crime, domestic and sexual violence and abuse, victims, fuel fraud and human trafficking were discussed. I note the Member's comments. If it is something that I need to raise at my next meeting with the Tánaiste, I am quite happy to do so.

**11.30 am**

**Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):** I thank the Minister for her statement to the House. She has indicated a very welcome cooperation between the probation boards in the two countries. What new ideas and learning on the prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence did Probation Board NI take away from the conference? What initiatives are in place to improve information sharing and prevent sex offenders and domestic violence offenders from using the border to prevent detection and carry

on their abuse? Does the Minister realise that there is a significant problem in that area?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Chair for his questions. He will be familiar with the fact that tackling domestic and sexual abuse will be my overarching priority for the next five years, so I welcomed the opportunity to discuss that with Tánaiste Fitzgerald when we met in July.

I want to highlight the importance of cross-border working in learning from shared experiences. It is about how we can do that. I think that our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland can take away the experiences that we have had in Northern Ireland, particularly the pilot of the domestic violence court in the city of Derry.

The problem-solving approach to justice will be another thread that runs through my next five years in office. It is about taking a common-sense approach to how we tackle issues in the criminal justice system to satisfy the needs of those who find themselves in the system and look at better and more efficient ways of working so that we can speed up justice.

**Mr Sheehan:** The joint agency task force has been established. Is the Minister satisfied that it has the necessary resources to operate effectively and that there will be no negative impact from the recent Brexit referendum?

**Ms Sugden:** Yes, at this stage, I am quite content that we can work collaboratively on sharing information and best practice. Indeed, that work was ongoing long before my tenure in the office. The work addresses issues such as rural crime, child exploitation, financial crime, illicit drugs, excise fraud and human trafficking. Regardless of the outcomes of Brexit, those issues would still come up in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland concurrently. As we share that special relationship with our colleagues in the South, it will be good to ensure that this work is continued and perhaps even strengthened, even in the wake of Brexit.

**Mr Attwood:** I welcome the fact that the meeting addressed the joint agency task force to tackle organised crime and criminality. Inevitably and properly, that will deal with paramilitarism. As the Minister will be aware, in Dublin today the British and Irish Governments are entering into a treaty to deal with paramilitarism. A four-person commission will also be established, two of whom will be nominated by the Executive. Will you advise when the Executive will nominate its two

members of that commission? Are you being consulted about who those people should be?

**Ms Sugden:** I do not have that information at this stage. The Member rightly points to the joint agency task force and the collaborative working on tackling paramilitary activity. That is really important and I appreciate the comments. Indeed, that leads us to the work that we are doing in relation to the Fresh Start Agreement and how we can do that. Again, we are mindful that we have to look at all the various agencies when consulting on that, as well as the community and voluntary sector. Undoubtedly, that will include people in the border areas.

**Mr Lunn:** The Minister's statement points to a high level of cooperation between North and South, which is very welcome. I only hope that it does not come to a juddering halt in about two years' time.

Specifically, I understand that drug courts operate in Dublin, which enable offenders to access programmes that are led by the probation service there — the statement refers to those — to tackle their addictions and turn away from crime. In the context of our proposed problem-solving courts, is there any intention to try to learn from their model?

**Ms Sugden:** By all means. My Department has continued to take a problem-solving approach from the previous mandate. I am keen to explore it, as it seems that problem-solving courts have been quite successful across other parts of the world, for example in North America and Scotland. We can learn from that. It is a common-sense approach to tackling these things, and it will have wider positive implications for the rest of the criminal justice system. I take the point.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the update on the work of the cross-jurisdictional joint agencies task force to tackle serious and organised crime. Can the Minister provide further details regarding the number of arrests made in Northern Ireland, the volume and type of illicit goods seized and when she expects prosecutions to take place?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for her questions. I do not have that information to hand, but I am happy to write to her. Cross-border working has been very successful, and I am aware that a number of arrests will be taking place. It is really a case of coordinating that. I am quite happy to provide the Member with those details.

**Ms Boyle:** I thank the Minister for her statement. In a letter to the Committee for Justice, the Chief Constable raised a number of issues relating to high-priority policing and criminal justice matters. Europol obviously no longer provides information on criminal activity across Europe. Given that one of those high-priority issues is child sexual exploitation and abuse, can the Minister give assurances that she and her counterparts will keep those high-priority issues, which also include cybercrime and international organised crime, high on the agenda? I welcome the fact that the Minister will work with her counterparts on a commissioned work programme. When are we likely to have an update on that?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for her questions. Of course, child sexual exploitation and cybercrime are high on our priorities for cross-border working. Indeed, we have seen an increase in crime of this nature. Crimes within the cyber arena are becoming more prevalent. They are almost hidden, because it is difficult to catch someone working from behind a keyboard. At our most recent joint agency task force group, I raised the issue of cybercrime, because it is moving more quickly than we are. We need to get on top of it. Every Member will be familiar with the opportunities that these criminals take through the Internet. There is a serious amount of work. It seems to be almost a channel for other types of crime, as well as those direct crimes that actually happen online.

As the Member rightly said, we need to focus on child sexual exploitation, and I confirm that I am keen to do that.

**Mr Aiken:** I welcome the Minister's statement. I imagine that, during cross-border discussions, cross-border financial crime, particularly white-collar crime, would be of considerable concern, particularly to the Irish Government, especially as we look forward to the publication of the NAMA report that we expect presently from the Irish Government. Will the Minister please state that she does not feel in any way constrained by the First Minister, deputy First Minister or Finance Minister and can set her own agenda, particularly on issues of financial crime and NAMA?

**Ms Sugden:** I can absolutely confirm that I do not feel constrained in issues surrounding NAMA. I have a body of work which I am quite keen to get on with. NAMA was not covered in discussions at my recent meeting with Frances Fitzgerald, but, as the Member's party colleague suggested, it is something that we

can look at. There are a lot of impending issues that I feel I need to prioritise. Certainly, the impact of Brexit will be a big consideration in cross-border working. There is an opportunity, as part of our continued working relationship with colleagues in the South, to strengthen our approach to the challenges of Brexit.

We will need to focus on rural crime. Members who represent such areas will be familiar with rural crime, which is almost heightened because of their proximity to the border and how that affects things.

My first meeting with Frances Fitzgerald was an opportunity to strengthen that relationship and understand the day-to-day problems that we are facing on the entire island, whether in Northern Ireland or in Ireland. That relationship is important so that we can all put our best foot forward.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Minister for her statement. Whilst she was not able to answer Mr Attwood's question about the composition of the Independent Reporting Commission, I trust that, when she next reports on an IGA meeting, she will be able to tell us about the discussions that she and Frances Fitzgerald have had about the operation of that.

Two years ago, some of us remember the very great problem that this society nearly ended up with because of the opt-out engineered by Theresa May and Chris Grayling from European justice and home affairs measures, particularly the danger of very nearly losing the European arrest warrant. What discussions has the Minister had with Frances Fitzgerald on ensuring that we maintain a measure that is at least similar to the European arrest warrant if the UK were to leave the European Union?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his questions. When I get five years into this job, I may be better equipped to answer some of the questions that he suggested that he was able to answer as Minister.

We are quite confident that we will be able to maintain the European arrest warrant. These arrangements, as the Member will know, were put in place not necessarily with any consideration of leaving the EU but for the sake of pragmatic working across the jurisdictions. That will not be a threat. When we discussed the European arrest warrant at our most recent meeting, we were confident that we could secure it moving forward.

**Mr Allister:** In answer to Mr Aiken, the Minister said that she did not feel constrained by political influences inhibiting the investigation of financial crime and corruption. As Justice Minister in this jurisdiction, what steps has she taken since last Tuesday night's BBC 'Spotlight' exposé of precisely such corruption and financial crime? What steps has she taken to ensure that such matters are not swept under the carpet and that those culpable, whoever they might be, are brought to justice?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** Order. I remind Members that all questions have to be relevant to the statement made. I will refer it to the Minister as to whether she chooses to reply.

**Ms Sugden:** Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I am quite happy to say to the Member that, as Justice Minister, I consider all things. I may not make statements as frequently as the Member does for the sake of posturing, but I consider everything. It would be irresponsible of me not to do so.

**Mr Hussey:** I apologise to the Minister for not being here for the start of her statement, but I have read your statement and was paying attention as you spoke. You referred to paramilitarism and also to forensic services. Clearly, in the Republic of Ireland, quite a few explosive devices and arms caches have been found. Will you assure the House that any evidence gathered that is forensically linked to the previous use of weapons etc that may relate to crimes in Northern Ireland will be provided by the Southern authorities to the Northern authorities?

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Member for his question. We discussed the forensic arrangement around information sharing and best practice. Those specific issues were not discussed, but I will keep it in mind for potential further meetings.

## Private Members' Business

### Rail Services between Belfast City Centre and Belfast International Airport

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

**Mr Girvan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses its concern at the lack of competitiveness and availability of rail services between Belfast city centre and Belfast International Airport; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to investigate all options for remedial action including the re-introduction of the Lisburn to Antrim rail link.*

**11.45 am**

I take this opportunity to bring the motion to the House on the basis that, since the closure of the Knockmore line in 2003, an area of Northern Ireland has been denied access to the rail network. In the past, it seemed to be the policy to close rail lines. The Bleach Green line was also one of the lines in question. It was reopened and is now one of the busiest routes. If you build it, they will come. I am taking the line that we have villages and towns along the route, such as Crumlin, Glenavy and Ballinderry, that have all grown dramatically. In fact, Crumlin has grown extensively since 1999 and would, in fact, be nearly double the size that it was at that time. As a consequence, it is an area that could and should have that rail link re-established. The Knockmore line has been in place and to date — not from 2003, but from 2010 until now — has cost £1.5 million to maintain in a state of potential readiness. It is also used as a training link.

Our main angle in the motion is to bring another form of transport and connectivity to the International Airport. Unfortunately, our International Airport has not necessarily had the same help and assistance that Dublin Airport has. Dublin has managed to get round what I deem to be an excuse that we have used in relation to state aid to actually encourage that and suck the life out of our International Airport. In fact, it has done nothing but attract routes for which potentially we should become a hub. I want to grow the traffic to the International Airport. I do not see the point when they say that they need 10 million passengers coming into the airport before they see the necessity of a rail network. I believe that we have to put the investment into the infrastructure and ensure that we have it there. I believe that if you have that, you will attract those routes to our area.

The other opportunity that we have is something that we have not made use of up to now. In fact, it has been mentioned in the Committee for Infrastructure. We have a rail network that is not being used for freight. I believe that we could establish the International Airport as a major freight hub, not just for

Northern Ireland but for the whole United Kingdom, as a consequence of that. A very large area of zoned land around the airport has already been identified for potential growth of the airport. We should encourage that. To do so, the Executive need to make a decision not just to mothball the rail estate that we have but to actually make use of it and give another opportunity for additional links to Lisburn, Antrim and Belfast. That is on the back of what we have already encountered up to now, which has been to see nothing but the lack of a joined-up approach, both from Translink — I will use Translink as the overall head as it used to be — and the rail and bus networks not being totally joined together. That seemed to be a point —

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

**Mr Girvan:** I will indeed, yes.

**Mr Clarke:** The Member talks about Translink. I am sure that he is aware that a bus leaves the International Airport every 15 minutes to take passengers to Belfast. Do we not see the benefit then of a rail link that gives passengers an option and removes some of the traffic congestion on our roads?

**Mr Girvan:** I see that as a vital point. We do need to see that complementing, not taking away from. On the basis that we have an existing railway running very close to the airport, it is vital that we make use of the land that is already zoned and bring a rail halt to the airport itself.

As well as mentioning what goes on from a Translink point of view on the roads, I must say that Templepatrick is a village that is being blighted by traffic all day, every day. As a consequence, it is vital that we try to remove some of those bus runs coming through what is a sleepy village every 15 minutes. I use the term "sleepy village", but it has become a place on a major commuting route to our International Airport. As a consequence, we need to look at other ways of dealing with that traffic.

The only quick fix that I see currently is to encourage a rail link. Ultimately, we would like to have the opportunity to look at having some form of link to the M2. If that is a possibility, it is something that we should look at. However, we currently have infrastructure that we should be locking into for the airport itself.

Spending £1.5 million — what I call "putting a sticking plaster on" — is throwing money down the drain. We would be better investing money.

**Mr Aiken:** Does the Member agree that one of the significant issues that we have in South Antrim is an infrastructure problem, full stop? That has been caused by considerable underinvestment over the years. Part and parcel of looking at Belfast International Airport, which is our key international hub and one of our major economic areas, is being able to develop a broad-ranging infrastructure strategy, particularly for South Antrim.

**Mr Girvan:** I have absolutely no problem with that, and that is one area that we should look at. Not just South Antrim but Northern Ireland as a region should be putting that forward. I know that the Minister will focus on that.

The line was closed in 2003, under the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. They were aware of what was going on in pulling out of what was a potential jewel in the crown of having a rail link to our airport. In fact, it is not that long ago since a question was asked in the House on what help could be given to Dublin to create a rail link to Dublin Airport. That is just sucking the life out of what is here. Those who represent border areas such as Newry and the Mournes may say that Dublin is closer, but why should we not look at the infrastructure that we have in Northern Ireland to ensure that passengers use it and make the best of it? That is what we should be doing: making sure that our network is there.

I know that the freight aspect is something that the airport would welcome, because there is an opportunity there. We have slots available. There are difficulties with flying into Belfast harbour airport at night — I still call it "Belfast harbour airport". I want to see Belfast International Airport being the main way forward. There is an opportunity for us to designate an enterprise zone in the airport area, not just to build up distribution networks but to drive business into the area.

South Antrim is an area that I have a great love for. I represent it and want to pull as much into it as possible. I want to see that the networks there are not being lost. We had a fantastic rail network in Northern Ireland back in the 1950s, but it has been disappearing ever since.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank Mr Girvan for giving way. Does he also recognise that, in order to achieve his ambitions for additional rail services in that part of South Antrim, the Minister needs to give serious consideration to the dualling of the Dargan Bridge as it crosses the river at York Street? Unless that is included in the York Street interchange, none of the rail improvements referred to will ever be able to

happen because of the engineering contingencies of the interchange.

**Mr Girvan:** I do not know enough about the intricacies of the full rail network, but I ask those who have the expertise to look at this, because I see the Knockmore line as an opportunity to create a loop. Effectively, where we are talking about dualling railways along the route, given the opportunity, it can be dealt with.

I met the people of Glenavy and Crumlin, all of whom are requesting additional services.

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

**Mr Girvan:** They believe that the railway stations in their villages should be opened again and used.

**Mrs Palmer:** I welcome the motion. I am pleased that the party that tabled it has finally decided that a rail link between Belfast city centre and Belfast International Airport is worth serious consideration.

The Ulster Unionist Party's document, 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU', which was launched only yesterday, identified 10 key asks, one of which was a trebling of the investment in infrastructure, including hard infrastructure such as airports, roads and railways. We have urged the Northern Ireland Executive to treble their investment in infrastructure. That will require making the case to HM Government that investing some of the funding currently being directed to Brussels should be used to increase Northern Ireland's competitiveness.

There is no doubt that, in an ideal world, we would have a rail link to the International Airport. In Great Britain, there are direct rail links to all London airports as well as to Birmingham and Manchester airports, Newcastle airport is connected to the city centre by the Tyneside metro and Edinburgh is connected by a hugely expensive and recently completed tram system. However, Glasgow, Liverpool, Leeds Bradford, East Midlands and Bristol airports do not have train links to their city centres and all rely on shuttle buses, as is the case for the International Airport.

With regard to the International Airport, it is obvious that improving transportation links to our largest airport would yield benefits to tourism and the local economy. Additionally, any modernisation and extension of the rail network in Northern Ireland has some intrinsic value as we seek to increase the use of public

transport. In 2013, my colleague Danny Kennedy commissioned a consultation that estimated that the cost of reopening the Antrim/Knockmore line with a halt at the International Airport would cost in the region of £50.5 million. That cost would be substantial, and there would also be ongoing maintenance costs.

The key question from the motion is whether the benefit outweighs the cost to the taxpayer. If the new Minister should use his limited funds, bearing in mind the vast deficit being dealt with in the Department, to fund this, presumably that would be at the expense of other projects. It would be better to concentrate on the completion of the Belfast hub project, which has the potential to transform public transport in Northern Ireland and to improve and renew the Northern Ireland Railways fleet.

Evidence suggests that, until recently, the DUP did not feel that the project was a priority use of funding. Only five months ago, the former Minister for Regional Development, Michelle McIlveen, said:

*"my understanding is that the usage of the airport would need to increase to around 10 million passengers to make that rail link viable". — [Official Report (Hansard), 1 February 2016, p33, col 1].*

In April, the managing director of Belfast International, Mr Graham Keddie, stated that he believed that the airport would serve five million people this year, taking into account the additional passengers travelling for major events like the Euros and the Olympic Games. That number does, however, fall well short of the volume necessary to make a rail link financially viable.

**Mr Ford:** I appreciate the Member giving way. Has she taken into account the difference between a railway system to serve an airport and a railway to serve the population between Antrim and Lisburn as well as the airport? That makes a fundamental difference to the numbers involved.

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

**Mrs Palmer:** I do not concur with my friend's opinion that another five million passengers could be found with that rail link.

With that context in mind, I wonder whether the motion is motivated more by the desire to be seen to be doing something than by genuine

belief that this is the best use of departmental funds.

That is especially true in the context of Brexit, which the party that tabled the motion so vociferously supported. Translink's rail service has already availed itself of a great deal of European funding, hence the EU flag on almost every train run by the service. Given that we are set to lose out on £58 million of TEN-T funding, I must ask where those who tabled the motion intend to find the money for this project.

#### 12.00 noon

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for giving way on that point. I take the Member back to the start of her contribution, when she talked about their 10-point plan, which, by her own admission, was launched only yesterday. In your contribution today, you said that infrastructure projects were on that list; indeed, you went on to say that the linkage between the International Airport and the City Airport was on that list. Maybe you can tell us in your contribution where you are getting the money for your 10-point plan.

**Mrs Palmer:** It is for you boys to have the negotiations in Europe.

Given that we are set to lose out on £58 million in TEN-T funding, I must ask where those who tabled the motion intend to find the money for this project.

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

**Mrs Palmer:** It is only fair — I did not hear you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I ask the Member to conclude her remarks. The time has now expired.

**Mrs Palmer:** Is there not an extra minute, Mr Deputy Speaker?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I have already allowed the extra minute. Thank you.

**Mrs Palmer:** I will finish. It would be cynical of me, of course, to suggest that now that the DUP —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I advise the Member that time is up.

**Mrs Palmer:** — no longer bears primary responsibility for funding —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I ask the Member to resume her seat. Time is now up.

**Mr F McCann:** Like many here today, I will speak in support of the intent of the motion and its call for rail services to connect Belfast city centre with Belfast International Airport. The destruction of the rail networks many years ago was short-sighted and led to the isolation of many communities across the North, especially in rural towns that had a rich history of rail provision. In fact, I believe that we lost something when we moved from the train to the car. Whilst I understand that there are now a number of public transport options available to people to get from A to B, the fact remains that rail can be more efficient, is cleaner and sends out all the right signals to encourage people to get out of the car or bus and on to a greener, cleaner mode of travel.

