



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 15 March 2016
Volume 113, No 5

Contents

Assembly Business

End of Mandate	1
----------------------	---

Assembly Business

Plenary Business: Monday 14 March 2016.....	11
---	----

Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2016	11
--	----

Ministerial Statements

Sign Language Legislation: Initiation.....	13
--	----

Ulster-Scots Academy/Irish Language Academy: Proposals	19
--	----

Executive Committee Business

Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016.....	25
--	----

Ministerial Offices (Number and Functions) Determination 2016.....	31
--	----

Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion	33
--	----

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development	37
----------------------------	----

Social Development.....	45
-------------------------	----

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission	53
--	----

Executive Committee Business

Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion (<i>Continued</i>).....	60
--	----

Fisheries Bill: Final Stage	62
-----------------------------------	----

Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill: Final Stage	64
--	----

Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill: Final Stage.....	68
--	----

Mental Capacity Bill: Final Stage.....	73
--	----

Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage	84
---	----

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Final Stage	86
---	----

Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage.....	92
--	----

Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2016	93
---	----

Licensing Bill: Final Stage	104
-----------------------------------	-----

Ministerial Statement

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Cochrane, Mrs Judith (East Belfast)
Cochrane-Watson, Adrian (South Antrim)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Diver, Gerard (Foyle)
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)
Flanagan, Phil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)
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)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCallister, John (South Down)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McCorley, Ms Rosaleen (West Belfast)
McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McGahan, Ms Bronwyn (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
McIlveen, David (North Antrim)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McKevitt, Mrs Karen (South Down)
McKinney, Fearghal (South Belfast)
McLaughlin, Ms Maeve (Foyle)
McLaughlin, Mitchel (Speaker)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ó hOisín, Cathal (East Londonderry)
Ó Muilleoir, Máirtín (South Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Patterson, Alastair (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Pengelly, Mrs Emma (South Belfast)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Rogers, Seán (South Down)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West 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 15 March 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

End of Mandate

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's business, I will make some brief remarks to mark the end of the mandate. After I have made my comments, I will give the leaders of the five largest parties, or their nominated representatives, an opportunity to speak for up to five minutes. Thereafter, the process will follow that used for Matters of the Day: Members who wish to contribute should indicate so by rising in their places and continuing to do so. If called, they will be allowed a maximum of three minutes to make their remarks. I do not intend for this item to last for more than 45 or 50 minutes, but I will exercise some discretion on the time limit to try to include as many Members as possible. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until this item of business has finished.

I expect today to be the last meeting of the Assembly before Easter recess and dissolution on 29 March 2016. In the weeks to come, Members, candidates and parties will have plenty of opportunity to debate the achievements of the last five years. I will use today to put some appreciation on the record in terms of the support for Members and the contribution of Members.

Since May 2011, there have been 337 plenary sessions of the Assembly and approximately 2,545 Committee meetings. I anticipate that we are likely to have passed 67 Bills, 30 of them since last September, as I am sure some of you have noticed. We have also had more than 72,000 questions tabled. Amidst all of that during the mandate, there have been 270,000 visitors to Parliament Buildings. None of that could be done without the support of the staff of the Assembly, both the secretariat and our contractors, whether connected directly to our proceedings or welcoming our visitors, providing services or maintaining the Building. As someone first elected to the Assembly in

1998, I have, since becoming Speaker, gained a deeper insight and respect for the work that goes on behind the scenes to make this institution operate. I formally record the appreciation of the Assembly for the whole team in the Building. I also recognise the work of the staff of Members and parties, who have a difficult role but who play a significant part in supporting our proceedings. We are grateful for that, too.

I thank all Members for their cooperation. We have, for the most part, conducted our business with respect and good temper. We have had some very sensitive and serious debates in a completely different atmosphere to what was possible when I was first elected in 1998.

I will be back to preside over the first sitting of the new Assembly, but today allows me the privilege to recognise those colleagues who will not be returning in May. By my reckoning, some 16 Members are not seeking re-election, seven of whom, like me, have been here since 1998. I thank them all sincerely for their contribution over those years. Regardless of our political divisions, you have all brought something different to the Chamber and your constituencies. I want to acknowledge that being an elected representative, particularly in a society with our history, is not easy, and I thank you and your families for your service.