Between 4 July and 13 July this year, Belfast International Airport expected over 200,000 people to pass through its doors, an increase of 30,000 over the same period last year. Most of them travelled by road to reach the airport. That figure is expected to increase over the next number of years. In fact, Belfast International Airport showed a 9% increase in 2015, with figures of 4.4 million, and that is also expected to increase. Also, there is a huge increase in the number of people using Belfast City Airport. That is a clear indication that more and more people are choosing to use local airports as their first choice of travel.

I understand that people argued a number of years ago that the rail route would not be financially viable, but what has not been considered is the impact of making the decision to create a rail connection between Belfast city centre and Belfast International Airport, which could lead to a serious rise in passenger usage at the airport. It would offer an alternative form of travel to the tens of thousands who use their car or a bus. It could revitalise the small communities in its wake and send a positive message that we are committed to rail as a positive mode of transport. It could offer competition in provision and could lead to a business hub in the shadow of the airport that creates thousands of new jobs.

I take into consideration what the previous Member to speak said: how do we find the money and the resources at present to drive that forward? That is a crucial element in the whole debate about how we create and bring in new rail networks to different parts of the North.

The parties in here probably need to get their heads around and discuss the impact of taking the train rather than the car or the bus. I leave it in the hands of the Executive to work out the best way.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for giving way. It is right and proper to ask where the funding is coming from. If you look at the way we have worded the motion — you have picked up the essence of it, unlike the previous Member — you will see that we are asking the Minister and his Department to investigate options. Among those options is Ballymartin park-and-ride, which has not even been talked about. It is another facility where we are bringing people out of Belfast, removing some of the tensions in Belfast and, indeed, actually increasing investment because people on business can move, making their journeys easier. We are not suggesting that the Minister must do it, we are asking him to investigate ways in which it can be done.

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

**Mr F McCann:** I do not disagree with what has been said. In many ways, everything we discuss here is a wish list for somewhere down the line. I believe that the current Minister for Infrastructure is a person who is not only willing to listen but will also look at how best to plan and put into operation things that could benefit our communities in the longer term down the road.

**Mr McCrossan:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of the motion, and I thank the proposers for bringing this important issue to the House.

The SDLP supports improved connectivity between all our airports and rail services. Access to airports through direct railways is a hallmark of most major European and international cities and is essential to expanding Northern Ireland as a business and tourist destination. Airport rail links are vital to any European city and any country that must compete for inward investment. Over the summer holidays, like many in the House, I have been abroad. I have been to London and Barcelona, and it amazes me how connected public transport is and how efficient the services are. It should be our ambition in Northern Ireland to seize the opportunity and reap the many benefits that airport and rail connectivity can bring.

As we consider the Programme for Government and the infrastructural needs, it is my view that a modern Northern Ireland must have modern rail infrastructure and we must ensure the continued development of a modern railway system throughout the North and across the island. Minister, the fact that, in 2016, we do not have a rail link to Belfast International Airport or any other airport is nothing short of scandalous. Any airport rail link to and from Belfast International Airport has the potential to stimulate economic growth not only in Belfast but throughout Northern Ireland. It also has the potential to assist with the growth of tourism through the provision of direct access for air passengers and would offer a long-term sustainable public transport alternative for accessing Belfast International Airport. It would reduce congestion and provide important environmental benefits, as articulated by other Members.

Over the past number of years, there have been several proposals put forward on establishing a direct line to Belfast International Airport including reopening the Knockmore line through the construction of a rail spur to provide a halt serving the airport. If operational, the Knockmore line would enable the airport to be accessed directly from stations across Northern Ireland through connecting with existing services from Lisburn to Belfast or Portadown and from Antrim to Belfast. It would also allow for far greater west to east train connectivity because the Knockmore line would link Belfast International Airport and Derry. There is also potential to link Derry with Dublin for a train journey that would last three and a half hours. We have considered the infrastructure deficits in the west including the failure to develop the A5 and the A6, and I have spoken clearly about them since I was elected. Expanding the limited rail infrastructure could go some way to alleviating the regional imbalance. My constituents and the people of the west have suffered for decades.

We must also consider the cost. It has been estimated that re-opening the Knockmore line may cost in the region of £100 million. I ask the Minister how much it has cost to maintain the line in the 13 years since it was closed. We know that, since 2012, it has cost £1.5 million, despite being used only in an emergency. I ask the Minister, rather than pay for a railway line that serves little purpose, to invest in and pay for a railway line that serves the North and its people. The Minister has also said that in order for the service to become economically sustainable there needs to be 10 million passengers per year, which is 5.5 million short. From the population projections, the airport will

reach 10 million by 2035. I ask the Minister if it would be better to invest now rather than pushing the issue down the track for another day?

Although today's debate focuses solely on Belfast International Airport, we must also consider rail connectivity to the other regional airports: Belfast City, and the City of Derry. At the former, the Sydenham halt is about half a mile down the road from the airport, and you often see passengers with suitcases walking along the road in very dangerous circumstances. That is not acceptable, and it is my view that the halt could be moved adjacent to Belfast City Airport, with an over-road accommodation bridge for foot passengers. I would welcome the Minister's views on this and whether a feasibility study has been conducted.

To conclude, I support today's motion. The rail infrastructure in the North is not fit for purpose, and if we genuinely want to compete internationally for investment and boost local tourism, airport rail connectivity plays a central role and it is up to the Minister to lead on this. Minister, I believe that you could lead fully on this and set the bar very high.

**Ms Armstrong:** On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support this motion, which highlights this key question for the Minister: how attractive is he making Northern Ireland for business travellers and tourism? If we are to attract inward investment and grow our tourism market, we need better connectivity and investment in public transport solutions. By making it easier for people to get about, we make Northern Ireland easier to visit and therefore easier to do business with.

I welcome the call for the Minister to investigate options that would enable the reopening of the Lisburn to Antrim line and provide accessibility to Belfast International Airport, for the following reasons. First, local people want this line reopened. The local community in Crumlin, Glenavy, Ballinderry and the surrounding areas support the reopening of the Lisburn to Antrim line. The local community has petitioned my colleague David Ford, who has consistently brought the issue to successive Ministers, only to be told that it will be considered in the future as part of a long-term plan — on the long finger. The line was closed in 2003; that is 13 years ago. That is a very long finger.

The local community is very frustrated by the lack of progress on this issue. During recent Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council community planning consultation sessions, the community reiterated its wish for the line to be

reopened and for the council to initiate a project under the connecting our communities theme, potentially in partnership with the Department. This opportunity will not progress if the Minister and the Department continue to consider the issue on the long finger. The Minister should look to his regional development strategy, where an increasing modal shift from car to public transport figures strongly. In this instance, we have a community who would use the public transport system but are unable to do so because the line is closed to the public. The line is maintained and operational for training and emergency rail use, at considerable cost, as has already been mentioned, but it is not available for use by passengers. Really? We spend £1.5 million and it is not available to passengers?

Secondly, the Minister and his Department have predetermined the cost-benefit of reopening the line as being too expensive, based on a Translink estimate of £100 million and not on actual cost. In July this year, in response to a written question from David Ford, the Minister confirmed that the reopening of the Antrim to Bleach Green line cost £18.2 million. While I accept that the Lisburn to Antrim line may be more expensive, it does raise the question of whether the £100 million is a fact-based figure, or a guesstimate.

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

**Ms Armstrong:** I will.

**Mr Aiken:** It might be of interest to note, particularly on the Mossley line, that when the original projections on cost were made, there was not expected to be any growth in traffic. At the time, there was a lot of criticism of the investment in it. I understand that the Minister has some choices to make, but one of the most interesting things is the idea that if you build it, they will come. There is no doubt that there is a large amount of interest in improving rail links through this area, and I encourage the Minister in particular to get the Department to look critically at future growth projections rather than present growth, particularly across the great constituency of South Antrim. Thank you very much indeed.

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

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you. It is, therefore, appropriate that the Minister considers reopening the line using fact-based figures —

**Mr Clarke:** On that point, will the Member give way?

**Ms Armstrong:** Can I continue, or I will run out of time? Thank you. An investigation will give Translink the opportunity to provide a detailed business case showing the actual cost to maintain and modernise the line, with a view to reopening it for passenger use. It is not appropriate for the Minister or his Department to continue to ignore the opportunity on the basis of an estimate.

Thirdly —

**Mr Ford:** Will the Member give way very briefly?

**Ms Armstrong:** Yes, certainly — briefly.

**Mr Ford:** Since my colleague was not a Member of the House at the time, I am sure that she is unaware that a few years ago — before the property crash — a private business was interested in investing in the line, given the development opportunities on it, which could well have provided a cost-effective service. It would undoubtedly have been significantly cheaper than the £100 million guesstimate that is being prepared, particularly in light of what Mr Aiken highlighted about the potential for growth.

12.15 pm

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you.

I was talking about figures, and the third reason that is repeatedly given is that passenger numbers through Belfast International Airport need to be around 10 million. I am unclear as to what that figure is based on. Is it the Translink calculation whereby the number of passenger trips is counted, or is it the throughflow in the airport? If we are to understand whether the project is to be economically viable, we need figures quoted as targets to be clarified.

If we assume that the 10 million is the number of passengers, the airport's ability to grow to reach the proposed figure is being stymied by the lack of joined-up or integrated transport solutions for onward travel for business and other passengers. This lack of joined-up regional transport planning and provision has been highlighted by airlines over a number of years, but, amazingly, no survey of the business or tourism community appears to have been completed to establish whether better connectivity to Aldergrove would benefit or improve business.

The regional development strategy highlighted the need to promote regional gateways as

economic development opportunities, to exploit the economic development of the key transport corridors, to undertake or, where appropriate, facilitate a programme of infrastructure improvement essential to business needs and to promote a sustainable approach to the provision of tourism. If the Minister is to deliver the regional development strategy to 2025, he must take action to consider the viability of opening the line and enabling better connectivity. As was mentioned, it needs to take into consideration the Yorkgate interchange and creating that better connectivity to Belfast International Airport.

While I appreciate the loss of potential income streams following Brexit, I reiterate that we need to make Northern Ireland attractive to business and tourist travellers by making it easy to travel once they arrive here.

Finally, if Northern Ireland is to reduce carbon emissions and congestion, the Minister and the Department for Infrastructure must create the ability for modal shift and prioritise investment in public transport.

When I was in business, I travelled to England often, and it was easy to go to a meeting in a place where there was onward travel availability. My counterparts do not come to Northern Ireland because it is too difficult to travel across the country here.

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

**Ms Armstrong:** Road building has been prioritised over public transport. If we want to entice businesses and tourists and meet the needs of our local communities —

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

**Ms Armstrong:** — there needs to be a shift in departmental investment.

**Mr Poots:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to see you in the Chair.

Mr Ford and I go back a very long way on this issue. I remember standing in Crumlin with Oliver Frawley fighting the campaign to keep the Knockmore to Antrim railway line open. As I look at mothballed railway lines, particularly at one that runs through my constituency between Lisburn and Banbridge, I think of the time that would be taken off the Belfast to Dublin rail route if that line had been kept open, so avoiding Lurgan and the problems that arise

every so often when some brave Irish heroes think that they will achieve a united Ireland by blocking the railway line between Belfast and Dublin. I can only look with regret at the mothballing of that railway line, which is probably beyond bringing back. However, when I look at the Knockmore to Sprucefield railway line, it is not beyond bringing back. There is every opportunity to restore that railway line with imagination, conviction and good business sense. That is why we tabled the motion. We do not believe that it will be delivered very quickly, but, nonetheless, we believe that it can be achieved, and we need to focus on it and target it.

Mrs Armstrong's last comment about England being so much easier to travel around than Northern Ireland is patent nonsense. Most people who come from England remark on how much easier it is to travel around Northern Ireland than it is to travel around England, where the rail networks are heavily congested.

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

**Mr Poots:** Yes, I will give way. The rail networks are heavily congested and heavily overpriced.

**Mr McCrossan:** In England, you can get on a train, travel anywhere with no difficulty, there are the necessary halts and there is accessibility. We are completely and utterly disconnected, and that needs to be appreciated in this debate.

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

**Mr Poots:** Thank you for that, Mr Deputy Speaker. Travelling around England is a nightmare —

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

**Mr Poots:** Allow me to respond to the point, Mr Aiken. Travelling around England is a nightmare compared with Northern Ireland. Our public transport network is not as good as it should be, and considerable work has to be done on that, but Northern Ireland is a very accessible place, and it takes little over an hour to get from one side of it to the other.

I look forward to hearing from Mr Aiken, because the last time I heard from him he seemed to contradict his colleague who spoke earlier. I am completely confused about what the Ulster Unionist position is. Are they

supporting the motion? Are they against the motion? Do they want to see the railway re-established? Does Mr Aiken want this service running through his constituency? It appeared that Mrs Palmer did not, so perhaps he can clarify that.

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

**Mr Poots:** I will let Mr Aiken go ahead.

**Mr Aiken:** I was asking the Member to give way to support the Member's statement about English railways. As somebody who has been stuck in what the Great Western Railway laughably called the rapid transit route across the central section of England, I can fully appreciate those issues. It is unusual for someone to support your comment, but that is indeed true. We will address those other issues as we go further in the discussion. Thank you.

**Mr Poots:** Thank you very much for that very useful contribution, Mr Aiken.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate the work that the Member has put into the campaign over the last number of years around his constituency. How does it make you feel when you see a large party in this place — the Ulster Unionist Party — completely divided on this issue? It is very much like how they were divided in Europe, with some of their members campaigning to leave and others campaigning to stay. How does that make you feel?

**Mr Poots:** It does not really matter that much to me.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** We are going off the rails. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Poots:** That is a fair comment, Mr Deputy Speaker, and we will try and get back on track.

Mr Hazzard has a very substantial job in terms of infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Considerable bounds have been made over the last 10 to 15 years. We look at the road network, at the train sets that have been bought and the quality of those train sets and at lines such as the Bangor to Portadown line, which is so well used. We want to extend and encourage that. We see in the new line to Londonderry that the numbers using it are 225% greater than anticipated. Let us reinvigorate our railways; let us see how we can invest in our railway systems to ensure that we do better. Connecting people in Lisburn and

Antrim, who may well be in one constituency in due course, would be a great thing. We can do that together. The 10 million that is required for the airport is augmented by the numbers who are using it. You do not have 10 million passengers using the railway line; you need 10 million passengers going through the airport to get the appropriate number using the railway line.

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

**Mr Poots:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Kearney:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht; tá sí iontach suntasach ar fad. Tá sé fíor-riachtanach go ndíríonn an Tionól a aird ar an cheist shuntasach seo. I speak in support of the motion. The reality is a lack of competitiveness and availability of rail services between Belfast and the International Airport. In my constituency of South Antrim there is indeed — it has been touched on by other Members — a long-held local desire for the Lisburn to Antrim rail line to be restored, and I support that wish.

There has been a dramatic increase in population growth in the wider Crumlin, Glenavy and Ballinderry area over the last 30 years. There has been a quite phenomenal explosion in population. Once small rural villages are now growing towns with large numbers commuting daily, particularly for work and education, into Belfast. This is a catchment that is badly served by public transport generally. Bus services in that part of the lough shore area are completely inadequate. The transport infrastructure in these parts of South Antrim does not correspond to the needs of local people. I welcome the fact that I and constituents will meet the Minister — in October, I hope — to deal with some of the issues that are now unfolding as a result of these serious difficulties in the local transport infrastructure.

The reality is that the design of local transport infrastructure fails to meet the needs of local business, and, in turn, that fails to assist in optimising economic growth or attracting new investment opportunities both locally and from abroad. Not surprisingly, in parallel with the growth in population, there has been a spike in car use, with inevitable environmental consequences in terms of the carbon footprint and so on.

The Antrim to Knockmore section of the Lisburn railway line runs directly past Belfast

International Airport, yet, as others Members have correctly observed, there is no connection. The role of the airport complex as an economic driver for growth and investment in our regional economy cannot be ignored in the context of this debate. In the last two years, there has been a significant upswing in passenger footfall and air routes available through Aldergrove airport. The airport has also benefited from important commercial investment. It has the potential to become an enterprise zone in the future, and it should be recognised and nurtured as a strategic economic hub within the regional economy. However, that growth trajectory, that potential, is in fact fettered and limited by the absence of an overall integrated transport infrastructure.

I understand the business case that argues that passenger numbers in the airport do not meet the criteria for a direct rail connection from Belfast, but, equally, I do not accept that we should wait — I believe that we should not — until all the conditions are met before acting.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for giving way on that point about the passenger numbers. That is the point that we wanted to draw out in the intervention on Kellie Armstrong. I have a difficulty with the Department's projections. In the case of the projection for the Coleraine to Londonderry line, when it was built, it was 225% more than was estimated. They cannot accurately estimate how many people will use a line. As you rightly said, the figures show that the population in those areas is growing. We suggest that, by default, the number of passengers will grow.

**Mr Kearney:** I thank the Member for that contribution. I will revisit that point in due course.

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

**Mr Kearney:** We cannot approach the issue in zero-sum terms. If the proper standard of transport infrastructure, including rail provision, is put in place, economic growth, new investment and population expansion will inevitably follow. All the options, including investment in light rail rapid transport, should be considered fully. We need to come at this in terms of what we can do and what we ought to do, as opposed to what we cannot do, simply on the basis of what we are told.

I understand that the Minister must contend with unremitting pressure on his departmental budget. There will be the impacts of worsening

austerity, due to British Tory policy, and the unforeseen economic and investment damage that will be caused as a result of the Brexit decision. In the face of that type of adversity, there is an even greater need for blue-sky thinking. I refer that point directly to my colleague's earlier intervention. We need to coordinate the transport policy with foreign direct investment, industrial policy in the Six Counties, job creation and environmental priorities. We should be innovative and ambitious, even with the limited resources available. In that sense, we need to think about investing to accumulate, arising from our neglected transport infrastructure.

All our Departments and officials need to think about strategic challenges differently. Thinking the same way and doing things the same way will only guarantee more of the same results. Investing in rail services between Belfast and the regional airport and in the Lisburn to Antrim rail link should be seen as a strategic opportunity.

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

**Mr Kearney:** It will help to transform the regional economy and modernise our local transport infrastructure, particularly —

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

**Mr Kearney:** — in my constituency of South Antrim.

**Mr Easton:** I rise to support the motion and say from the outset that the motion is a no-brainer. At a time when we want to improve lives, enhance trade, create jobs, attract foreign investment and compete on a level playing field with our neighbours, we need to ensure that we have the best possible infrastructure to support those aims.

It is, therefore, vital, if we are to compete in a global economy, that our international airport has the best possible infrastructure in place to attract all those aims.

**12.30 pm**

The lack of a fast, efficient rail network from Belfast to the International Airport is criminal and short-sighted and hampers growth and foreign investment in our local economy. We know that one of the main factors in attracting business and, indeed, foreign airline companies

to Northern Ireland is to have the right infrastructure in place for quick and easy access from the airport for passengers and businesses to the main investment hubs. The way to do that is to have a fast transport system. In a world that moves at a quick pace, we in Northern Ireland lack that facility and are lagging behind our competitors.

We know that our main competitors are seriously looking at the possibility of extending their infrastructure. For example, a second runway at Dublin Airport and a rail network straight into Dublin from the airport are under serious consideration. If we are serious about attracting foreign investment and jobs —

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

**Mr Easton:** Yes.

**Mr Aiken:** Does the Member agree with me that the activity of the Irish Government and the Dublin Airport Authority is anticompetitive and is definitely detrimental to the Northern Ireland economy, particularly the state funding for terminal 2, for the outstanding debt for Dublin Airport Authority's pension fund and for the second runway? Those are examples of anticompetitive behaviour that we in Northern Ireland need to fight against.

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

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I do not disagree with him. I thank him for that.

OK, jobs —

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Member for giving way. There has been a lot of discussion lately about how difficult it can be for us to compete with Dublin Airport at times. Some things are outside our control. Dublin Airport is able to offer, for example, pre-clearance to the United States. Does a railway link at the airport not go some way towards making us a more attractive opportunity for travellers?

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree with that.

If we fail to act on the motion, our competitors will have the economic edge. We are aware that the former Department for Regional Development undertook a public consultation during 2013 and produced the 'Railway Investment Prioritisation Strategy', which was about how we could take forward and prioritise

future investment in the Northern Ireland rail network up to 2035. One of the priorities identified was priority 3, which is what we are talking about today.

One of the main arguments that will be used for the case not to reopen the Antrim to Knockmore/Lisburn line will be that such an investment would not be viable because of airport passenger numbers, which in 2013 stood at around four million, and that, for the project to be viable, numbers need to grow to about 10 million. However, I argue that airport numbers are projected to grow to the 10 million mark by 2030. We can see from current levels that there has been an 8.9% increase in the past year, as well as a 2.5% increase in aircraft movements. We can see that there is positive movement in increased flight and passenger numbers. I argue that, if we had the right railway connection in place from the airport to Belfast, that would attract passengers and foreign investment and enable us to compete with our neighbours and increase those numbers even more quickly.

The potential cost of reopening the Antrim to Knockmore line and providing a link to Belfast would be in and around £50 million. That would involve the rehabilitation and resignalling of the track between Antrim and Knockmore, the construction of a single-track spur and a rail halt at the airport, two additional trains, station renewals at Ballinderry, Crumlin and Glenavy and a park-and-ride. Failure to do those things would be folly. In 2014, Dr Peter Bolan, director for international travel and tourism management at Ulster University, stated that the lack of a rail link to Belfast International Airport was detrimental to Northern Ireland and one of the reasons that there had been a failure to secure a long-haul route to Canada.

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

**Mr Easton:** Very quickly.

**Mr Ford:** I appreciate the points that the Member makes. I am just slightly concerned that he does not seem to recognise that there were services on the Knockmore line until they were closed by a former Minister for Regional Development by the name of Gregory Campbell, whom he appears to have described as a criminal whose work is folly. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Member for his useless information.

Dr Bolan further said that, if Northern Ireland had serious ambitions to develop its economy

by bringing in investment from places such as China or North America, it must improve its transport infrastructure, particularly to the main airport:

*"International visitors simply just expect that but, instead, they're limited to buses and taxis, which isn't ideal."*

As we enter talks on Brexit, we will enter a whole new set of negotiations for new and exciting global deals that we in Northern Ireland want to benefit from. If we want to benefit, it makes sense to invest in a rail link from Belfast to our main airport and show the world that we are open for business, investment and job opportunities.

**Mr Aiken:** We welcome the motion on providing improved access between Belfast and the International Airport; indeed, in our recently launched 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU', we have specifically called for improving infrastructure. I am sure that the Minister for Infrastructure and other Ministers are already aware of the ongoing discussions in London on the provision of a significant potential infrastructure stimulus. A stimulus like that could be transformational if it is used to significantly enhance our position as a gateway to the EU. End of plug.

It would also be useful to note that Belfast International Airport will come close to and might exceed 5.2 million passengers. 2017 is expected to be a better year, maybe pushing towards 7 million passengers. In the airport, retail and food and beverage outlets are reporting high double-digit increases in business. One of the things that I am most pleased to report is that that increased activity has generated over 800 jobs this year, with 100 additional posts to be created shortly. That is a great success story. Indeed, the 1,000-acre site is a major economic hub for Northern Ireland, second only to Belfast harbour estate for employment numbers. Airlines such as Ryanair and Easyjet have made Gatwick the most important airport for Northern Ireland passengers, eclipsing Heathrow, with extra capacity being added on that route all the time. With Ryanair launching four new routes, including Berlin and Milan, and with extra routes to come, everyone in the House will be pleased to note that the airport has had a very good season and is looking to have a better year next year. All in the Assembly should thank Graham Keddie and his team for all that they have done not only for South Antrim but for all of Northern Ireland.

Our major international gateway — this is where I agree with DUP Members — has been hampered by unfair competition. I welcome the opportunity to compare the access that has been afforded to the fully state-aided and state-supported edifice that is Dublin Airport and to observe and listen to the advertisements, again state-funded, about the so-called great access that Dublin Airport has, coupled with significant enhancements, including the potential provision of a new runway — again state-funded. It is of concern that Tourism Ireland, to which Northern Ireland contributes over a third of its budget, actively promotes Dublin Airport as the gateway to Ireland. That raises obvious concerns about competition. If you couple that with the abolition of Irish air passenger duty (APD), VAT at 9%, EU-funded roads and well-established transport links to two terminals, you can see that the improvements that Belfast International Airport has made are well-nigh remarkable and it should be supported for them.

The competition will be even further skewed as our major airports are being starved of access. Again, as has been pointed out, can we name any major airport on these islands that does not have at least dual carriageway access? I will ask you to indulge me, Mr Deputy Speaker, while I quote one of my constituents who has contacted me on the issue:

*"Our roads access is deplorable. What other major international airport do you go to and get stuck behind a tractor or even worse ... Our roads owe more to the 1950's than the 21st century. We need at least carriageway access from the M2 with a potential Templepatrick bypass, and improvements to the other main access route, the A56 ... There is also no advance planning under way to build infrastructure to meet increased passenger demand ... Everything is left on the long finger ... As for rail, we were told years ago that a rail spur would only be viable if we hit 8 million. Yet, as numbers grow, there is no discussion on this matter."*

What are the Executive going to do about this, apart from utilising Dublin Airport regularly? I and, no doubt, all of the 1,000-plus workers who keep our airports working and the aircraft based here flying will be interested to see which Ministers and officials use Dublin rather than our own airports.

In supporting the motion, my party calls for a much wider discussion on improving access. We welcome an improved rail system across all of South Antrim. Connecting the airport should also include facilitating a major park-and-ride

facility at Crumlin and a rail station at Ballymartin park-and-ride should be progressed with a degree of urgency. We would, as a matter of priority, push for a dual carriageway link from the M2 to be built first, and any additional infrastructure made available in the autumn statement should be fast-tracked to that provision. Indeed, the Executive, along with Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, could significantly push the success of this programme by fast-tracking the planning of such a link and doing it now.

More importantly, APD has to go, and we know that the Scottish Government are already planning to reduce theirs.

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

**Mr Aiken:** Finally, while not germane to this discussion, we must address the challenge of Dublin Airport. We are all for competition —

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

**Mr Aiken:** — but competition against a state-aided airport seeking an all-island monopoly must be challenged. Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Lyons:** It is a privilege and a pleasure to follow the Member for South Antrim, who has been very positive about the motion, unlike his colleague from Lagan Valley. I am still not sure whether she supports the motion, but perhaps Mr Aiken can have a little word in her ear and get the support of —

**Mrs Palmer:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I would rather not, but I will. I do not want to hear any negativity from the Member. If she is upbeat and positive, I will give way.

**Mrs Palmer:** I remind the Member that, in my opening remarks, I started by welcoming the motion and saying that we fully supported it but have issues.

**Mr Lyons:** I wish that she had continued in the vein in which she started. We are pleased that she now says that she will support the motion, and I welcome that.

I welcome the motion because I think that it is important that we have a rail link from Belfast International Airport to the city of Belfast. I am pleased that the motion asks for the Minister to

explore options. It is important that we find out what is necessary for this to happen. Today, a lot of figures have been bandied about: the number of airport passengers we will need; the number of rail passengers we will need; how much it will cost to sustain the line; and the cost of maintaining the line in its current unused state. We need to explore this. We need to find out about and nail these figures down, because I understand that some of them are from quite a few years ago. It is important that we take the time and have the feasibility study originally proposed in the strategy produced by the Department for Regional Development a few years ago. If we had those facts, it would put us in a better position to —

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

**Mr Lyons:** I will give way very briefly.

**Mr Aiken:** I ask the Minister to, instead of looking purely at the potential growth in the number of people using Belfast International Airport, take on board the views of all the South Antrim MLAs here. We talked about the overall growth of the population of the area and looked at that as part of a wider prospect. I am sure that the DUP would also be delighted to look at wider options to improve those links.

**Mr Lyons:** Certainly, people in South Antrim and across Northern Ireland would welcome this.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Member has an extra minute if he chooses to use it. I remind him to address all remarks through the Chair.

**Mr Lyons:** I will, of course, and I agree with the Member. It is important to note that the figure of the 10 million passengers that would need to go through the airport has also been used. There are lots of other rail stations linked to airports across the country that do not have that sort of figure. Glasgow Prestwick Airport has 600,000; Southampton has 1.7 million; and Belfast International Airport has four million, which obviously does not include the other passengers that would use the line to travel between Lisburn and Antrim or elsewhere.

I used to be a frequent user of Newcastle International Airport, and the Tyne and Wear Metro from Newcastle and Sunderland goes right into the airport. I have seen the economic growth and development that came along that line as a result of it being there. As other Members mentioned, we should look not only at the number of passengers that could use it but

at the other growth that could come along that line; not just the airport.

We want better connectivity. We also need to look at the truth that will come from all of this, which is that more people might use the airport because of the train line. People like the certainty of knowing that a train will come. With buses, people are sometimes not sure where to get them or where they will go, but rail is one of the easiest ways to travel. You have only to look at the transport statistics from Northern Ireland over the last 15 or 16 years to see that, in the first decade of this century, we had a 60% increase in the number of people using the railways. Even in the last three or four years, we have had a 30% increase. One of the reasons why that happened was an increase in investment in the railway lines in Northern Ireland. It is the same here. Like Mr Aiken said, if the investment is put in and you build it, people will use it.

**12.45 pm**

I understand that Minister Hazzard has an awful lot on his plate. There are competing groups and competing interests and priorities on his desk. However, it is important that, on such an important issue that has the potential to grow the accessibility of the International Airport and therefore grow our tourism potential, we at least explore the option of a rail link at the International Airport. Of course, an important thing to remember and realise is that the line is already there. We are not proposing a completely new construction here. It is there, but it is not being used. All that we are asking today is for the Minister to look into the feasibility of doing something with that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** I call Mr Gerry Mullan. I have to advise Mr Mullan that, because of the tight timescales involved in this debate and agreed by the Business Committee, I can allocate him only four minutes.

**Mr Mullan:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As a Member for the East Derry constituency, I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion, and I thank the proposer for bringing it to the Chamber. Rail connectivity is a major issue in my constituency. There have been some major advances in upgrading services, carriages and halts in recent times. Indeed, in June, I was fortunate enough to be invited to attend the opening of the new Bellarena halt, which has provided a great boost for local rail passengers.

As outlined by my colleague from West Tyrone, the SDLP is in support of improving our rail infrastructure. A vital component of that is improving airport rail connectivity. Access to airports through direct rail linkages forms a vital part of any modern city or region, especially when you consider its importance in attracting foreign direct investment and boosting local tourism. In this regard, we have seen cities throughout Europe invest heavily in their airport rail connectivity. We will all have experienced this when we have travelled to the continent and even within these islands. For example, no sooner do you land at London Heathrow than you are navigating your way through London Underground. This is the hallmark of any modern city that prioritises connectivity that saves travellers both time and stress. It is something that we in the North of this island should prioritise.

Today's debate has been informative in highlighting the many issues that surround establishing a rail link to the International Airport, especially through the reopening of the Knockmore line. In spite of the political posturing that we have seen across the Chamber today, I think that we can agree that this is supported by the majority of Members, especially those in the Antrim constituencies.

Despite no feasibility study having been conducted, it is estimated that reopening the Knockmore line will cost upwards of £100 million. However, as my predecessor John Dallat highlighted in the last mandate, the Department for Regional Development had been spending vast sums on the maintenance of the 20-mile stretch of line from Antrim to Lisburn with little or no return. Therefore, I ask the Minister to detail how much his Department has spent on the line since it closed 13 years ago and where exactly the money has been spent. Surely that money would be put to better use if it were invested in a project that would see the permanent reopening of the Knockmore line. That would be a massive boost for travellers from not only Belfast city centre but across the North. This is especially the case when we consider the prospect of having a rail link from Derry to Dublin, a service that would allow people from my constituency of East Derry and from Foyle to be able to travel by rail rather than rely on buses that are inconvenient and inaccessible for many people.

Although today's motion focuses solely on the International Airport, the people of my constituency want to see greater rail connectivity to and from the City of Derry Airport in Eglinton, where the Derry to Belfast service runs adjacent to the airport yet no halt

exists for airport passengers. The construction of a railway halt at Derry Airport has the potential to transform connectivity in the north-west, especially when we are attempting to attract record numbers of tourists into the area. It would not only serve the people of Derry city but could act as a gateway by connecting Castlerock, Downhill, Coleraine and Portstewart. There is also a possibility of constructing a railway halt at the Shackleton site in Ballykelly. I therefore ask the Minister what consideration he has given to the possibility of constructing a rail halt at the City of Derry Airport and whether he plans for his Department to conduct a feasibility study.

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

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

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member recognise that the argument that he makes is somewhat weak?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy):** The Member's time is up and I am afraid that we have to conclude.

The Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm today and I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the Minister will respond to the debate.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.50 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Finance**

**Mr Speaker:** We will start with listed questions.

### **Housing Associations**

1. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the impact on public finances of the likely statistical reclassification of housing associations from private to public bodies by

the Office of National Statistics. (AQO 206/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance):**

Thank you, Mr Agnew. The outcome of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) review is expected shortly. While the result may be anticipated, we must await the formal notification and the detail of the ONS rationale before responding.

Any reclassification from the private to the public sector will affect how the bodies are treated in departmental budgets. Any new borrowing by them would require capital DEL budget cover and would therefore place a significant pressure on already constrained resources. I am working alongside the Communities Minister — in fact we met at 10.30 am today and this issue was very high on the agenda — and our officials are ensuring that we are ready to respond to the ONS decision.

I would add that we expect the reclassification decision to, as it were, go against us and to rule that housing associations are public-sector bodies. We expect that decision before the end of the month.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for his answer. We had a debate in the Chamber yesterday about the need to invest in housing. My concern is that such a reclassification could inflict serious damage on our ability to invest, particularly in social housing. From his discussions with the Communities Minister, can the Minister tell us what contingency plans they hope to put in place?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Thank you for that supplementary question. I share those concerns. Last week, I addressed the finance directors of all the housing associations, and you can be sure that they also impressed on me the urgency of getting it right.

I am content that we are on the right path. When the decision is issued, I will seek a derogation and the Treasury will decide how to respond to that based on the work we have done. I am content that that work will have the desired effect and that we will get a derogation to allow us to put the proper regulations or legislation in order. Therefore, while Mr Agnew is right to stress the issue and be vigilant on it, I hope and trust that we are on the right path. Mr Givan gave me much confidence in that regard this morning.

**Mr Maskey:** The Minister has already answered the question and said that he has

met the Minister for Communities. Given his optimistic projections, will he give the House an assurance that he will continue to engage with the Minister for Communities to make sure that the potential ramifications of the decision are minimised if not reduced altogether?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chomhalta. The Member is right to stress how grave it will be if we do not get it right. Needs must in that case, and if we were to lose the ability for housing associations to borrow off balance book it would cost the Executive up to £100 million a year. We do not have that type of money, yet we are resolved to hitting very ambitious social housing targets. For that reason, I take on board Members' concerns and am heartened by the response of Minister Givan and his team this morning.

## UK Multi-year Budget

2. **Mrs Little Pengelly** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any engagement he has had with HM Treasury to ascertain the current position on the previously anticipated multi-year budget for the United Kingdom. (AQO 207/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I have had a number of discussions with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the British Chancellor, Mr Hammond, on the EU referendum and its implications for the Executive's Budget. In addition, I have corresponded with them on a number of occasions on issues including the implications arising from the EU referendum. I continue to press for early engagement on the Budget implications in advance of the Chancellor's autumn statement, which will take place on November 23. I am pleased to say that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has agreed to meet me on 24 October, which I think is a Monday. Shortly before that, we will meet Mr Hammond and, I believe, Theresa May.

I agree that it is essential that we have a clear path of communication with the Treasury on all these issues, especially in this period of uncertainty. My officials are in touch with the Treasury on a daily basis. It is fair to say, after our weekly meeting on EU issues this morning, that my officials believe that there is not enough information coming back from Westminster and the Treasury, but we can take some solace from the fact that, in Westminster, opposition parties are saying the same — they are not getting as much information as they would like. For our part — mine and my Department's — we remain on the ball on this issue.

**Mrs Little Pengelly:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I think that he shares my view that one-year Budgets should be avoided if at all possible, but we acknowledge that sometimes that is not possible. I ask the Minister, and I have raised this with him already, to take into particular consideration those in the third sector — the many thousands of community and other organisations relying on grant funding. For them, in particular, short-term one-year Budgets can be tough, especially when they have contracts and other things to extend and bills coming in. I therefore ask the Minister to continue to engage with the Department for Communities and to give a commitment to this House that he will try to get information out to them as soon as possible in this financial year to enable them to plan for the next financial year, if it is a one-year Budget.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Thank you for that supplementary question. Of course, you met me this morning as Chair of the Committee and made those points. I am very cognisant of the pressures on those on the front line of providing services. We did not take the decision on a one-year Budget lightly. I am pleased that our Celtic cousins in Edinburgh and Cardiff are following the same route. That is because there is no alternative, inasmuch as we do not know what the autumn statement will bring in terms of corporation tax, this entire fiscal reset and other issues. However, I take that on board. We will not know the full impact of the autumn statement on 23 November; it will probably take us a week or two to assess it and prepare a Budget. However, before Christmas we should have a one-year resource budget and four-year capital budget ready. I hope and trust that we can get the information to the bodies that need it as soon as possible. I take on board the broader point that stability around Budgets would be a great boon to all of us, and I hope to return to the House in more stable times and say, "Here is a resource budget that will bring us right up to 2020."

## Budget Proposals

3. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Finance what are the implications of proposals to set a one-year rather than a three-year Budget. (AQO 208/16-21)

4. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any responses he has received from Executive colleagues on his proposal for a single-year budget instead of the previously suggested multi-year budget. (AQO 209/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will group questions 3 and 4 together.

A single-year resource DEL Budget will allow additional time to plan for the fiscal adjustments that the British Chancellor is expected to set out in the autumn statement. It will also provide further opportunity for our Departments to reflect upon resources that are required in future years to deliver Programme for Government priorities. A multi-year capital budget is possible — I am very pleased by that — in light of indications that a degree of protection will be afforded to capital budgets to encourage investment opportunities. A local multi-year capital budget will provide more certainty in planning capital projects. The First and deputy First Ministers have written to express their support for this approach to the Budget, and the indications from other Ministers have also been positive, with acknowledgement that, in the circumstances, it is a pragmatic way forward.

While Mrs Long is focusing on a one-year versus a multi-year Budget, I think she would agree that there is another pressure on us. Not only do we have to adopt this Budget because of the circumstances — the lack of information and the uncertainty from Westminster — but we face into the problem of resource between now and 2020: we have a 4.1% real-terms cut. Battling that and finding a way round it, when we have obligations in the form of pensions and pay, is very difficult and challenging for us all. I believe, however, that this is the correct way forward at this time.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Obviously I recognise that there is uncertainty. How does the Minister intend to ensure that the Budget process at this point in the Assembly runs smoothly? It has often been beset by delay, and under a one-year Budget that could have significant implications for service providers. What discussions has the Minister had with Executive colleagues to address any potential delays down the line?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thank Mrs Long for her supplementary question. The Executive have united around the concept of a one-year Budget because there is no alternative. Our Welsh and Scottish friends came to the same conclusion. The Executive realise that we have to move with some speed at this time.