We have a new generation coming forward, and we have a responsibility to them. With retirements and co-options, I expect that more than 30% of the Members who were elected to here in May 2011 will not be here in May 2016. That is a very significant churn, but it also represents an outstanding opportunity to take the next steps in the development of our Assembly and to helping our society come to terms with the changes that have been wrought over those years. The election will also be the first one in which those born post the Good Friday Agreement will come on to the electoral register.

At one time, many of us here today would never have imagined that we would be together in the

Chamber in these circumstances. I am constantly surprised by the number of people who comment to me or stop me to say that they have been watching business and particular discussions and debates in the Assembly. Despite what at times is very hostile and negative reportage, that underlines to me that many people in our community are deeply invested in this institution. The Assembly is, of course, imperfect, and the issues that it deals with are very challenging and difficult. Those of us who played some part in getting us this far are looking to all of you who are hoping to come back to work constructively to continue to improve it. We have a tragic past to deal with, but we also need to be focused on the future. The next weeks will be largely about party politics, but let me just give a gentle reminder that it is for every Member from every party to play a part in moving society forward.

Finally, Members will know that I hosted Assembly Women's Week last week, which involved close to 1,000 participants, and again saw great efforts and commitment from Assembly staff and great cooperation and mutual respect from every political party in this institution, with women giving the lead in that respect. I end today with one last reminder to parties and the electorate about the need for the Assembly to be representative of the population. We currently have 23 female Members. That is our best record, but I think that most people would recognise that it is also a record of dismal failure. It is still nowhere near good enough. If we were truly to represent the community that we are elected by, we should have 51% women in the Assembly. When I preside over the registration of new Members and the election of a new Speaker, I will be looking very carefully to see how well we have improved on the existing record. I anticipate that we will improve on it, but I do not think that we are going to crack the 51%.

I wish all of you who are not coming back all the best for whatever the future holds. I hope that those of you seeking re-election enjoy the campaign, as well as have a successful one. To all those who are not coming back — I am one of them — I say that we should keep in touch. We are the owners of the corporate memory of this institution, and it has been a pleasure to know each and every one of you. Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

Mr Hamilton: It is my pleasure to be able to stand in for my party leader, the First Minister, who is, of course, in the United States of America with the deputy First Minister this week

doing what she does so well: working to attract jobs and investment to Northern Ireland.

I welcome this opportunity to briefly reflect on the Assembly term, which draws to an end this week. It is fair to say that the Assembly and the Executive have faced a range of challenges over the past five years. We began the term feeling the effects of the worst economic downturn in living memory and the subsequent impact of austerity. We experienced difficulties in passing welfare reform legislation to such an extent that the very existence of the devolved institutions was in serious jeopardy. In spite of our difficulties and in defiance of the doom merchants who wished to collapse Stormont, we came through our problems, and we are the stronger for it.

The Fresh Start Agreement reached in November was just that: an opportunity to begin again, to get our public finances back on an even keel and to resolve the issue of welfare reform. Welfare reform may have been the issue that threatened devolution most, but its resolution is a clear illustration of the benefits of devolution to Northern Ireland. A solution tailored to Northern Ireland's needs is always better than what direct rule would have produced.

There will be some who, for their own petty, party political reasons, will want to talk down devolution, but the evidence is clear: devolution has delivered for the people of Northern Ireland. Difficult decisions by successive Finance Ministers have ensured that we still have the lowest household taxes in the United Kingdom. We have increased investment in health and social care by over £0.5 billion, and we have employed 1,200 more nurses and nearly 300 more consultants. We have created more jobs than at any time in Northern Ireland's history, with 40,000 new jobs promoted through foreign direct investment, business start-ups and local support. We have built new roads, new schools and new hospitals, and we have rebuilt town and city centres. Our schools still produce the best examination results in the United Kingdom.

I would not, for a single second, dream of standing here and suggesting that things are perfect, because they are not. We have done a lot, but there is much more to do. If we are to keep Northern Ireland moving forward and capitalise on the progress that we have made, partnership will be required in this place. The Democratic Unionist Party firmly believes that, for all its imperfections, devolution remains in the best interests of Northern Ireland and its people. We must do the best we can to govern

well in spite of those imperfections and not waste our time dreaming of an undeliverable utopia. There will always be differences, but is debate inside Stormont not infinitely better than division on our streets?