There are bigger issues around the Budget, the complications of Budgets and the way that we do Budgets that I want to address in the time

ahead. My officials will do a consultation with all the relevant sectors, including the trade unions, the third sector, the business sector and so on.

The Executive will be united around not only the concept of a one-year resource budget and a four-year capital budget but the commitment to make the Budget process as swift as possible. I am unhappy that we have to wait until December before we can bring forward a draft Budget. I wish that it were otherwise, but I understand that, given that it will be very late in the year, we need to move at pace in the new year to get the Budget through the House. I am confident that we can do that.

**Mr Butler:** Does the Minister not realise the sheer absurdity of the Executive pushing through a one-year Budget while trying to spin that they are almost at the finishing line of agreeing a five-year Programme for Government?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Let us see what the alternative is. If we were to agree with the Ulster Unionists that a one-year Budget is the wrong way forward, we would not be walking in lockstep with the devolved Administrations of Scotland and Wales. It has been my experience — I have met my fellow Ministers on several occasions — that, when we move together and speak for 10 million people with one voice, we make a better impression on the Treasury and better decisions for our people. The alternative would be, as the Ulster Unionists wanted us to do, to make a three-year Budget even though we do not know what Mr Hammond will do about corporation tax. Will he reduce it to 15%? Will he keep it at current levels? We do not know what Mr Hammond will do about his predecessor's resolve to raid our Budget in 2019-2020 and remove £150 million. I met the CBI yesterday morning for an hour-and-a-half discussion. Businesspeople understand that prudent Budget making necessitates taking tough decisions for the benefit of all our citizens. In this situation, the wrong and reckless decision would have been to press ahead with a three-year resource budget before Mr Hammond's statement or afterwards in that period of uncertainty.

The Programme for Government will be outcome-based. I am confident that the two processes will align and that the Executive — it is irrelevant now to consider mistakes made in the past by other Administrations — with an independent Justice Minister and with the DUP and Sinn Féin at the table, will make the right decisions for our people and create a Budget

that sets out our priorities and meets the aspirations of our people.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for his explanations so far. We heard from Mrs Little Pengelly about the impact that this could have on the community and voluntary sector in its ability to plan, the amount of time that it will spend on applying for funding on an annual basis and the inefficiency of that; 20% of its time will be spent on applying for the next year rather than reducing that over a longer term. When the Minister describes this as the best way forward, for whom is it the best way forward?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thank Mr Agnew for that. There is no real logic to that at all. The logic of your position is that, if we had brought forward a Budget earlier or gone for a three-year Budget, we would have faced into massive uncertainties. We will not know until 23 November what Mr Hammond wishes to do or what he means when he says that he wants to reset the fiscal system and reboot his approach to public finances. We do not know what his approach is to the austerity agenda. In that context, the only sensible and prudent way forward, as is reflected in Scotland and Wales, is a one-year Budget.

We will engage with all those in receipt of public funds at an early stage. I will ask my colleagues on the Finance Committee to bring forward their thoughts on the Budget by October. The priority issue is to provide all those who depend on the Government with the funds that they need. While we can never satisfy all demand — demand is infinite and our resources are finite — I will endeavour with my colleagues across the way and the Minister of Justice to ensure that we can meet the maximum amount of requests from the public sector, the third sector and those who provide essential services to the community. I will endeavour to provide them with the moneys that they need. For me, Mr Agnew, that is where the focus should be.

I urge the Committee for Finance to look at this. Where are its priorities? Where would it like money to be spent? We have a year's Budget to lay out in that regard. I think that that is the area where I will work full out to try to ensure that we have a Budget that we are proud of, which delivers on the Programme for Government objectives and, more than that, delivers on our objective of a shared and prosperous society.

**2.15 pm**

## NAMA/Project Eagle

5. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Finance what contact he has had with the Minister for Finance in the Republic of Ireland regarding the National Asset Management Agency and Project Eagle. (AQO 210/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thank Mrs Barton. I met Minister Noonan on 22 June 2016. It was a positive introductory meeting where we discussed a broad range of important issues including NAMA. The exact detail of our conversations at all these meetings remains private. However, Mrs Barton will know that my position for some time has been that there should be a commission of investigation on an all-island basis of the Project Eagle sale. She will also be aware of the position of Mr Noonan that any wrongdoing happened outside his jurisdiction. Needless to say, a Cheann Comhairle, I do not accept that position. Since June, things have moved on rapidly. The latest disturbing revelations by 'Spotlight' serve only to underline the need for a full and thoroughgoing investigation of the NAMA/Cerberus deal. In my view, the suggestion that these matters are relevant only to the North is not tenable, but I look forward to tomorrow. As Mrs Barton will know, the Comptroller and Auditor General in the South of Ireland has prepared a report on this particular issue. He will issue that. It will be discussed by Minister Noonan and his Cabinet colleagues. We will take it from there.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you very much for your answer, Minister. Are you confident that proper due diligence was carried out on the appointment of Frank Cushnahan to NAMA's Northern Ireland advisory committee?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thank Mrs Barton for that. If she has the time — you would need a lot of time for this — and she wants to go back over the Committee for Finance's investigation of the matter, she will see that, at the time, we expressed reservations about many issues around the Project Eagle sale deal preparation. I do not want to name individuals today. There will be enough of that, and it will probably happen at a higher court than this when it does happen. Whatever our misgivings about the conduct of the investigation, I think that we can stand over the conclusions of the report and investigation. One of them was that there are lessons to be learned. In my Department, we took those lessons on board. Where it is relevant and has been relevant to the Department of Finance, we have resolved that those mistakes should not be repeated. I

suspect that the Minister for Finance in the South, Mr Noonan, and maybe the Taoiseach will touch on one of them tomorrow. This was the biggest-ever property deal since partition. It was our view across the table in the last Committee for Finance that we did not have on our side sufficient professionalism to gauge and understand what was happening. In the time ahead, if there were ever to be a sale of any asset of this size — I cannot actually imagine that there would be — we need to ensure that Government have on their side those who understand exactly what is going on. That is one of the lessons that my Department has taken on board.

**Ms Hanna:** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. In a previous answer, he referred to Executive unity. I think that the public are united in wanting to understand what did happen in the run-up to this deal. Will the Minister raise this at the next Executive meeting with a view to getting a united Executive commitment to a full, clear and transparent inquiry into the issue?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I think that the Member heard my position on the issue — it is not a new position — that there should be an all-Ireland inquiry. I do not know whether it was said in the House yesterday or on the TV earlier this week, but she will know the position of the First Minister. They are not the same positions. In my view, it would not be a sensible path to try to take an argument in the public domain into the Executive.

As Minister of Finance, I reiterate what I have said to Southern Ministers and to my colleagues here: a commission of investigation is needed so that we understand what happened and so that the mistakes do not happen again. It has been my view for some time that the sales process was flawed at its very core, and that, I think, will come out in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report.

What we need to do in the time ahead is ensure that those who can really bring justice to bear on the matter and bring to book those responsible for wrongdoing — the gardaí, the NCA, the FBI and the SEC — have the information to do their job. I remain hopeful. I do not know whether the Member was on the Finance Committee when we met the NCA. The information provided was confidential. You can be sure that it did not breach any of its protocols, but everything that the NCA promised us it would do, it has done. It outlined and road-mapped the stages of the investigation, and it has delivered on that. It is

therefore my hope that it has the evidence. I believe that there was wrongdoing. I do not want to speak about individuals, but I hope that the NCA is able to use the evidence that it has gathered to bring to a higher court than the Assembly those who were responsible for the scheme.

**Mr Girvan:** I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I appreciate the Committee's desire for the Minister to step aside to allow an investigation to take place, but that has not happened. On the back of that, regarding the NCA's investigation, would that be right? What is the Minister's view on allowing that process to take place without political interference?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thought that you were going to ask me to step aside. I know that, of all the people in here, you would be the most disappointed if I did anything but step up, and step up is what I intend to do.

This is the sort of thing that you should not say in politics, because you are putting some trust in an organisation outwith this institution entirely, but I have faith in the NCA. They have delivered on their promises so far, and I believe that they will not need and will not brook any political interference in their affairs. Time will tell, Paul, if that is how things emerge. Of course, there are other jurisdictions' agencies now involved as well: the gardaí and the FBI.

**Mr Ford:** I must say that I am delighted to hear the Minister's support for the NCA, given the circumstances of its introduction here.

Given the significant public concern in the community about a range of issues involving NAMA — issues that are not just those for criminal investigation by the various agencies, North and South — given the potential difficulties of establishing an inquiry on a North/South basis and given the lack of confidence that the public would have in any inquiry conducted solely by the Assembly or any of its Committees, will the Minister give a commitment to have a full, independent inquiry in Northern Ireland if it is not possible to have one on a cross-border basis?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** There was every "given" in there except Paul Givan, I notice. What I would say to the former Minister is what he would have said to me in similar circumstances: unfortunately, I do not control the setting-up of inquiries in this jurisdiction. The Assembly may have the power to do that, or perhaps the Executive have the power, or perhaps it is the Comptroller and Auditor General.

I am as keen as he is to get to the truth of what happened in the Project Eagle deal. Much of the information that we are getting has come from sources outside any official investigation: in particular, we all have to tip our cap to the journalists who have been working on the issue.

I would not give up on the possibility of an all-island inquiry. I would like to see what Mr Noonan comes forward with tomorrow, and I am sure that Mr Ford would like to wait as well and see what the Comptroller and Auditor General points out as shortcomings. We know there has been some speculation that he or she will say that there is a shortfall of €200 million to €300 million because the deal was not carried out properly. Let us wait until that happens, when we see the report tomorrow. Let us see the response of Minister Noonan and the Taoiseach and take it from there.

I stand firm in my position that there should be that inquiry; I support your position. However, I would not give up on the fact that, among the many givens, any commission of investigation set up by the Dáil or the Taoiseach or any individual appointed by the Taoiseach to scope it out will have the influence or ability to find out the information that they need north of the border.

**Mr Allister:** I totally accept that the Minister has no responsibility for what happened in his Department before he was Minister, but I have no doubt that he is concerned by the boasts in the 'Spotlight' programme from a gentleman who, while feathering his own nest, said that he had insider status in the Department and the opportunity to influence decisions in it. Has the Minister been able to investigate whether the integrity of the Department was breached in that respect and, if so, whether there was any staff complicity?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Mr Ford wants me to take on new powers, and Mr Allister wants me to be transported to the past. Let me tell Mr Allister what I have done since my appointment in relation to the NAMA Project Eagle deal. I have been in touch with the NCA and asked for my own meeting to make sure that they have the full cooperation of my Department, that there is no other information that they need and that I am kept aware of how the investigation is proceeding. We also did a forensic audit of all the information relating to NAMA that was in our files, and we ensured that any additional information could be handed over to the Committee and that the authorities had all the information. We were able to hand over some additional information, Mr Allister, without redactions. In my view, those were unimportant

redactions, and we were able to remove some of them. Very few redactions were retained, mainly relating to data protection issues. We released the name of the third nominee from the former Minister to Minister Noonan for the NAMA advisory committee.

I stand over the integrity of the 3,100 staff in the Department of Finance. I believe that all those people, especially those who have been working on the issue, want to see the truth about the Project Eagle deal coming out. You can be assured that every member of my staff will, like me, cooperate fully with any inquiry. There will be no hidden corners, and no information will be held back. That is what I have done since my appointment, and we will continue that. My staff are equally committed to that end.

### **Sexual Orientation: 2021 Census**

6. **Ms Seeley** asked the Minister of Finance whether the 2021 census will include a question on sexual orientation. (AQO 211/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Chomhalta as an cheist seo a chur. Last year, the statistics and research agency NISRA ran a consultation to assess what questions needed to be in the next census. Of the respondents who expressed an opinion, the vast majority indicated the need to have sexual identity data collected through the census. The NISRA response to the consultation was published in August, and research will now take place to test whether a sexual identity question could be included in the next census. That research will be completed by 2017-18, after which NISRA will publish the results and make a recommendation.

The census will be subject — this is the part that everyone else here likes — to the approval of the Assembly, which will provide the opportunity for full legislative scrutiny. I am minded to include a question on sexual identity, but, as with all matters related to the census, we will need the buy-in of the Assembly and the Executive. The next Irish census will be in 2021, and I suspect that they may go in the same direction. At this stage, I am minded to include a question on sexual identity.

**Ms Seeley:** I thank the Minister for his response. Does he have awareness of the view of our LGBT groups in relation to having a sexual orientation question included in the census?

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Minister to make his response quick.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** They are supportive. I met many of the groups at the Rainbow Project centre earlier this year, and they would like a question on sexual identity to be included in the census.

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

### **NAMA Scandal**

T1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Finance, after thanking him for finally addressing the elephant in the room in relation to the NAMA scandal, by outlining that he is well aware of the many issues surrounding it, including the BBC 'Spotlight' allegations about a £40,000 fee to Frank Cushnahan and the report by the Comptroller and Auditor General in the South, which stated that the NAMA deal had irregularities and shortcomings, how confident he is that we will finally get to the bottom of this scandal that has literally shocked and sickened every single person who is watching this Chamber. (AQT 156/16-21)

2.30 pm

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thank the Member for his question. A lot of people are giving the Minister of Finance extra powers today and relying on me to do things that I am not empowered to do. I suggest to the Member that, rather than asking what my confidence is, he ask what is the confidence of the people of Ireland, North and South, and those further afield who were involved in the deal that we will get to the truth. We have to assume that people are confident. If they have trust in government and trust in the highest levels of business, law and accountancy, they have to be confident that we will get to the bottom of this scheme. If we do not, the upshot will be that we have let the people down. I personally am confident, and one of the reasons why I am confident is that I see, at every turn, people from all professions, not least from the political profession but also from the highest ranks of business, accountancy and law who think that it is incumbent on us and that it is essential that we do not let them down.

I will say only one other thing to Mr McCrossan. Neither he or nor I have seen the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, but it is my feeling at this stage that, while I am very much in favour of an all-island commission of investigation, it will be down to the FBI, the

NCA and the gardaí, probably in that order. It will be down to the law enforcement agencies finally to unravel and pull back the cloak that has surrounded the NAMA/Cerberus deal.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Minister for his answer so far. He highlighted public confidence. Is the Minister not concerned that, following the revelations surrounding a former party colleague and the alleged coaching of a witness due to appear before the Assembly Finance Committee, any investigation undertaken by the House might be compromised due to political involvement? Is he not also concerned about the allegations linking him to the coaching of the witness concerned?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** No. You have moved from having confidence in the Minister's opinions to being concerned about the Minister's point of view on these matters. Let me assure Mr McCrossan that, when I come to work each morning and face the issues of balancing the Budget; of finding £4.6 billion to fund the health service; of making sure that our schools have the resources that they need; and of making sure that we are building, according to our plans, the art galleries, libraries and community centres that we need, the NAMA revelations about Jamie Bryson and Daithí McKay are very low on my totem pole.

It is worth stating again — I thank the Member for the opportunity — that I had no involvement in and no knowledge of the connections and communications between Mr McKay and the other individual, Mr Bryson. *[Interruption.]* Mr McCrossan has been here only a short while, so he should try to keep his manners in the House, and we will keep our manners with him. *[Interruption.]* He should also note that, while the Committee has asked whether I have any communication of any type that might shed light on the matter, I have not. I am happy to have the opportunity to put that on the record.

Let me say one other thing. When I hear the party of Conall McDevitt and Declan Boyle come here and lecture others about the ethics of politics, I am not concerned because I have confidence in the people and their ability to see behind party politicking. I also have confidence in the people and those who serve them to make sure that they will get the answers that they deserve on this matter.

### **Equal Pay: Executive Position**

T2. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance, given that there has been much talk about what

the public think about various things, to outline the Executive's position on equal pay, in light of the section of the public, namely those who were involved with the PSNI and the justice agencies, who are concerned about equal pay. (AQT 157/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thank the Member for his question. It leads to an issue that you never want to hear in politics, which is the moral obligation. There is a belief among many Members that there is a moral obligation that the equal pay settlement should have covered those who served in the PSNI and the NIO. Moral obligations sometimes do not make it into budgets because we do not have the resources that we would like to have, as the Member understands. It is my firm view that the responsibility for the issue lies with the NIO and the British Government. I have written to Mr Brokenshire, who was recently appointed to the position of Secretary of State, and have asked him to pick up his obligations in the matter. I am sympathetic to the plight of the individuals involved but I do not have the money in my budget and I cannot think of who I would take it from to serve this particular cohort. The NIO has the resources and a moral obligation to resolve the issue.

**Mr Clarke:** I welcome the fact that the Minister refers to a moral obligation and that he accepts that there is a moral obligation. Given that there was a paper prepared in 2015 to the Executive by the DUP, which does not seem to have gone anywhere, will the Minister give a reassurance that he will redouble his efforts to make sure that the moral commitment is realised by the NIO, or whoever the paymaster might be, so that these people can get justice on the equal pay issue?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I am happy to keep the Member abreast of developments. Mr Brokenshire has not responded yet; he has only received that particular letter from us. It may require much persuasion or pressure. The Member's party has more sitting Members in another House than our party has, and they may have a role to play in this as well by putting pressure on the Treasury and Westminster.

### **Parking: Banbridge**

T3. **Ms Lockhart** asked the Minister of Finance what progress has been made following the undertaking he gave after he and his colleagues met Banbridge Chamber of Commerce to discuss using the health centre grounds for parking. (AQT 158/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** For a minute, I thought that the Member was going to raise the vexed issue of rates, which we are always troubled and concerned about. I thank the Member for being present at a meeting with retailers from Banbridge in Gordons Chemists just outside the town some weeks back and for a run through of all the issues. The issue you highlight is that a government asset that is now redundant is not being used to provide some parking for the town centre. I have given a commitment to speak to the Health Minister, in whose estate that particular property sits. I will come back to you as soon as possible. It will take joined-up government — and you know how challenging that is for us — but I would like to think that we could resolve the issue regarding a car park that will help retailers in the centre of Banbridge.

**Ms Lockhart:** I thank the Minister for his response. I am very keen that the traders see that this Government are listening to their needs. Can you give an undertaking around timescales because Christmas is fast approaching and I know that they will require the parking for Christmas trading?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** If I were to say that I am going to speak to the Health Minister today, that might indicate that I have not spoken to her yet, so I want to be careful about that. I will make sure that, today, we talk to the Health Minister. The ball will be in her court — you can be sure she will bat it back — but I agree that it needs to be resolved and I will try to get it resolved.

## Post-Brexit Budgets

T4. **Mrs Little Pengelly** asked the Minister of Finance, following this week's good example of toddler economics from the Ulster Unionist Party, with its "triple our funding but lower our taxes" cry to the British Government, whether he can, on a more realistic basis, outline the engagement he has had with Her Majesty's Treasury on the protection of our capital budget in the short term and an enhancement of that capital budget, particularly for infrastructure, in the light of the additional funds coming back that would otherwise have gone to Europe post-Brexit and the benefit to Northern Ireland from that. (AQT 159/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I thank the Member for her question. For the Treasury to have had that level of engagement with me would mean that they have been speaking to me more than they have been speaking to any of the other devolved Administrations, more than they are speaking to the Opposition and more than they

are speaking to one another. Every time I turn on the TV, Mrs May, Mr Davis and Mr Fox are arguing with one another, not to mention Mr Boris Johnson.

You can take it that it is my contention that the British Government can do two things to help.

First, if there is going to be a fiscal reset in the autumn statement and a new approach to austerity, I hope that there will be additional investment in infrastructure. We will not reach the cloud cuckoo land of trebling infrastructure spend. I do not know which particular portal it was going to be transported to Earth from, but we are never going to have the money to treble infrastructure spend, as the Ulster Unionists seem to want. But, there could be a stimulus from Mr Hammond in the Autumn.

Secondly, he could take his foot off the austerity pedal. He could say, "We are not going to oblige you to have a 4.1% real-terms reduction between now and 2020". Regrettably, he has not brought me into his confidence, but we will be keeping the Treasury under pressure on those issues.

**Mrs Little Pengelly:** I thank the Minister for his response. Can he give a commitment that he will work with his Executive colleagues to look at a stimulus and encouraging business and economic growth here? He will be aware that infrastructure projects, unfortunately, take considerable time in what is referred to as the pipeline; it could be three, four or five years. Will he do everything in his power to ensure that resources and processes are fit for purpose to enable these projects to get shovel-ready and be ready to go when we get that certainty from Her Majesty's Treasury?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** As I know from my discussions with the business community — I have met maybe 15 or 16 different business organisations, chambers of commerce and so on — a surprising number of infrastructure projects are ready to go. They are not, perhaps, entirely over the line, with full planning permission, but when I meet with my ministerial colleagues, I find that there are projects sitting ready in each Department that they have had to hold back.

We have started a conversation in the Executive about creating our own stimulus locally, so whether it is through a stimulus of our own making or as a result of Mr Hammond's actions and the Barnett consequential, there is a series of projects that I would like to see realised. The South West College in Enniskillen

was one of the most impressive visits that I have made since my appointment as Minister, and it is effectively ready to go. I think that would be a great project. Belfast City Council has a number of cultural projects close to the Ulster University that I would like to see happen, and there are some smaller game-changing projects, including an Cultúrlann in West Belfast that I would like to see happen as well.

In your own constituency, there is a little cycle and pedestrian bridge over the Lagan. I do not want to encourage you in baiting — never mind beating — the Ulster Unionists, but as you know, a previous Minister announced that cycle and pedestrian bridge, got full planning permission and then did not build it. If we had stimulus here of our own making or as a consequence of a Barnett consequential and a decision by Mr Hammond, those are the sort of projects — much more than just a bridge over the Lagan — that we could bring forward swiftly.

### **Brexit: Minister of Finance's Position**

T5. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Finance whether, based on previous statements that he has made, not only in the House but on other occasions, it would be representing him correctly to say that, as of yet, he remains unconvinced of the merits of Brexit; and whether he accepts that he would be much better able to lead his Department from where we are than from where he would like us to be; that is, from a position of leaving the European Union. (AQT 160/16-21)

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I admire your confidence; confidence has been used a lot here. The Buddhists have a great saying about living in the moment, so I always try and lead from the here and now and live in the moment. What I find amazing is that, regardless of Lord Morrow's certainty on this particular issue, the Tories in London cannot agree among themselves. Mr Davis said there was going to be a hard exit, a hard border; Mrs May, the Prime Minister, had to correct him. Liam Fox is busy insulting "fat and lazy" businesspeople, instead of preparing for the exit that you believe is coming.

I prefer to say, "Let's keep the options open", but, at the same time, we have set up in the Executive an inter-departmental group that is gathering information. It is gathering it without political interference, without "Remain" or "Leave" having any bias towards it. These

matters will take some time to resolve, and Lord Morrow and I would both like to see a conclusion to this which is in the interest of all our people. I am a "Remainer". I will not call him a Brexiteer, but he certainly supports "Leave". The facts will become clear as time moves on. I think that he will agree that we need to get facts that are independent of political interference. Let us collect them in the middle, let the Executive take cognisance, and let us all take decisions based on those facts.

**Mr Speaker:** We do not have time for a supplementary question. We will now move on to questions to the Minister of Health. I will let the Minister of Health take her seat.

2.45 pm

## **Health**

### **Learning Disability Underspend**

1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health how she is addressing the underspend in learning disability services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQO 221/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health):** Since I first became aware of the issue, I have been closely monitoring the actions of the Western Trust, in particular its engagement with families and carers. Indeed, I wrote recently to the chief executive of the trust to make clear the seriousness with which I take the concerns that have been expressed to me by families and carers and to underline the need to restore confidence by resolving the issue in a robust and transparent way.

While work to determine the extent of any underspend is ongoing, it is clear to all of us that urgent action is necessary in the shorter term. As part of this, the Western Trust has taken a number of steps to begin to address the issue, which include the development, in partnership with families, of a phased investment plan in adult learning disability services. In the immediate term, some £3 million is being invested to secure additional professional and support staff to enhance the community infrastructure in the Western Trust area and to address the priority needs of those transitioning into adult services by, among other things, increasing the day opportunities and day centre support.

In addition, I understand that the trust intends to develop an awareness programme and education sessions for families to continue to

engage with MLAs and others as it progresses this crucial work.

I have also been assured that the trust will review how it communicates progress to all families affected, and this is something that I will continue to monitor very closely. While I think that we can all agree that all this progression is welcome, we cannot be complacent, and I have made clear my expectation that more needs to be done. A continuing commitment is required right across the system to ensure that we are delivering the right services for people with a learning disability and their families. Therefore, the trust will continue to develop a plan for further investments, working closely with the families and local representatives.

As I made clear during the Adjournment debate in June, and as these recent investments now demonstrate, I will not be found wanting in my support for people with a learning disability and their families. I am committed to working with the trust and others to ensure that the right services are in place, and I will continue to pay close attention to the progress that the trust is making.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Minister for her answer, but she has not answered my question. Minister, it is now September, and we still have no figure for the shortfall, we still have no solutions, and we still have no explanation. What is the figure? What is the solution? What happened in the trust? Where has the money gone?

**Mrs O'Neill:** OK. I think that I did answer the question. Perhaps the Member was not listening. I very clearly set out what is happening across the trust. I very clearly set out that I took this up in my early days in office as a priority issue that I was concerned about. I very clearly set out how I have instructed the trust to engage better with families and carers. That is key for moving forward. There has been a breakdown of trust in the area, and that is totally unacceptable from the families and carers' point of view.

As we move forward, families are more interested in our finding a resolution to the issue than standing up and trying to do a bit of circus antics in the Chamber. It is far more important that I deliver better services — *[Interruption.]* — for all those people right across the Western Trust area, and I have set out how I have done and will do that. The amount of underspend, which goes back for many years, needs to be properly quantified. I have always said that. I

said it in June. Work is going on in the board to make sure that that happens.

It is important that we do not throw more flame on the fire by trying to make headlines around figures. If it is £8 million, let us get to the bottom of it and address what has happened in the past. That is the work that I have been involved in. I have very clearly set out my stall by supporting the families in the Western Trust area. I have set out how the trust has been instructed to engage better, and I have written again to the chief executive in the last number of weeks because, in my experience and in my conversations with families, they do not feel that it has gone far enough. I am OK to take that on board and to engage with the trust to make sure that that happens. We need full transparency, trust to be built up again and proper supports on the ground. That is more important to families than trying to score petty political points off other Ministers.

**Mr McCrossan:** There is nothing petty about £8 million a year, Minister.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member not to barrack the Minister.

**Mr Hussey:** Like the previous contributor, I am not overly happy with the answer.

I met Mencap yesterday, and we discussed the problems associated with adults with learning disabilities in West Tyrone. The figure is not £8 million: we are possibly talking about £110 million or more that has been underspent in West Tyrone and the Western Health and Social Care Trust. You mentioned the trust in the Western Trust: well, there is no trust among the parents of children with learning disabilities. The question has to be whether the Department is taking this seriously. Is the Department going to make the chief executive accountable? So far, she has not been.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his tone and his question. As I said to him in the Adjournment debate that he brought to the House, in my first couple of days in office, when the issue was brought to my attention, I very clearly involved myself with the issue. I have continued to push the trust around what it is doing, particularly around engagement with families, because that is key. There is such a big breakdown in trust here over many years that needs to be addressed. I want to make sure that I hold the trust to account in terms of what it is doing. In the last number of weeks, after speaking to families, I have again instructed it to look at how it engages with

families. I do not think that it has gone far enough. Families are telling me that, so I want to address that.

We need to get to the bottom of the figure so people can quantify the amount of money and how long this underspend has been going on. We will get there. The board is actively working its way through that, but it is a difficult process. I am assured that we will get there. I will not stand behind; I will be very forthright in publishing that figure and making sure that families are aware of the figure. I will also be very sure to make strong guarantees about the investment of an additional £3 million that has been put in place to improve the picture. I do not want to wait until we have the final figure; I do not want to wait until that work is done. I want to make sure that we are already actively working on the ground and making changes. That is happening. We certainly have a way to go in building up trust, but I am committed to making sure that I play my role as Minister to make sure that happens.

**Mr T Buchanan:** I listened to what the Minister said, and she has set out what she plans or intends to do and so forth. How do you intend to communicate that with the families on the ground? Any of the families that we talk to do not know anything of what is happening or what is taking place. How do you as Minister intend to communicate that to the families, to let them know that you are interested and that you are planning to do something about this?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member is probably aware that I have already met families, and I will continue to engage with families. It is a fact — I have met families and will continue to. I have received representations from many of the elected representatives in West Tyrone, you included, and I am happy to keep engaging to make sure that we put out the facts. I do not think that it is helpful to scaremonger. I think that there is a recognition right across the board that there is a problem — a problem that needs to be addressed. I will not be found wanting in my role in addressing that. I will not be found wanting in my role of holding the trust to account and making sure that it properly engages with families. Even when we quantify the figure, in going forward we have to make services better. We have to improve things for people with a learning disability, and the only way we can do that is proper communication. It is also about delivering and designing services and supports that actually meet the needs of people with learning disabilities, and I am very committed to making sure that in transforming and going forward we co-design all the services that are delivered for all those out there who

need to avail themselves of health and social care.

## Autism Assessments

2. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health, given the waiting list for clinical assessments in Belfast for conditions on the autism spectrum whether she plans to prioritise the clinical assessment of children on the waiting list who are at critical stages of their education. (AQO 222/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** All referrals to trusts for an autism assessment are prioritised on the basis of clinical need, not educational status. However, I am fully aware of the current waiting list position in the Belfast Trust and can assure the member that action is being taken to tackle the issue utilising the £2 million additional investment made available to all trusts from 1 April 2016. To be clear, I am committing to getting those waiting lists down and ensuring that children and young people are assessed as quickly as possible. In the immediate term, additional capacity for assessments has been secured from additional hours and overtime clinics. In addition, arrangements are being developed for the assessment of children in the Belfast Trust to be undertaken by other trusts. Further, a recruitment process is currently under way to fill six new posts that, when complete, will substantially improve waiting list management in the Belfast Trust. However, sustained improvements will require substantial reform. Therefore, in parallel to the actions that I have just set out, the HSC Board is also in the process of agreeing with the trusts a new regional model for autism services to improve both the diagnostic process and access to early intervention in line with current best practice and along with NICE guidelines. That new model will optimise the scope for the integration of child development, emotional and mental health services, as well as working more closely with the education sector, to ensure that the provision of coordinated and appropriate support for children with autism is in place.

**Ms Bunting:** I am grateful to the Minister for her answer and the action that she intends to take. In East Belfast, parents are told that there is a 22-month wait for an assessment in the Bradbury Centre. They wait for seven months, then they check and are told that the wait is down but it is still 20 months. That is, realistically, a P6 child who is not going to be assessed until they are about to enter first year. I have parents who are at their wits' end.

I am sure that the Minister is sympathetic, but my question and, to some extent, my plea to her, while I appreciate the action that she intends to take and that she has outlined, is "How long can this go on?". If necessary, will she directly intervene to help, particularly the Bradbury Centre, alleviate the problems and address what are clearly enormous issues with regard to waiting lists and the prioritisation therein?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for that question. I totally agree with her. We can see that the situation in the Belfast Trust is obviously worse when it is compared with other trusts; there are particular issues there. I have set out how the trust itself intends to deliver. We need to move to the point where we are looking at a more regional service and a regional model approach. That would provide consistency across the board, not just for autism but for other disabilities. That will be key. I will keep a close eye on investment in the Belfast Trust and how it is trying to address the problems.

The fact that we have so many more people coming forward for referral shows that there is a lot of awareness now about autism. Look at the prevalence of autism over the last number of years: it has risen from 1.2% of the school-age population right up to 2.3% this year. That shows that there is obviously a growing demand. That is testimony to the great work that has been done on raising awareness. Families know that they can be referred, and they are seeking referral for assessment. That is really important.

The fact that we have a rise in the demand for autism services and supports means that we need to be continually tailoring the supports that are on offer. We have the autism strategy and plan in place, and they obviously need to be continually reviewed to make sure that we have services that are fit for purpose and meet the needs, in as timely a manner as possible, of all the children who need to be referred for assessment.

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Minister for her answers to date. She referred to the dire waiting lists in the Belfast area. Just last week, a distraught mother contacted me, Minister. She had just been told that her daughter had to wait up to 22 months for a diagnosis, with a possible further one-year wait for intervention. She is currently watching. What is your direct advice to her?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is unacceptable that she has to wait that long. It is totally unacceptable that

anybody has to wait that length of time, particularly for children to be referred for assessment in the first place, so that we can put a proper package in place to support them. I would not stand here for one minute — never, ever — and defend that type of waiting list, whether for autism services or any other supports for people who need health and social care. That is why we have to transform health and social care. We cannot keep doing things the way we are doing them. That is why we need to move forward with the transformation piece. I look forward to engaging with all the parties in the House about how we seriously engage on how we will transform the delivery of health and social care services. We had the additional investment of £2 million right across all the trusts to try to deal with the backlogs that are there.

I would never stand here and say that it is acceptable that someone should have to wait that length of time. All I can say to that parent is that I will work night and day — I have done for the four months since I came into post — to make sure that I transform health and social care to deliver better outcomes for that child and every other child who needs health and social care.

**Ms Gildernew:** I thank the Minister for her very full reply. I ask her for a progress report on the autism strategy. What are the next steps?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for her question. As I said, there is a strategy in place that creates a statutory obligation to prepare, review and monitor the implementation of a cross-departmental strategy. That came about as a result of the Autism Act 2011. There are a number of themes right across the strategy, all of which are very relevant. We can all point to really good examples of things that have happened as a result of the strategy. We have more autism training for front-line staff, education professionals and youth workers. We have one-stop shops developed by the Northern Trust and Belfast Trust for adults to obtain employment and careers advice. Adjustments have been made to the theory and practical driving tests. We can point to a number of things as good examples.

### 3.00 pm

What I believe we need to do is to keep the strategy continually under review. It is important that it be cross-departmental in nature and has an action plan. In partnership with stakeholders and people out there who are involved with families and carers day and daily,

we need to plug the gaps that are there. The way in which that can be done is by informing ourselves of the views of people with autism and those of their families, their carers and the community and voluntary groups that work with the sector.

**Mr Lyttle:** I wish to ask the Health Minister why there is a 22-month wait for autism assessments for children in Belfast, how exactly the £2 million investment has been spent and why that has not reduced waiting lists?

**Mrs O'Neill:** As I said earlier, the prevalence of autism in the school-age population is continuing to increase. If you compare the figures that I talked about and look at this year alone, you will see that there has been a 17% increase in the number of referrals for assessment. That is testimony to the work being done to raise awareness, with the result that people are more alert to the fact that autism exists and that they are entitled to get a referral for assessment. When you look at it, you can see that that in itself creates a demand for services. It is so important that we continue to review the strategy, make sure that we are fit for purpose and meet the need that is there.

There was and is good progress being made with the £2 million that was invested, but we have not got there yet — far from it, when you look at that waiting list. The Belfast Trust's share of the £2 million was £418,940, which paid for a range of things, including staff overtime, but that is not a sustainable approach. We have to recruit. We have to make sure that we have ongoing recruitment and a proper workforce that can deliver the assessments that need to happen. I will continue to monitor the progress being made, but we seriously have a way to go. When I met Autism NI the other day, I committed to working more with the community and voluntary sector on the work that it does.

## Looked-after Children

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Health how she is addressing the needs of looked-after children. (AQO 223/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The term "looked-after children" (LAC) refers to a diverse group that varies in age, the reason for being looked after, the age of first entry into the care system and the duration in care. Although some looked-after children and young people can go on to enjoy success, as a group, outcomes, including health and education outcomes, tend to fall

significantly below those of the general population.

In my term as Health Minister, I am determined to give those children and young people the priority that they deserve, in keeping with my duties as their corporate parent. I want a care system in which fewer children need to become looked after, in which quicker decisions are made about where they will live permanently and in which there are improved outcomes for each and every child in every area of their life, including physical, mental and emotional health and well-being and educational attainment. I also want to ensure that everything possible is done to secure their successful transition into adult life.

It is a commitment that I cannot deliver alone. I will need the help of the wider Executive, which, as is reflected in the draft Programme for Government, have also agreed to improve support for looked-after children. To deliver on the Programme for Government commitment, and in the context of the Executive's wider children's strategy, my Department is developing a strategy that is specific to looked-after children. The LAC strategy will be reinforced by a family support strategy, also being developed by my Department. Both strategies are being developed on a co-design basis, and we intend to consult on a draft LAC strategy and supporting action plan early next year. Where legislation is required to deliver any of our strategic aims for looked-after children, that will be done by way of an Adoption and Children Bill. I have already made public my intention to bring forward a Bill in the current mandate.

I want to ensure that looked-after children are given the opportunity to shape the strategy. Some of that will be done directly through me. I have already met a group of looked-after children in my time in office, and I am committed to ongoing engagement. I am also committed to providing Members with the opportunity to engage directly with looked-after children, and I am considering how that can be done to best effect. In their role as corporate parents, I have asked all five trusts to consider establishing formal engagement mechanisms to facilitate direct engagement with looked-after children in their area.

I accept that a looked-after children strategy may require some additional investment, either to test new ways of working or to extend existing supports available to looked-after children. I have already made a number of new investments. For example, I have invested £500,000 to extend the Going the Extra Mile

scheme to more young people in foster care to enable them to remain with their supported family until they reach the age of 21. I have also invested an additional £2 million in fostering services in response to service pressures and a further £150,000 to enhance therapeutic support for looked-after children, particularly those who have suffered or been exposed to trauma.

I thank the Member for his interest in the issue of looked-after children and recommend that other Members show a similar interest. I look forward to working with the Executive and the Assembly to support families in the North to stay together and to ensure that, when we make decisions to take children into care, we provide a system of care that nurtures them, acts in their best interests at all times and secures the best possible outcomes for them.

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

**Mr Maskey:** I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive response. I wanted to ask whether looked-after children are being engaged with, but, clearly, that is the case. Therefore, in the spirit in which she has already responded comprehensively, will she continue to update the House in future on the success of that engagement with looked-after children?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I am very happy to do that. As I told the group of children that I met, they may be small in number but they are a high priority for the Executive and we want to deliver better outcomes for them, whether in health or in education or just in their feeling comfortable in their home environment. It is important that we talk to them. They clearly articulated to me what they feel needs to happen with services and how we support them. I am keen to continue that engagement, and, as I said, I have asked trusts to consider some sort of formal mechanism whereby they can engage with children in care in their areas. I am also going to try to provide an opportunity in the Assembly for MLAs to engage with children who find themselves in care.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for her answers to this point. Will she outline whether she intends to bring forward new adoption and fostering legislation to ensure that looked-after children are placed in a safe and caring environment rather than being kept in institutional care and other temporary care settings?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I intend to bring forward an Adoption and Children Bill. I have said publicly that I intend to bring a Bill to the Executive and put it out for consultation to make sure that we have the most efficient and robust possible legislation in place to support children who find themselves in that situation. The Bill will strengthen support mechanisms for those who are involved in adoption. I am keen to get Executive endorsement for that, and I will do that over the coming weeks.