As events in east Belfast in recent days have illustrated, we know only too well that our society is still polluted with those who would drag us back to the dark days of the past. They cannot, and they will not, be allowed to succeed.

Mr Speaker, this is your last day presiding over business in the Chamber. I had the pleasure of sitting under your chairmanship of the Finance Committee almost a decade ago, and I saw for myself your capacity to fairly yet firmly do your job. You brought that same style to the prestigious post of Speaker, and, on behalf of my party, I place on record our thanks to you for the way that you have impartially dealt with the business of the House and sensitively dealt with some difficult issues. I wish you well.

This item of business also allows us to pay tribute to those colleagues and even opponents who are not running for re-election. I offer my best wishes to everyone who is stepping down, particularly my party colleagues Stephen Moutray, Gregory Campbell and Peter Robinson.

Whether friend or foe, all of us enter public service with the best interests of Northern Ireland at heart; we just have different visions on how that can be achieved. In the weeks ahead, the Democratic Unionist Party looks forward to taking our vision and our plan for a better future to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm bheith ag labhairt ar an ócáid seo ar maidin. It is a privilege to stand in for Martin McGuinness, who, like the First Minister, is in America.

We are very conscious that this is the last time that you will be presiding over a plenary session, although you have one more function to do. On behalf of my party colleagues in Sinn Féin, I put on record our great appreciation and deep admiration for how you carried out the Speaker's role. You brought to that role all your experience of over 40 years in political activism. We have seen your ability, wisdom, judgement, leadership and decisiveness. We have also seen, particularly in your role as Speaker, your firmness when you have had to put people in their place, be they party colleagues or not.

Even this year — the 100th anniversary of the Easter rising and the battle of the Somme — we have seen your compassion and sensitivity in the many events you held in the Assembly. That sets a template for how people can remember in a way that is mindful not only of our differences but of the fact that we have a shared narrative and a shared history. If I can break with convention once and perhaps not be pulled by you, as Speaker, I will say this: Mitchel, this team of Sinn Féin MLAs wishes you very well, and we wish you and your family all the best for the future. We know that you are not going into retirement; indeed, I have no doubt that the constituency of Foyle will have an interest in some of the work that you will do.

10.45 am

I also think it would be remiss of me not to mention John Dallat, the Deputy Speaker. I do not want to pick him out from the many colleagues who, as you say, are leaving this place and not seeking re-election; it is right and proper that we acknowledge all their roles and wish them all well for the future. However, I particularly want to mention John Dallat, the Deputy Speaker. I sat with John on the Regional Development Committee. He is a very courteous and hard-working person, and in his role as Deputy Speaker, he too displayed the necessary qualities of fairness and firmness when it was required.

I will make a few concluding remarks on the term. I put on record our appreciation of our five Ministers and the great work that they have carried out over the mandate. On behalf of the party, I thank all our MLAs, who, in my opinion, have made massive contributions to legislation, Committee work and the unseen work that the Assembly sometimes does not get the proper publicity for. There is absolutely no doubt that, against the backdrop of Tory-led austerity and the reduction in the block grant, the record of the Assembly in protecting the most vulnerable is there to be seen.

The Health Minister said that there were many challenges, and there will be many before us. However, if we show the stewardship and leadership that brought about the Fresh Start Agreement, none of those challenges are insurmountable. We have been innovative and have shown innovation in the past in how we addressed them.

There are headlines that the Assembly should seek praise for. When we go in front of the people, they are the final arbiters of whether this Assembly has worked and whether we, as public representatives, have fulfilled the

promises we made at the last election. On May 5, the people will decide. However, there is absolutely no doubt that, against the backdrop of the economic downturn, 40,000 jobs were created. That is a plus, and it should be seen against that backdrop. The fact that we have secured and maintained the budget for health is to our credit. The Minister outlined the recruitment programme for more nurses, more allied health professionals and more consultants. There are still challenges for the health service, but we go forward from a position of strength.

It is very important, particularly against the backdrop of the recent election in the Twenty-six Counties, that, for issues like water charges, prescription charges, free domiciliary care and the delivery of education — the Minister ensured that equality was brought to the heart of all those issues and similarly with DARD and DCAL — we ensure that those in the most vulnerable places, the people who are under-resourced and those who perhaps did not have access to resources in the past are given access to them now. That is important, particularly on the issue of water charges, because we have seen how people in the Twenty-six Counties made that one of the key decisions and issues in the election.