**Mr Bell:** I thank the Minister for the work that her Department is doing for looked-after children. What is the current status of the educational gap that is emerging between looked-after children and the cohort of children in the general population? Secondly, will she assure the House that, where necessary, given that many of these children have experienced severe trauma and disruption to their lives and that there is such a short time to get it right, extra resources will be put into helping those looked-after children to achieve the life opportunities that many of us took for granted?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Absolutely; that is what the strategy will be about. There will, obviously, be a cost factor associated with the strategy, but as I said, when I engaged with the group of children in care, they clearly set out the changes that they feel need to happen. I agree with them, but I have also committed to them that we will put proper legislation in place that will allow all those things to happen speedily. There should not be any delays in processes and in making sure that people are placed in proper homes and given every support possible. The facts speak for themselves when it comes to educational attainment, health outcomes, potential mental health problems and all those things that we know are relevant to children in care. It is so important that we support these young people on their life journey.

**Ms Armstrong:** Will the Minister confirm whether children being cared for by kith and kin will be considered formally in her Department's arrangements for looked-after children?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, absolutely. We will take all that into consideration. It is important that we support that. There has been a lot of media focus and attention on kinship recently, and it is so important. The family support network is key, so it will all be considered.

## Outpatient Waiting Lists

4. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Health how many outpatients in each health and social care trust have been waiting longer than 52 weeks for their first consultant-led appointment. (AQO 224/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The latest provisional figures for outpatients waiting longer than 52 weeks for their first consultant-led appointment show that, at 31 July 2016, the most recent figures available to me, there were 19,849 patients waiting in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, 1,698 patients in the Northern Trust, 4,689 patients in the South Eastern Trust, 3,278 patients in the Southern Trust and 4,104 patients in the Western Trust.

I wish to reiterate that tackling excessive waiting times is high on my agenda for delivering improvements in the health service. I want to assure patients and their families again that long waiting times are completely unacceptable to me and I that understand the worry and stress that people feel when they are waiting to hear when they will be seen.

To be able to deliver sustainable improvements in waiting times, we must take action that addresses the root causes of the problem. Short-term measures to address immediate pressures will, on their own, not be enough. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix. The position that I inherited in May was one of continuing deterioration in waiting times. It is just one of many challenges facing the health service here, and the need for change is very clear. As I said before, I will need time and new investment to deliver the radical change necessary to deliver sustained, long-term improvement. As I also said before, my policy will be to adopt a balanced approach to taking further short-term action when funding is available, combined with longer-term change.

I am considering the expert panel's report, which makes very clear the need for change. I look forward to setting out my vision for Health and Social Care over the next number of weeks. That will include elective care waiting times. The health service here will continue to do its utmost within the resources it has available to ensure that the clinical needs of patients are met, patient safety is maintained and patients do not wait any longer than they have to.

**Mr Nesbitt:** If I heard the Minister correctly, it sounds as though something like 34,000 people in this small country are waiting more than 52 weeks for their first consultant-led appointment. The Minister will know that the longer patients

are forced to wait for treatment, the more likely it is, unfortunately, that they will come to harm. Why is this unprecedented crisis escalating? Why is it getting worse?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There are a number of factors. We have an ageing population; people are living longer with more complex needs so need more supports. Individuals and patients' expectations have risen, and rightly so, and the demand for services is greater. If you refer to the question on autism and look at the numbers referred for assessment, you will see the rising demand for our health service.

The numbers also very clearly point to the reason why we need to transform Health and Social Care. We cannot keep doing things the same way and expect a different outcome. The only way we will be able to seriously address the issues and make the necessary investments is by reforming how we do things. The present situation cannot continue, as all parties recognised when they signed up to the principles in Professor Bengoa's report when he set out on his work with the expert panel.

If you look at all the factors that led to why we are in this situation, you will see that waiting lists are absolutely, 100%, totally unacceptable. We need to rectify that problem. I will certainly do that, and I have set out on a number of occasions to the House how I intend to do it in the short term, the medium term and the longer term.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Regardless of what the expert panel says, I do not think that we need an expert panel to tell us about the need for change. Nothing should make that clearer to us than these horrific figures. Is the Minister aware of individuals and families putting themselves in debt so that they can receive private care, given how long they are being told they will have to wait for these consultant-led appointments?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I am. I am aware of many such people, even in my constituency. People turn that way because they cannot get access as quickly as they would like. That is why we have to transform how we deliver health and social care. Whilst there has been plenty of talk about it in the past, and report after report has pointed to the challenges in the health and social care system, we need real action and we need to deliver transformation. That is what I am committed to doing. I have set out my stall on how we need to deliver in the short term and the medium term, but the longer-term picture is about changing how we deliver services. We

have to be real about delivering better outcomes for people, and the only way we will do that is to stop doing things the way we are doing them and to stop getting caught up in the black hole that is health. The Finance Minister could give me millions upon millions of pounds tomorrow, but I would not be prepared to invest that money to keep doing things the way we have been.

We need proper transformation, and we need real transformation. That will be my priority as Minister of Health. We have to deliver better outcomes, and the only way we will do that is through such real and meaningful transformation. As I said, I look forward to all the parties in the House supporting me in that transformation and taking the difficult decisions that need to be made. That is the only way we will deliver better outcomes and the only way we can deliver to time frames that make sure that people do not wait ridiculous lengths of time for treatment and assessment. That will be a priority. I have set out many times how I intend to do that. It is certainly a priority for me.

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

3.15 pm

### **Bengoa Report: Community Care**

T1. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health whether the Bengoa report will address the lack of provision of carers in the community. (AQT 166/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. I have said that I am going to use the piece of work done by the expert panel as a foundation to drive forward the transformation. We have to look at everything. The focus has always been on the acute end of things and the acute services. We have to tackle the root causes of why people get sick. We have to be real about investment in primary care, and domiciliary care workers are obviously part of primary care. There are particular challenges around trying to recruit people to work in domiciliary care in rural areas. Hospital backlogs are created because people cannot be discharged from hospital because there is no care package in place. These are the things that we seriously need to address. The expert panel's work and my response to it, and my vision of transformation, will address how we are going to deal with social care.

**Ms S Bradley:** As the Minister rightly pointed out, there is a real shortage of care workers, particularly in rural areas. Organisations with

good intentions are unable to provide the care packages required. Does the Minister have some way in which she is going to make sure that rural people in particular are not disadvantaged in their access to care packages at home?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, absolutely. That is going to be key. All the trusts employ so many domiciliary care workers in-house who are paid directly by the trust. They will also buy in so much domiciliary care service from the independent sector. That is not a good enough position. I want to see trusts employing more people in-house. Domiciliary care workers are the lowest-paid workers in the health service. Quite often, those who work for the independent sector will not get travel costs. They are expected to go onto every rural and country road to go and see people who need their support, but they are expected to do that without any mileage payment. That is not acceptable. If we want to provide better outcomes, support people closer to home and allow older people to stay in their homes and not have the need for residential care etc, we should be supporting the workforce to be there to do it all. That is certainly where I want to go. That is the direction of travel that I intend to take in making sure that we support domiciliary care workers, which, in turn, will obviously benefit the patient.

### **GPs: Out of Hours Services**

T2. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health to outline the current picture with out of hours GP services across the North. (AQT 167/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** GP services and out of hours services are under significant pressure. The Department and the Health and Social Care Board have been working with out of hours providers right across the North to try to address the challenges that are facing the service. In 2015-16, an additional £3.1 million was made available to help build capacity in GP out of hours services, with a further £1.1 million made available to help out of hours providers meet the increased demand for services over winter months and the Easter period. There are significant challenges that we need to continually review and work our way through.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Minister will be aware that there has been particular commentary on out of hours services provided in the Southern Trust area. Will she give further detail in regard to that area?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has been facing significant challenges in the provision of the out of hours service. As with the other out of hours providers, there is a number of reasons for that, including difficulties in recruiting and retaining GPs to maintain the provision. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust provides GP out of hours services from five bases: Armagh, Craigavon, Dungannon, Newry and Kilkeel. This configuration is intended to ensure that the vast majority of residents in that trust area have access to an out of hours base should a face-to-face appointment be required. There have been occasions when the Southern Trust has had an insufficient number of GPs and other staff available to deliver out of hours services from all of those five bases. In those circumstances, the trust continues to use contingency measures, which may require consolidating resources in the out of hours bases where patient demand is greatest. Patient safety has to be first and foremost in all those circumstances, and the trust takes that into account.

The Southern Trust also recently took a number of actions to support the out of hours service; for example, the introduction of nurse practitioners, clinical pharmacists to support GPs in managing the service, ongoing recruitment campaigns for GPs, the provision of additional funding to boost capacity at busy times, and supporting flexible shift hours and bases to work from. A body of work is being done, but there have clearly been particular challenges in the Southern Trust.

## Cancer Strategy

T3. **Ms Lockhart** asked the Minister of Health, given that a recent visit to the research facilities in Belfast left Ms Lockhart quite taken with the fact that Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have a cancer strategy, to outline her commitment to the drawing up of such a strategy. (AQT 168/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Meeting the challenges posed by cancer is a priority for me and will continue to be one of the highest priorities. I think we have made great strides in tackling cancer and there has been significant progress in the past decade since the cancer centre in Belfast City Hospital opened. We need to continue to drive forward continual progress, and I and my Department are committed to working in partnership with others to provide the best cancer services that we can. The issue of a comprehensive cancer strategy has been raised with me and I am giving it some

consideration. I attended an event that the Chair of the Committee hosted a few months ago, and I said that I would give it due consideration.

**Ms Lockhart:** I thank the Minister for that commitment. However, I would like to drive home to her the fact that I believe that Northern Ireland needs a comprehensive strategy — the terminology you use — to try to capture all the statistics and all the needs around cancer. I encourage and lobby you to give the House a clear commitment that you will work towards the commissioning of a cancer strategy in Northern Ireland.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for her comments and I will certainly take them on board. There appears to be growing demand for a comprehensive strategy, and, as I said, I have not ruled it out. Officials are currently engaged in a round of discussions with the community and voluntary sector and with the major charities that provide brilliant support and research. We are determining if any support could be provided from the community and voluntary sector if we decide that we need to progress a review here. I have not ruled it out and am certainly still open to the idea, but let us do a bit more homework on it.

## Trade Union Engagement

T4. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Health whether she has engaged with union and staff representatives since becoming Minister. (AQT 169/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, since I have taken up the post of Health Minister, I have made it very clear that I want to listen to and hear the views from the grass roots. Where I can, I want to make changes that reflect those ideas. I have had a number of meetings with trade unions since coming into office and have further introductory meetings lined up over the coming months to ensure that I have an opportunity to hear from all the staff representative bodies.

**Mr Lynch:** I welcome the meetings that the Minister has had. How will she continue to engage with staff, particularly in light of the upcoming transformation process?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is so important, more so than ever before, that we continue to engage with trade unions, and it is so significantly important now given that we are about to embark on a process of transformation. I always say this genuinely and most people in the House will

share the same sentiment: the best asset that we have in the health service is the workforce. It is so important that they are given ownership of the changes that we are trying to make and so important that they feel that they are listened to, because they are on the front line delivering services.

I recently established a new health partnership forum and I will personally chair the first meeting. This shows that I am really serious about engaging with trade union side. It is significant that we develop shared aims and a shared approach to how we bring forward transformation because transformation will mean change. It is so important that people understand why we are making changes and understand that it is not always about saving money but is genuinely about creating better outcomes for people. I think that the best way to do that is to make sure that there is wholesome engagement with the workforce at every level. I intend to host the first meeting of the health partnership forum, which will bring together all the leaders across the Department and all the leaders from the trade union representation. That will be a major piece of work that is vital for me, particularly in trying to bring forward the transformation and to enable people to understand that we are doing it for the best reasons. It will also enable people to understand and take ownership of the process.

### **Accident and Emergency Coverage: Belfast**

T5. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health to outline her plans to ensure adequate accident and emergency coverage throughout the city of Belfast. (AQT 170/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Obviously, the Belfast Trust leads on providing adequate services. It comes back to the conversation that runs through every question that I have answered today. We have to transform how we do things if we are to make sure that we have better outcomes for people and make sure that people are not sitting in A&E for a very long time. We have a lot of work to do on awareness and why people present in A&E in the first place. Is it the most appropriate place for them to go? Should they be at the minor injuries unit? We need to look at all those things in the round.

Belfast A&Es are obviously extremely busy. The staff there do excellent work and are very much challenged day and daily. We have to seriously transform how we deliver health and social care so that we do not have people who, quite frankly, sometimes present at A&E

because they cannot get a GP appointment or have ongoing conditions and are on waiting lists to be seen.

**Mr Stalford:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she give us an update on how the services at the Royal's A&E are working as they take up the slack following the decision on A&E provision at the City Hospital?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not have any details in relation to that. There is nothing on my desk that suggests that there is anything in particular for me to be worried about. I suppose that I will look into it and respond to the Member in writing, but I do not have any detail with me on any particular challenges or problems.

### **Breast Cancer Waiting Lists**

T6. **Mrs Little Pengelly** asked the Minister of Health for an update on progress to ensure that people can see a specialist as soon as possible, given that she will be aware of the concerns being raised about the breast cancer waiting lists, particularly in the Belfast Trust area over the last 12 months, and in the light of a recent meeting with Action Cancer, a charity based in south Belfast that works across Northern Ireland, providing breast screening for approximately 11,000 people each year, which is a valuable service given the pressures on the Belfast Trust. (AQT 171/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Absolutely; I think that it is invaluable. What it does is amazing. It gets out, is on the ground, is in communities and meets people, and I think that that is really important.

The performance on breast cancer in the Belfast Trust is improving. The latest stats from July indicate that 87% of patients were seen within 14 days, but we obviously want to meet the target, which is 100% of patients being seen within 14 days. It is an extremely worrying time for a woman who has been referred and needs to be assessed. There are a number of particular challenges in the Belfast Trust around radiologists and staff vacancies, and the trust is working on those to secure additional capacity to be able to deal with the cases that are referred.

In the longer term, there is a need to have a sustainable breast service in place across the North to make sure that patients are seen within the timescales that have been set out — the recommended 14 days. That is vital. That is when we can say that what we are doing is excellent.

**Mrs Little Pengelly:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree that those 11,000 screenings really alleviate a lot of pressure. Although it is not traditional for the Department of Health to fund third sector capital builds, there have been examples of that in the past with the Mencap new build, also in south Belfast, and the hospice. Can the Minister take it away and look at the issue? She may be aware that Action Cancer has purchased a building in order to expand its services, including breast screening. Are there any opportunities for potential funding, despite it not being the usual way that the Department of Health funds such projects, given that it has happened in the past with Mencap and the hospice?

**Mrs O'Neill:** OK, yes, I am happy to take it away, give it some consideration and see if there is a way. I totally support everything that you said about what Action Cancer does. It is absolutely amazing and reaches so many women. If I can be part of supporting that work, it will help me to deliver better outcomes for patients. That is something that we all want to work together on.

Actually, breast cancer survival rates here are excellent. We are leading the way, and we can be very proud of that. Quite often when we talk about health and social care everybody focuses on the negatives. It is sometimes important for us to sing loud about the good things that happen. There are many good things. There are many staff on the ground who provide excellent services and deliver better outcomes for people. It is important not to just focus on the negatives. Whilst we have to address the challenges that are there, we should also sing really loud about what is excellent in health and social care services.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Nichola Mallon is not in her place. Ms Carál Ní Chuilín is not in her place. I call Ms Kellie Armstrong for a quick question.

## Blue Badges

**Ms Armstrong:** I will be very quick, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much.

T9. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health whether she can confirm that people with blue badges can park at all hospitals and health centres and in any other car parks while their badge is out of date during the current backlog. (AQT 174/16-21)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am quite sure that they can, but I will clarify that. I cannot see any reason why that would be a problem.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr William Irwin is not in his place. That concludes topical questions —

**Mr McCrossan:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the Finance Minister's answer to a question during Question Time, he made comments about a former Member of the House and a current SDLP public representative.

I ask the Speaker to review those comments, to make a ruling on whether they were in order and, if he finds that they were not, to ask the Minister to withdraw his remarks and apologise in the Chamber.

3.30 pm

**Mr Speaker:** I have noted your comments.

**Mr Maskey:** Coincidentally, on the back of the last Member's contribution, I thank you, Mr Speaker, for admonishing Mr McCrossan for the manner in which he put his questions to Minister O'Neill. I felt that his tone was hectoring, bordering on bullying, and I do not think that the Member would want that as his reputation. I therefore ask you, Mr Speaker, to review the manner in which those questions were put and to have a conversation with Mr McCrossan to make him understand that Members should address colleagues in a certain manner in the Chamber.

**Mr Speaker:** I think that I have already dealt with that, Mr Maskey.

I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Rail Services between Belfast City Centre and Belfast International Airport

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly expresses its concern at the lack of competitiveness and availability of rail services between Belfast city centre and Belfast*

*International Airport; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to investigate all options for remedial action including the re-introduction of the Lisburn to Antrim rail link.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call the Minister for Infrastructure to respond to the debate. Minister Hazzard has 15 minutes.

**Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure):** I thank the Members on the Benches opposite for tabling the motion. As part of a small island off mainland Europe, we are entirely reliant on our airports and ports to access key markets and destinations, whether for pleasure, business, education or simply to visit family and friends. We are fairly unique in that regard, and that is reflected in the fact that we have significantly more air passengers relative to our population than anywhere else on these islands.

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

**Mr Hazzard:** I will indeed.

**Mr Aiken:** Minister, we will all in the Assembly note with concern Ryanair's announcement today that it is cutting the route from Stansted to City of Derry/Londonderry Airport, removing the route to Faro and reducing the service to Liverpool. I am sure that the Minister will now look closely at access to our airports and, maybe through the Northern Ireland Executive, push for issues relating to air passenger duty and access to airports, road and rail links to be addressed.

**Mr Hazzard:** I thank the Member for his intervention, although it is not entirely relevant to the subject. Let the Member be under no misunderstanding — I suppose that it goes back to the motion — it is not that the Executive simply do not look at these issues. They are looked at regularly and are constantly under review. It is not the case that this is news out of the blue. I daily put our airports, ports and connectivity at the forefront of the agenda, and the Executive have them on their radar. Rest assured that there will be plenty of commentary about that specific issue over the next number of days. I hope that that reassures you.

While it is not the subject of today's motion, it is important to acknowledge that the connections that our airports and ports provide will be increasingly important in creating the conditions for prosperity and key to our ability to compete in a global, skills-based and innovative economy, not simply for markets but for investment and talent. Of course, it is not just

the overseas connections from our airports and ports that are important. Connections to our airports and ports in the North are critical. For me, this is the core issue of today's motion, because, in tabling the motion, my colleagues are not seeking a rail link for its own sake; it is about realising their ambitions and mine for improving access to our key gateways for all parts of the North.