As we go forward, our party is willing to play its part to ensure that the Assembly and the Executive will deliver for the people and protect them in future.

Mr McKinney: Mr Speaker, I think we all enter politics to make a difference. Individually, we help in the daily life of many of our constituents, but it is the Assembly's job and ours as politicians collectively to really make a difference for society as a whole. It is our job to ensure that our people can and should dare to dream that life can be better; that our children will not be forced to leave these shores for the promise of work in Australia or America because of a failing economy — I referenced the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's latest research; that our health service provides a service that is fit for the 21st century and is not dominated by waiting-list headlines, among others; that we can provide world-class education and training for our young people; and that we become a much more cohesive society that is at peace, finally, with its troubled past. Can we say that in this mandate we have achieved that ambition on behalf of all our people?

We can point to collective achievements — local government reform among them — but just months ago the echoes of our past

threatened our political future, reinforcing the challenges to our delicate political system that the Good Friday Agreement could never have foreseen. We cannot look back on a mandate and claim that it succeeded when we ended with a process we called 'A Fresh Start': a fresh start that failed to properly address the needs of victims and survivors; a fresh start that had Sinn Féin and the DUP handing welfare-cutting powers back to Westminster and not resolving it in the interests of the most vulnerable; and a fresh start that failed to reference job creation, economic development or a prosperity process as a top priority. There are many big challenges facing Northern Ireland, perhaps the biggest of which is to get people into work. It is our job to create the infrastructural and educational opportunities and to maximise those opportunities. The SDLP can sum it up simply in saying that we need to make Northern Ireland work and that the Assembly needs to make Northern Ireland work.

The public know, instinctively, that we have not delivered all that we could, which is why the public are looking to the next mandate and the next Programme for Government. Following the Assembly election, this party will heavily scrutinise the Programme for Government. If it does not come up to the mark, we will not be afraid to say so. In particular, we want the Programme for Government to adopt a much more joined-up style of government that delivers much greater accountability and transparency and will itself say that it wants Northern Ireland to work.

Nine years after the resurrection of devolution, can we say that the Assembly has worked for our population of 1.8 million, when less than half are economically active and when we generate revenues of £14 billion a year and consume close to £24 billion a year in public services? With the Conservatives committed to their stringent austerity programme, there will be no special dispensation for here. Our situation is fundamentally and economically unsustainable, and that is why we will not accept anything less than a detailed prosperity strategy come May. We need to do everything we can to bring investment and job opportunities. A prosperity strategy should also include a massive programme of workforce training and skills enhancement. We need to meaningfully address the levels of social deprivation that prevent far too many people here reaching their potential and cause such strain, for example, on our health service. The legacy of the Troubles has meant that some areas have fallen behind and are now dominated by long-term mental health issues and other long-term conditions brought about

by long-term deprivation and unemployment. What sort of society are we if we continue to allow the most marginalised to be further marginalised? What sort of Government have we become that we have not altered our deprivation statistics in any meaningful way in the past nine years? Creating much better social cohesion and integration must be another Programme for Government requirement.

Health reform, job creation, better infrastructure, creating world-class education and tackling social deprivation are issues on which the SDLP is not prepared to compromise. Stagnation at Stormont is no longer an option. In the next mandate, we want to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland, make things work and drive the changes that our society cries out for.

Finally, I thank all those who serve the Assembly for their positive contributions and all those who, in any way, influence and shape it. In that context, I thank you too, Mr Speaker, and I wish you well, along with all your colleagues who are retiring.

Mr Allen: It gives me great pleasure to speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. Most importantly, I would like to start by paying tribute, on behalf of the party and, indeed, the Ulster Unionist MLA group, to Leslie Cree, Sam Gardiner, Michael McGimpsey, Michael Copeland and Neil Somerville, who will not be standing in the upcoming election but who all made a considerable impact in their respective constituencies and in Northern Ireland. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the dedication and hard work of Danny Kinahan MP and Tom Elliott MP, who left the Ulster Unionist Party group for Westminster last year.