Over recent years, the Assembly has supported the Executive in delivering a significant programme of investment that has aimed to enhance regional access, including to Belfast International Airport. That has included dual carriageway provision on the A4 west of Dungannon and the A1 around the south of Newry, as well as the widening of the M1 Westlink and M2. By enhancing access to Belfast International Airport, those have helped to reduce the time and cost of travel for businesses and communities across the North. I and my Executive colleagues are determined to continue to build on that. The Executive's commitment to deliver the £258 million upgrade of the A6 will address the historical underinvestment in that corridor and significantly enhance access to the International Airport from the north-west. Alongside the delivery of the A5, I see that as a key to unlocking the economic potential of the west and delivering on our ambitions for more balanced regional growth. Investing in our road infrastructure will not, however, do that on its own. It needs to be part of a more integrated package across government. It also needs to be accompanied by measures that enhance access to and promote the greater use of public transport, including for those accessing the airport.

The need to enhance connectivity, with a particular focus on increasing the numbers using public transport, is a key outcome in the Executive's draft Programme for Government. We have been very careful about how we have defined that because, ultimately, it is not about building roads or investing in rail and buses; it is about connecting people and opportunities. Achieving modal shift from the car to our bus or rail services for longer journeys and to walking or cycling for shorter journeys will reduce demand on the road network, which will allow it to work more efficiently, assist in the better movement of freight, reduce emissions and improve health by increasing levels of physical activity. It will also address key barriers to accessing social, employment and other opportunities for those who do not have access to a private vehicle. In that context, I am determined to continue to enhance public transport links to our airports, but it is important

that we do so in a way that genuinely improves the opportunities available to those travelling to and from our airports.

There are a number of public transport options for those travelling to and from Belfast International Airport, including to the centre of Belfast. Those include the designated 300 bus service, which operates 50 times each day, seven days a week and with a frequency of 20 minutes at peak times. It is a reflection of the flexibility and quality of that service that, last year, it carried nearly 500,000 passengers between Belfast city centre and the airport. With a fast journey time of 30 minutes and high passenger numbers, it is not a wonder that Translink plans to invest in new double-decker vehicles for that route, adding passenger capacity.

In promoting the use of public transport and enhancing access, there appear to be obvious merits in introducing a rail link to the International Airport. However, it is estimated that annual passenger numbers to the International Airport would have to be around 10 million to make the service economically viable.

**Mr Ford:** I appreciate the Minister giving way. He has just highlighted the success of the 300 air-bus, which serves not just the airport but Templepatrick and Ballymartin, where a considerable number of passengers come from. In that context, when he is talking about the railway line, will he also talk about Ballinderry, Glenavy and Crumlin rather than just the airport?

**Mr Hazzard:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It has been discussed at length during the debate that it is not simply a rail link to the airport. However, when we are looking at the rail link, the figures are very much part of any feasibility analysis of how we go forward.

Last year, 4.4 million passengers used Belfast International Airport, which is an increase of almost 10% on the previous year. Passenger numbers are projected to continue to grow in the forthcoming years and are projected to exceed 10 million by approximately 2030. It is really only at that stage that we could realistically look at the potential to introduce a rail link to the airport. Extending a rail link to the International Airport would most likely involve the reopening of the Antrim to Knockmore line and the construction of a spur and rail halt close to the airport terminal. The cost of that has previously been estimated at anywhere between £50 million and £100 million. Even were passenger numbers at the

airport to reach 10 million per year, the real benefits to passengers of introducing a rail link are likely to be limited. It is highly unlikely that rail could provide a more regular or more cost-effective link than that already provided by bus. Therefore, while I fully support the objective to enhance access to the International Airport, the provision of a rail link must be a longer-term objective.

In enhancing public transport access to the International Airport, my immediate priority will be to continue to invest in and support high-quality, frequent and affordable bus connections that meet passenger needs. I can assure Members that I remain committed to investment in our rail network. Indeed, the Executive have set aside funding for significant investment to complete phase 2 on the Derry to Coleraine line. They are also planning to develop new transport hubs in Belfast city centre and Derry at a cost of over £200 million. I will continue to make the case for investment in our rail network. My immediate priority for railway investment, however, is to maintain and improve passenger capacity on the existing network. That approach has delivered significant increases in passenger numbers on rail services in the recent past. As passenger numbers at the International Airport approach 10 million, I will wish to explore the opportunities to establish a rail link, but to do so well in advance is unlikely to offer real benefits to passengers or, indeed, the airport.

I will turn now to some of the specific points raised by Members. The possibility of establishing a rail freight hub at the International Airport was mentioned. It is thought that that would encourage the use of rail freight. No freight has been carried on local railways since 2003. Although there are benefits to moving freight off-road and on to rail, those can be realised only where they provide a cost-effective alternative to road. As a relatively small land mass with easy access to ports, road is generally more competitive for speed and flexibility.

Some Members raised the issue of the cost of maintaining the Knockmore to Antrim section of track. Since 2010, Translink has spent around £1.5 million on keeping that section in its current condition. The benefit of that is that it enables Translink to use the track for staff training, as well as reducing the cost of any future reinstatement of services should the circumstances permit. The existing rail infrastructure passes close to George Best Belfast City Airport and the City of Derry Airport. Linking those airports directly by rail may not necessarily be the best way in which to serve

the gateways through public transport. Translink provides frequent and popular bus services to both airports. My Department's priorities are to maintain and improve passenger capacity and to remove bottlenecks on the existing rail network. That does not preclude new halts where passenger demand justifies it and additional finance is attainable.

I have asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report of the debate. If I have not addressed any of the points raised by Members, I will correspond with them by way of response. In conclusion, I welcome the motion. I fully support the objective to enhance access to the International Airport. However, my immediate priority will be to continue to invest in and support high-quality, frequent and affordable bus connections that meet passenger needs. The provision of a rail link must be a longer-term objective and one that we will explore as annual passenger numbers at the airport approach 10 million. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Clarke:** Minister, I start by saying that I welcome your comments at the start of your contribution. Obviously, I am pleased with most of the comments made by most of the Members in the Chamber and with those from my constituency colleague and one of your colleagues about the need for greater connectivity. However, I slightly despair at your closing comments and at the interjection by another colleague from South Antrim who referred to the other villages. As representatives of South Antrim, all of us were very familiar that the motion was geared directly towards the airport, yet we could see the benefit to the other villages, such as Glenavy, Stoneyford and Crumlin, and to Lagan Valley, everywhere else and beyond.

Most of your commentary has been based around the business case for 10 million passengers. Dare I say — I am usually quite rude with some officials — that DRD officials have got it wrong previously, as you know? As I reminded the Deputy Speaker earlier today in an interjection, the officials brought in services to do an estimate of the numbers using the line between Coleraine and Londonderry. When that line was realised, the projection was out by 225%. Mere desktop exercises do not demonstrate the yield of public transport use in the future. It is with that tone, Minister, that I am asking you to look at it again and to charge your officials with looking at it with fresh eyes, because communities such as Crumlin, Glenavy, Stoneyford and others are backed into a corner. The 300 service does not serve them whatsoever. The 300 service is a good service,

but it connects only the airport to Belfast, not that particular area's hinterland. Indeed, even if it does, people have a considerable distance to travel to join the service.

### 3.45 pm

So, if they were to use the 300 service, it would probably be as easy for them to drive straight on to Belfast, rather than trying to catch the 300 bus. Some of us made representation to your Department recently to try to let others use the 300 service, but Translink would not let other passengers in that area use it or provide a halt at the airport area in relation to Crooked Stone, which would have allowed the people in that hinterland right up as far as Nutts Corner to come down to get the 300 service. It is because the airport wants an express service from there, but it stops in Templepatrick.

Much has been said, Minister, about the benefits of this line. You spoke about the £1.5 million that has been spent. I suppose that that is not a huge amount of money from 2010. However, there would be much more benefit if we could see that line open again for the use of the people in that hinterland and, indeed, the airport.

My colleague who opened the debate talked about "build it and they will come". I believe that if we do build it, they will come. The testament to that is the example that was used for the Coleraine to Londonderry line. They had a very substandard service. I was on that train myself and felt that I would never get on it again because it felt unsafe. Now that they have built that railway line, their estimates have been blown completely out of the water — as I said, 225% over what they projected. What my colleague and others have presented today is that it is a case of build it and they will come.

I do not know how they could do a piece of work about the growth that there has been in Crumlin and Glenavy, as I dare say their populations have almost doubled, and those people are commuting. I am sure that you have the figure yourself, Minister, but an estimated 1,100 pupils leave Crumlin daily to go to other towns. Again, this railway line from Crumlin towards the airport would alleviate some of the problems in relation to the buses.

This is not only about the airport; this is about the connectivity between the villages and the airport itself. Steve Aiken gave us a four-minute speech on how successful the airport has been, and that is a good thing. You mentioned in your own remarks, Minister, about the growth of the airport, and that is something

that we should all welcome. In its own right, it is capturing about 5.5 million of your 10 million passenger trigger. If you add that to the number of people outside that area who could use that line, you could easily surpass the 10 million figure.

Paul, my colleague for South Antrim, opened the debate. He spoke about the opportunity of an enterprise zone and how all these things fit together in the bigger picture. I listened to a debate on the radio the other day about an argument, I think it was in the 'News Letter', about there being one regional airport in Northern Ireland and whether there was a need for the other two. I think that that issue will come forward in the future.

Steve brought bad news today in relation to City of Derry Airport, and maybe that is the sort of news that we will hear more regularly. Belfast International has the right location. It is central in Northern Ireland, and we need as an Executive to do more to invest to assist it, and that will bring benefits to the wider area.

Whilst Jenny Palmer welcomed the motion, I was confused because she went on to criticise the fact that we were coming forward with an ambitious plan. Others welcomed ambition in what we are suggesting. Indeed, others added to that ambition. We heard about the Ulster Unionist Party's 10-point plan yesterday, which was mentioned a few times today, even in Question Time, and the three times the investment in infrastructure but no suggestion of where that money will come from. It was a bit rich of them to criticise our plan, but if they had taken the time to read the motion they would have seen that we want to work with you, Minister, and your Department to bring this plan forward. The only way to deliver most things in Northern Ireland is by a partnership approach and everyone joining together.

Fra talked about the use of trains and how much cleaner and better they are for the environment. I suppose I will take that one because he is on our side in relation to that. I suppose the environment argument is a different one entirely, but there is an opportunity to create jobs. Fra talked about the creation of jobs if we could get more people off the roads and into trains to commute. It is a much easier and more reliable form of transport. I come in on the M2, and some mornings you do not know what to expect when you come to Sandyknowes, whether it will still be congested or otherwise.

Your Department has done a lot of work on the reliability of Translink, whether that be the

buses or trains, which is another reason why this would work.

We had support from the west of the Province. Daniel McCrossan supported the connectivity, the opportunities for business and for stimulating economic growth.

We are hearing positivity from some parties. Although they are joined in opposition, they are not exactly on the same message. That is for them to sort out; the rest of us were on-message today.

We then heard from Kellie Armstrong, who, in a previous life, wore a different hat. Having worked in community transport, she will understand exactly the difficulties of isolated communities such as Glenavy and Crumlin, which sit on the edge and have no connectivity. I worked with Kellie in a previous life, and I welcome her comments about the importance of connecting our rural communities and getting them into hubs. I welcome the fact that she joined the rest of us in welcoming the idea of working with you, Minister, to map a way forward to get this ambitious project started and make it a reality.

We then heard from Edwin Poots, who was reminiscing a bit with my colleague from South Antrim Mr Ford on the work that they have been doing on this. I do not want to take away from that. The more we shout about this, the greater the opportunity of it becoming a reality. Mostly, they talked about the linkages to communities outside the greater airport area.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, my constituency colleague and your colleague Declan Kearney spoke next. I was very heartened by what Declan had to say about those isolated communities and what they need. He talked about a future enterprise zone. We are all coming at this from the same direction. We see the real benefits that it can deliver not only for South Antrim but for Northern Ireland. We see this as a gateway, and we see an airport better connected to Belfast. That is not to take away from the growth of the airport through additional flights, but, in the long term, if we had a better connection between the two locations, we could assist in that growth.

We heard from Alex Easton about the need for the best possible infrastructure, and I do not think that anyone could argue against that.

Steve was a bit more sceptical of Paul's view of "Build it and they will come", but I think that he then came on to our page. He turned from

where he started and is now nearly championing the cause. I am glad that you have had that change of heart, Steve, and joined this train. We might need an extra carriage to get you to come along. Your later comments were welcome, and you are welcome with that view.

Gordon Lyons talked about the —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Clarke:** I will. The essence of what I want to say, Minister, is this: consider this as much as you can, but we want you to charge your officials with building it so that it will come.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly expresses its concern at the lack of competitiveness and availability of rail services between Belfast city centre and Belfast International Airport; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to investigate all options for remedial action including the re-introduction of the Lisburn to Antrim rail link.*

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]*

## Adjournment

### Investing in Town Centres in Upper Bann

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who are called to speak will have approximately five minutes.

**Ms Seeley:** I am proud to be from Upper Bann, which sits just 30 minutes outside Belfast. We have excellent rail links, although they could be improved if they were extended to Armagh; great access to the motorway; numerous booming industrial estates, with big names employing many; and many huge tourist attractions, including Oxford Island, the people's park, Lurgan park and Brownlow Castle. It truly is a place where we can work, live and play.

I want to take the opportunity to commend the businesswomen and businessmen of Upper Bann, who work tirelessly to contribute to our

economy. Endless hours are spent, often simply making ends meet and surviving from one month to the next. Our bustling side streets with our independent retailers, butchers and veg shops are the heart and soul of our towns. There is nothing quite like the meat from Jim McCann's and Finty O'Hagan's, the fruit and veg from Hendersons, the unique gifts from Danann Crafts or the mouth-watering food from our bustling restaurant scene. I also want to commend the efforts of Banbridge and Portadown's chambers of commerce. The Finance Minister recently met Banbridge Chamber of Commerce and witnessed at first hand the sterling work that they do. Hopefully, he will accept an invitation to meet the Portadown Chamber of Commerce and representatives from Lurgan retailers in the coming months.

Finally, I want to praise the officers of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. We have the second largest council in the North. I meet them regularly, as I am sure my colleagues from Upper Bann do. They work tirelessly to draw down funding and target it where it is needed most. They listen to and engage with our retailers and are developing a tourism strategy around our town centres. It is often their innovative ideas that breathe some life back into our town centres.

Sadly, however, that is not the reason that I rise in the Chamber today. I rise as a result of extensive lobbying during the recess from small and medium-sized businesses in our three town centres — Lurgan, Banbridge and Portadown — that are concerned for their future and the erosion of our town centres, despite the endless efforts of the many people I have mentioned. We are all too aware of the problems such as rates, lack of parking, decreased footfall, competition from shopping centres, the Northern Irish weather and more recently Brexit. Yet, town centres are the social centres of our constituencies. They offer people the opportunity to meet, talk and, more importantly, buy local produce. It is the very character of our town centres that gives our constituencies their identity.

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

**Ms Seeley:** I will indeed.

**Mr Humphrey:** Will the Member state to the House exactly what effect the Brexit vote has had on the economies of the towns she has mentioned?

**Ms Seeley:** I will use a particular example of a trader in Lurgan who trades across the border and is worried that it will be impacted on by tariffs that traders may have to pay and that she will lose that business.

As I was saying, town centres are not competing on a level playing field, and they need our help. They are a significant part of our national and local economy and provide jobs, distribute goods and services and are a place of investment. This is investment that we cannot afford to let slip away. Our town centres are much too valuable to our economy and to our local community to be left to market forces alone. To see their contribution to the economy and society being steadily eroded is concerning, and we must do all in our power to reverse that decline. In the short term, that will, of course, require further investment, and I want to acknowledge the investment that this institution has given to our council over the years. The investment must go beyond the tidying-up of shop fronts; it will require forward and long-term thinking. For example, fragmentation is one of the key issues facing our town centres, and developing them on the basis that we develop our cities is a must, with restaurant quarters, market areas, a night-time economy, strong transport links and good Internet connections. We need to look at rates and how retailers can get more from them, with marketing initiatives — many have simply asked about their bins being lifted or about their water — and reduced rates for start-ups.

Councils should be duty-bound to employ full-time dedicated town centre managers to focus on marketing, increasing footfall and encouraging businesses and offices into our empty buildings. Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council has a business engagement programme, and during my time as a councillor I signposted many struggling businesses to that programme, which was often the difference between a business remaining open or closing its doors. That programme is now under threat as a result of funding pressures. Programmes such as that must become the norm. I call for a marketing strategy like the one deployed in Lisburn and online strategies such as Dungannon's Get Online campaign to be extended to the towns in Upper Bann.

I touched on the importance of a night-time economy: our towns should not be ghost towns as of 5.00 pm. From 5.00 pm to 8.00 pm is one of the few time slots for growth in town-centre footfall, yet our shops are closed. We must look at incentives to keep them open.

#### 4.00 pm

We must bring derelict buildings back to life, not just by tidying them up but by encouraging traders, as well as offices, educational facilities and councils, into them. All of this will increase footfall throughout the day, supporting our businesses as more people buy local.

Some of the retailers I met during the summer recess complained that many of the successful and worthwhile Invest NI initiatives focus on manufacturing, exports and niche markets, but we must ensure that programmes are devised and aimed at supporting our retailers. None of this can be achieved in silos; we need a plan. We need regional government on a cross-departmental basis, working with local government and working together with traders, to invest effectively in our town centres, bearing in mind that every town centre is different and unique.

Moving forward, I hope that phase 2 of the business improvement districts will include our towns in Upper Bann. I also call for the creation of retailer hubs, similar to the digital and innovation hubs that exist, as well as the further empowerment of our councils, particularly given their planning powers. Finally, we need targeted funding toward the development of our chambers of commerce, so that they can play a proactive role in the regeneration of our towns.

I thank Members for being here today and showing interest in this motion, and I thank the Minister for Communities for being here as well. Other Departments will need to be involved if we are to truly address the problem.

**Mr Anderson:** I welcome the opportunity to speak today about town centre investment in my constituency of Upper Bann. I have to declare an interest, as I have family involvement in a small business in Portadown. We have three main historic towns, Portadown, Lurgan and Banbridge, and, more recently, we have seen the growth of Craigavon centre. Each plays an integral part in the local economy, but, since the economic downturn, many businesses and shops have struggled and ceased to exist. Our towns have had to adapt and develop to meet the demands of modern times. However, the economic downturn is not the only factor to affect businesses. The advancement of technology has meant that an ever-increasing number of people make more use of online shopping opportunities rather than shopping in the towns themselves, with the Consumer Council recently reporting that almost half of Northern Ireland consumers shop online. Our town

centres have also had to compete for trade with an ever-growing out-of-town shopping network. As such, they have found it harder to make their mark and attract the same level of investment that was seen in years gone by.

Business rates have also proved challenging, with the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association recently noting that, in Northern Ireland, the level of vacant shops on the high street is nearly twice the UK national average. Whilst a number of efforts have recently been made by the local councils and the Executive to revitalise and regenerate town centres through the small business rate relief and support schemes, much more would need to be done to encourage investment and new start-ups in our town centres. With the introduction of the new councils across Northern Ireland, local government will have an increasing role to play in regeneration and economic development.

On a personal level, in my time as a member of the former Craigavon Borough Council, I chaired the economic development committee, which oversaw public realm schemes in Portadown and Lurgan, and work continues. Plus, there were other schemes that sought to help improve those two towns during difficult times. I and others appreciated that work at the time, although there were, perhaps, difficulties in getting the work done in time, but it has helped those towns, and it is imperative that collaborative work continues between all key sectors and levels of government to explore further ways in which town centre investment can be fostered and encouraged.

In recent weeks, we saw the Banbridge master plan launched by my colleague, the Minister for Communities, Paul Givan MLA. This sets out a clear vision and aim for how the town centre will look over the next 15 years and incorporates a number of key regeneration proposals, including efforts to develop the evening economy and revitalisation projects to further enhance shop frontage and car parking.

I welcome the proposals, and I am hopeful that the master plan will provide additional opportunities for growth in the town centre. It is also important that we continue to help to drive investment in Portadown and Lurgan town centres, with efforts focused on developing the night-time economy and efforts being made to attract a range of different types of business that appeal to consumers.

Ultimately, the key to encouraging investment in our town centres is to continue to engage positively with the business sector to further

drive investment and further encourage people to start businesses in our towns. Adopting a positive vision is key as we seek to identify good practice and to promote and advertise what our town centres have to offer not only in the local area but right across Northern Ireland. As we go forward, we need to continue to liaise with key stakeholders such as the chambers of commerce in each town, councils and Departments and Ministers on these matters in an effort to assist investment and to help to restore the town centres in Upper Bann.

As I said, Upper Bann's town centres have a great history and have much to offer, and it is vital that we all harness that potential in the years ahead. I look forward to the Minister's comments.

**Mrs Dobson:** I also thank the Member for securing the debate. At the outset, I will say that I will be the only Ulster Unionist contributing. My colleague Doug Beattie MC has asked me to give his apologies.

Investing in town centres is a crucial issue for economic stability and jobs right across Upper Bann, not only for Portadown, Lurgan and Banbridge but for the smaller villages from Gilford to Loughbrickland and from Waringstown to Donaghcloney. The bottom line is that, whilst it is important to continue to invest, improve and innovate our town centres, it is equally important that the Executive fully support the small businesses that trade there. That requires a sea change in the silo mentality often adopted by Departments.

I will give one example. Last year saw investment in town centre public realm works on the one hand, whilst, on the other hand, small businesses suffered from a rating exercise, which was nothing short of a shambles. Thousands of small businesses, many of them family-owned for generations, rightly appealed, with many of those appeals eventually being upheld. For many of the dozens of small businesses for which I made representations to DFP last year, this often meant cancelling plans to expand their business or not taking on a new member of staff. Government must not give on the one hand and take away on the other. Investment in town centre infrastructure must, therefore, go hand in hand with packages of support that help small businesses to grow. Public realm works encourage businesses to invest, and the Executive must foster that investment and business growth to its full potential.

The fact that aspects of government policy impact on local families, whether they are

business owners or employees, must never be forgotten. I very much welcome the action that has been taken to progress town centre public realm works, including — I am sure that the Minister will refer to it later — the Banbridge master plan. I commend the Chamber of Commerce and especially Banbridge Regeneration Committee for their ongoing work and commitment to their communities. I am thinking particularly of the Banbridge plans when I say that I encourage the Minister to ensure that the local business community and residents have the full opportunity to have their say and their views listened to and taken on board.

If investment is to be successful, businesses and residents must feel ownership of change. I urge the Minister, when plans are being progressed by his Department, to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to benefit when it comes to initiatives like shopfront schemes, town centre Wi-Fi or public realm works. Positive changes that may have been a very long time coming should be allowed to have the maximum impact.

Again, I thank the Member for securing the debate, and I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

**Ms Lockhart:** Like the Members who have already spoken, I want to give a wee outline of Upper Bann. As my colleague Sidney Anderson said, it has a unique mix of town centres — Lurgan, Banbridge, Portadown and the new town of Craigavon — all with their unique portfolio of retailers and the way in which they do business.

When I was thinking of this debate, I thought about each of the towns and their different needs. I was thinking about Lurgan, obviously, where my own office is based. We can look at the investment that there has been. At this stage, I thank the former Social Development Ministers and their staff. I also commend Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council — the ABC council — and I also thank the current Minister for his interest in the area.

Millennium Way is being progressed in Lurgan, and that is a great asset. I look forward to its completion, but there is still an elephant in the room with regard to rail and trying to get a solution to the railway halt issue. I am thankful, looking at the statistics, that Lurgan's vacancy rate has actually reduced. I think that is a positive step that shows that we are starting to get things working. It is important that we look at gap sites, such as Castle Lane and the

Glendinning site, and at the entire area, and see where the council or this Assembly can invest in these sites.

In Portadown, there is a mix of family retailers and multinationals. There has been a significant amount of investment and work around the town quay — we welcome that, and it can be further explored. Look at the People's Park, and the investment there. There are still issues we need to look at, such as the barrier that Edward Street causes to the town; that is something that we can address.

Banbridge is a very vibrant town. Look at the statistics: believe it or not, Banbridge is actually one of the towns where vacancies have increased and that is worrying because Banbridge is always seen as a town that is bucking the trend. We need a very clear, concerted effort, maybe around a marketing strategy. We had the pleasure of having the Finance Minister in Banbridge very recently; the Communities Minister was there the day before. There was a master plan designed for Banbridge. I think that is very welcome, but I do not want it to be just a document — I want it to be a live document. I want to see the transportation strategy that the Minister committed to brought to fruition and a concerted effort by the Executive to attract new businesses, because ultimately that is what we need.

We need new entrepreneurs to come into our town centres. We need to encourage people to shop local. I am an individual who loves shopping local. We have got to encourage that, whether or not it is a Stormont-led initiative around shopping local, as was suggested in Banbridge. That would be really welcome, and the traders would welcome it. I think they are crying out for a regional marketing strategy for town centres so that people feel town centres are open for business. We have a fantastic mix of family-run and -owned businesses that create a phenomenal amount of employment in each of our town centres. We really have to put our shoulders to the wheel and help these traders, who have through times of change stuck with the town centres and invested in them.

We need to tackle the rates issue. We know that the Finance Minister is bringing forward a review, and I ask him to take note of the representations that the businesses have made, particularly around the disparity between town centre and out of town. I encourage the Finance Minister to look at that, and also the rating of the charity sector.

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

**Ms Lockhart:** I look forward to exciting times for town centres, and I really look forward to the Minister informing us of exactly what he is doing. I want to commend the three town centres, because there has been over £11 million spent in them.

4.15 pm

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** Thank you, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate my colleague for bringing forward this topic for discussion. It is a mixture of good news and more challenges ahead, but, as many Members who have spoken have outlined, there has already been significant investment in town centres across Upper Bann over this last decade. In particular, Banbridge requires investment in its landscapes, footpaths etc. I believe that that investment can come about, and I welcome the interest shown by Minister Givan, who was at the recent launch of the Banbridge master plan. That is a sign that the Executive are working.

I also noted during Minister Givan's visit that he has funded a transportation infrastructure plan for Banbridge as well. I commented at the time that the Minister could have stood back and said, "That is not my problem. Go and see Minister Hazzard." It is a sign of the Executive working together to assist in bringing forward plans, in this case for town centres, which benefit the entire community. They benefit the town centres, which, in turn, benefits our economy.

Town centres have faced a number of challenges over this last 15 to 20 years. The introduction of out-of-town shopping was a significant challenge to the traditional town centre. Many of them failed to recover from out-of-town shopping centres being placed near them. I also think — I have said this directly to traders — that many of them spent too long debating what they did not have and what the out-of-town shopping centre did have, instead of focusing on the uniqueness of the town centre — the family trader, the local produce and the unique produce that they were selling in their town centres. The envy of the out-of-town shopping centre has to end. They are here for the future; they are part of the make-up of our retail economy going into the future. Our town centres have to focus on the uniqueness of the

brand that they can deliver and sell. There is a huge opportunity there.

The other big challenge has been the turn to Internet shopping. That has been a challenge for international retail organisations: how they deal with the changing trend of the consumer in relation to buying products over the Internet. Our town centres and small retail businesses are having difficulties keeping pace with that. Perhaps that is an area where we should be assisting our small and medium-sized businesses: how they engage with the Internet online sales market, use their small businesses and promote them online, engage with the customer online, forward products, etc. That will continue to be a significant part of retail in the future, and if our small and medium-sized businesses and town centres are to survive, they have to be as up-to-speed in selling their unique products online as the large retailer.

Much has been said about rates, and they are a challenge for small businesses. However, I will put this measure of caution for people. If you cut rates in one area, it means that there is a reduction in the rates coming into the Executive. The Executive already face huge financial challenges. I believe that there is scope within the small business rate relief scheme for a new approach, and the Finance Minister has already said that the scheme is under review. I think that there is scope for small businesses to make their case heard: who qualifies for the small business rate relief scheme, how long should that qualification last, what is its purpose and how does it promote the local economy?

There is a lot of work going on. As has already been noted, we have had Minister Givan, Minister Hazzard, and the Finance Minister in the Upper Bann over this last number of months. So, the Executive are paying attention to what is going on in the town centres in Upper Bann and, as Mrs Dobson mentioned, in some of the smaller villages — Gilford, Loughbrickland and others — in and around the vicinity. There are huge opportunities for the town centres of Upper Bann. There are challenges, but I believe that the Executive are listening. The local council is listening. Our role as elected representatives is to ensure that that engagement continues and that there is product at the end of that consultation. Thank you very much.

**Ms S Bradley:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. As the SDLP spokesperson on the economy, I am delighted to speak in this debate. Whilst it is specific to the Upper Bann constituency, as a Member representing South

Down, I hear and recognise that many of the problems associated throughout Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown are reflected in towns such as Warrenpoint, Kilkeel, Downpatrick and right across my constituency.

They are not unique, although it has to be said that, like other constituencies, Upper Bann has its uniqueness. I suppose that, like everywhere, we have to work to our strengths and create a tailored approach to what will revive the high street in those areas. For example, I know that the council invests in Lurgan show. I have learnt that the public park there is the largest on the island after Phoenix Park. Such shows, although they are great and draw crowds, do not greatly benefit the high street. It is about creative thinking and playing to the strengths of the area. I look again at Portadown. You have the Seagoe Hotel, at which many of us would look with envy —

**Ms Lockhart:** I thank the Member for giving way. I welcome your point about Lurgan show, the park and Brownlow House. Significant investment is needed to link them with the town centre. I welcome the council investment in Brownlow House, but I encourage the Executive to look at Brownlow House as well. You make a very valid point.

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

**Ms S Bradley:** Thank you.

I agree completely. I look with envy at hotels such as the Seagoe Hotel in Portadown. I also think of the industrial hub in Craigavon. Unfortunately, visitors to Seagoe often have to travel to hotels elsewhere at the end of their visit. We therefore have to look at hotels, connectivity of features that are already in place, how those can be built on and how they directly link to the high street. I know that my former colleague Dolores Kelly did much work on the rail service, for example. It is an important feature in creating access to towns and town centres.

I looked through the statistics on vacancy rates in Upper Bann. Of course, we would like them all to sit at 0%, and we should aim for nothing short of that, but there are rates of 20%, 25% and 27%. In real terms, that means that one in three or four shops has its shutter down. That image is not enticing potential customers to visit the town centre.

We have rightly identified reasons for that, such as changes in shopping habits, the growth of

Internet shopping, the growth of out-of-town retailing, parking, traffic issues and infrastructure, including rail links, as I mentioned. The Government have to play their part in keeping our town centres vibrant, and stimulating the local economy will then play well into our regional and national economies. Our main streets and high streets play a significant role in the national economy. They are very much part of the bigger picture. The high street provides jobs, distributes goods and services and is a place of investment. We cannot afford to see that investment slip.

**Mr Chambers:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that, while the Department and the local authorities can do all that they can to improve town centres, the responsibility for a vibrant town centre lies with the residents? There is a big responsibility on residents to support local businesses. If they did that, there would be fewer shutters going down and more businesses coming into our town centres.

**Ms S Bradley:** Yes, I agree: we are all stakeholders. As the Member mentioned earlier, there are different sides to the argument, with people wanting support for one thing over another. We all have a part to play in this — you are absolutely right — but it is about making the high street enticing. Customers will not come unless there is an offer in place.

Looking at what is in the power of the House or the Government, I believe that investment must continue. We must look at why regeneration powers have not yet been handed over to council areas. The delay in devolving those powers is really unacceptable at this stage. The Regeneration Bill, which was not brought forward in the previous mandate, would have extended powers to councils to address social need and to carry out regeneration schemes. That really undermines the reform of local government. Planning powers, community planning powers and regeneration powers go together and can play a greater role in sharpening up and regenerating our town centres. The SDLP is, again, calling for regeneration powers to be transferred to councils. Many councils previously drew down funds from OFMDFM to regenerate their town centres to encourage footfall, but we need to get past painting shutters to make shop fronts more attractive while they are closed. Business rates are within our gift —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member should bring her remarks to a close.

**Ms S Bradley:** — and I ask the Minister to carry out a thorough review of working with other Departments to make real, effective change.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member's time is up. I call the Minister.

**Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities):** I thank Ms Seeley for the opportunity to speak this afternoon on town centres in Upper Bann, and I thank all those who contributed the debate. It is clear from the comments made that there are challenges there, but there has also been significant investment by my Department to date in the regeneration of areas in Upper Bann, namely Banbridge, central Craigavon, Lurgan and Portadown. A number of Members highlighted the fact that I was in Banbridge last month. I was delighted to see my colleagues, Mr Anderson and Carla Lockhart, there, as well as John O'Dowd, who came along and engaged with me on the issues around Banbridge.

Urban regeneration and community development activities are designed to help to reverse economic, social and physical decline in areas where market forces will not do that without the support of government. I am committed to taking forward and delivering regeneration programmes that aim to tackle area-based deprivation, make our towns and cities more competitive, link up areas of need with areas of opportunity and develop more connected and engaged communities.

To make our towns more competitive, I firmly believe in the need to build the strongest possible framework for investment and business growth. My Department has led the development and publication of master plans for all the towns in Upper Bann. Those documents provide the strategic vision and future direction for all stakeholders who have an interest in the development of our towns and cities over the next 10 to 15 years. The plans seek to develop and promote the unique characteristics of each town.

Councils will also play a key role in taking responsibility for the development of their towns, and it is important that councils take the lead in driving forward investment and business growth in their district. My Department will play a full role working with councils on the implementation of community development powers and the progression of local development plans.

Upper Bann is strategically positioned in terms of access to major roads, airports and seaports.

Government will need to work together to continue to improve the infrastructure to maximise the opportunities needed to improve and sustain access to markets. Investment is important to our economic development, because town centres are vital to the economic life of Northern Ireland. Since 2008, my Department has directly invested approximately £10 million in regenerating the town centres of Banbridge, central Craigavon, Lurgan and Portadown. That has been matched with local government and private-sector investment of approximately £4.2 million. I suggest to Members that that investment is slightly more than just the shop-front paint job that was suggested earlier.

Towns face many challenges, not least from the increased competition that Internet shopping brings. That was highlighted by other Members: Mr O'Dowd and Mr Chambers touched on it. The changing way in which consumers go about their business is driving change in the retail sector. We need to assist businesses, particularly in town centres, to tap into that and respond to it. Ultimately, however, the consumer is king — or queen, for that matter — when deciding where they shop.

Mr O'Dowd rightly pointed out that out-of-town shopping centres are here to stay. I support my out-of-town centre at Sprucefield because of its strategic location in Northern Ireland. That presents a tension when it comes to town centre traders, but consumers ultimately dictate where they spend their money; government cannot do that. However, we can assist our businesses to present environments so that consumers will want to come into town centres. Fundamentally, it is our businesses that need to recognise the changing environment that they operate in.

I will seek to do all I can to help them to tap into that market and how it is developing.

#### **4.30 pm**

Projects have included major improvements to the public realm in Upper Bann. That is the fabric of our town centres. It provides the attractive shared spaces that residents and visitors can enjoy, and it supports local trade and enterprise. Lurgan and Portadown have benefited from multimillion-pound investments, making them more attractive and inviting to all. We have also delivered a number of revitalisation projects into which the traders and businesses in town centres had input so that we could provide a tailored package of initiatives to meet the needs of their town. Those initiatives

included sprucing up shop frontages; provision of free Wi-Fi; new planters; shrouding derelict buildings; special events to promote the town centres; and landlord meetings, to name but a few. Local traders also recognise the benefit of those schemes, having invested their own money to improve the appeal of their business.

This has attracted commentary that the shop frontage schemes are somehow not worthwhile. I disagree, and private businesses putting in their own money as part of the schemes is testament to the fact that they are important when cosmetically improving an area. Suggesting that we only ever do revitalisation schemes does not present an accurate picture of how the Executive want to provide support through much greater investment, which we have been able to do in Upper Bann.

I am aware that the local traders often raise concerns about the need to introduce fairer rates and taxes in order to support existing businesses and attract new businesses to the town centres. The Finance Minister is looking into that. Let me assure the House that I will work with my colleagues to provide support to local traders. It is an issue raised with me by businesses in my constituency. Some benefited in our town centre, and others were disadvantaged by the scheme that was carried out. It was rightly pointed out by Mr O'Dowd that rates have to be paid and have to be paid by someone. What is important is that we ensure that there is a fair and equitable way that the burden can be shared across society. That, of course, is always open to challenge, and rightly so.

I believe that the level of rent that landlords seek to extract from commercial enterprises is as much of an issue as rates. Northern Ireland has the lowest rates of anywhere in the United Kingdom. We have introduced small business rate relief schemes, and we have helped to keep down the level that people pay. Some councils have put rates up; others have kept theirs down. When it comes to how much landlords charge for rent, which was an issue in my constituency, they need to be challenged about being realistic about the rent that they receive for their properties. That issue needs to be addressed.

My Department has also supported the private sector to redevelop vacant and derelict sites through the urban development grant initiative. That scheme was reopened earlier this year, and there has been considerable interest across the Province, including the Upper Bann constituency. Upper Bann has one of the youngest populations in Northern Ireland. That

helps to create the vibrant town centres, and investment in education programmes under the Department's neighbourhood renewal programme helps to support our young people to avail themselves of new and emerging opportunities. This year alone, my Department has invested over £1.5 million in three neighbourhood renewal areas in Upper Bann. The Department supports local jobs and local towns and has government offices in all the major towns in the constituency. Officials in Banbridge and Craigavon continue to work in close partnership with their council colleagues to deliver urban regeneration in the town centres of Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown. There is much physical evidence to attest to the success of that working partnership.

As I touched on, master plans have been developed. I launched the one for Banbridge recently, and already some of those initiatives have been identified and are progressing. Urban regeneration is fundamental to ensuring our town centres remain vital and viable, and that is why I am committed to continuing to invest in this area.

Finally, I will pick up on some points. It is vital that we seek to maximise existing opportunities to help to support town centres. We are looking to make future investment in Upper Bann, and Carla touched on that. The marketing strategy was mentioned by Ms Seeley, and such a strategy will be developed as part of the revitalisation scheme. There will be £2 million invested in Portadown over the next two years to take forward the linkages project, which will help to further improve the public realm, and there are other schemes too.

Let us take the opportunities to support our local businesses. Let us take the opportunity presented by Brexit. I know that Upper Bann voted to leave the European Union. You now have reduced sterling, which will attract people from the South to come in as trade has developed. There are opportunities that your area could be seeking when it comes to the lower sterling. Let us look at the opportunities —

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

**Mr Givan:** Let us look at the opportunities, maximise those and work with our independent retailers in town centres to the benefit of everybody.

*Adjourned at 4.35 pm.*

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