I also pay tribute to Members from other parties who are stepping down. I am sure that Members from across the House will join me in wishing them well.

I want to take this opportunity to also thank all the Ulster Unionist support staff, who have been instrumental in providing support to our MLAs. It would be remiss of me not to thank the support staff throughout Parliament Buildings, who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes, and staff from the statutory agencies, who we, as MLAs, work closely with on a daily basis to support our constituents.

My thanks go to you, Mr Speaker, the Principal Deputy Speaker, and the Deputy Speakers, who have presided over this House in a professional and diligent manner.

A lot has happened over the past five years. However, a lot more can and should be done to deliver a better Northern Ireland for all our people.

Last but not least, I would like to place on record my utmost thanks to Mr Welch, director of facilities; you, Mr Speaker; the team behind Mr Welch; the Assembly Commission; and all involved who have made every effort not only to accommodate me but other disabled visitors to this magnificent Building by taking measures to make it more accessible. That work is not finished, and I look forward to returning on 9 May with a strong Ulster Unionist Party team, delivering and doing what is right for Northern Ireland.

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, particularly in the context in which you introduced this item, I suppose that it is natural that we should look back on some achievements, whether statistics on questions asked or numbers of Bills passed. However, there is certain danger that we then end up in a mood of self-congratulation, which does not entirely take into account the feelings that people in the community have about this Assembly.

There is no doubt that we have changed from the days when you and I first arrived here in 1998, but whether we have changed as much as people expected remains very much an open question. Whilst, unlike some in the Chamber, I have no doubt in my belief that devolution is better than direct rule, and I believe that we have actually shown a significant measure of delivery in comparison with what went before, we need to also acknowledge that that is a pretty low bar against which to set our standards. There are real challenges to ensuring that we deal with the frustration that is felt in the wider community and to actually addressing the key issues before us in a way in which we have not yet managed. We have not fully got a spirit of partnership and working together at Executive level, even if we do have some good examples from Committees in this place of how that should be done.

Others have referred to the so-called Fresh Start deal of last autumn. There is no doubt that it provided a degree of stability, but, all but 18 years from the Good Friday Agreement, is stability enough? We need to be moving on from the concept of saying that the institutions are surviving and, therefore, that is something good, to the point where we can genuinely say that the institutions are delivering. There is no doubt that we could look through a series of issues where we have not got the strategies in

place that we need and where we have not spent the money that we should have spent on dealing with poverty and social inclusion. There are real challenges across every Department to ensure that we get a better measure of delivery in the future.

In the spirit in which others have highlighted the work of their Ministers, I certainly believe that we can say that six years of devolution of justice has made a difference. We have tackled issues like prison reform, youth justice and, I dare say, even legal aid, which were not tackled previously. As I acknowledged yesterday in the presence of a number of members of the Justice Committee, I acknowledge that that has worked, because we worked well in partnership between this Assembly, particularly the Justice Committee, and the Department. However, while we have made modest improvements on things like the removal of interface structures, there is still an awful lot more to be done that requires a much greater joining up of work between the future Department for Communities, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Justice than we have yet seen.

Let us acknowledge that, while we have made improvements, there is a lot more still to be done. In the same way, we can highlight some of our economic successes, and if Stephen Farry were here representing me — unfortunately for others, I am representing myself this morning — he would doubtless highlight the role that DEL has played in the creation of tens of thousands of new jobs and the 1,300 or so university places in STEM subjects and in work done around apprenticeships, all of which have been key to getting us started on the road of economic recovery, but there is such a lot more that still needs to be done.

I add my words of thanks to a number in this place who I regard as friends, if not exactly colleagues, in different parties, particularly the seven of the old guard who have been here since 1998. That number will potentially be even more diminished after the election, even should the good people of South Down decide to return Jim Wells to this place yet again, or if the good people of South Antrim return me. We are clearly going through a time of transition. Mr Speaker, you highlighted the fact that, after May, the Assembly will be significantly changed compared with five years ago, and that has to be an opportunity to move things on.

11.00 am

In paying tribute to those who are leaving, I particularly mention my three colleagues: Judith Cochrane, whom you know well, Mr Speaker, from her work on the Assembly Commission, where she helped to make this place run more smoothly than would otherwise have been the case; Anna Lo, who has been a phenomenal Chair of the Environment Committee and introduced initiatives in a way that some Committee Chairs can grasp and other Chairs often do not grasp; and the particular old boy who is sitting directly behind me, Kieran McCarthy. I assure you that the Alliance Party will do its best to address the age and gender issue in providing Kieran's replacement in this place. I shall leave it there, but we need to address that issue collectively.

I thank those who sit beside you, Mr Speaker — the Clerk/Chief Executive and the Clerks — and all staff, from doorkeepers, cleaners and catering staff through to the entire secretariat, for the exceptionally good way in which we are served. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for the role that you have performed. There were those who thought that it was not possible for somebody with your political background to be the Speaker of the House. You have proved that it is possible to make change and that it can be done by anybody from any background. The way in which you sought to reach out has been very welcome to all of us. The challenge for those of us who return to the Assembly will be in building the public services that our people want, ensuring that we get that across all our public services and ensuring that, in this place, we really start to build a united community.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. If Members want to make contributions, I will recognise them as best I can when they rise in their place.

Mr Campbell: I begin my contribution by thanking all the staff in this Assembly and in previous Assemblies, whom I found to be extremely courteous, diligent and helpful at all times.

I spent yesterday morning in the Senate Chamber at an event for victims, and I sat beside one of our youngest councillors in Northern Ireland. I asked him his age, and he told me that he was 24. I then pointed out to him that I was first elected to this Chamber in 1982, 10 years before he was even born. In the first 20 years of that time, violence was prolific. Politics was mired in quicksand. An agreement was always essential, but the right basis for getting it eluded parties here. When the right basis was eventually established, it still meant that hard and difficult choices had to be made.

The DUP made the right choice and choices. We took the right decisions when it would have been easier to take the wrong ones, and, for that, we make no apology. For our stance, our statements and our comments since then, we make no apology whatsoever — none.

Over the last five years, people yearned for delivery, which has begun under the guidance of the DUP. Planning for the future cannot and must not mean forgetting the past. Those who caused our bloody and deceitful past will not be allowed to erase their part in it. However much they try, they will not be allowed to do that. Battles must still be fought. For me, the arena will change and the venue will be different, but that campaign must and will be waged until it is won. I am not standing for election with my colleagues, but I am standing on the same ground, with them and beside them, and, together, we will take this country forward to be a much better place.

Mr A Maginness: In the last century, when I was first elected to the Assembly — *[Laughter.]* — people used to ask me what I did. I said that I was a fireman — a political fireman who put out political fires. That is what we did for the first five years or so: we put out political fires. I have become redundant, or semi-redundant, in relation to putting out political fires. I do that only on a part-time basis now because the political fires are much fewer than they were in the past. I feel as though I have changed and become an alchemist, in that my party and I have attempted to transform the lead of sectarianism and division into the pure gold of reconciliation, cooperation and community harmony. I hope that we can change that. I hope that, as I leave this place and a new mandate starts, I can relinquish the function of alchemist and that we will have a new dispensation in which we can, in fact, create that reconciliation, because the Assembly was created as a forum for reconciliation. What we have now is good, and we have achieved significant progress, but we need to do much, much better. We need to create a situation in which we can transform power-sharing into partnership — a dynamic, active partnership based on goodwill and harmony in which we can work together for the good of all of our people: Catholic and Protestant; nationalist and unionist. That is what the Assembly is all about.

I believe that we have made small progress towards that, but we can do much, much better. I look at the Justice Committee, which was mentioned yesterday during the Justice Bill debate, and see it as an exemplar of how people can work together, despite their political

differences, and create a political consensus in order to make worthwhile changes in the justice system. That, I believe, is worthwhile and an exemplar of what we can do together on a non-partisan basis. You do not have to give up being SDLP, Sinn Féin or DUP; you can continue to hold on to that but work for the common good.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I thank you for your work in the Assembly, and I thank your distinguished predecessor, Willie Hay, for all of his work. Both of you acted in the interests of the whole Assembly and the whole community. You showed your independence and wisdom, and I believe that that should be properly recognised.

Ms Lo: In 2007, when I decided to run for election, it was an exciting time filled with a promise of change to a better, more inclusive and progressive society. I have seen change, though, borrowing a line from Yeats, "peace comes dropping slow". More still needs to be done.

As someone who cares deeply about the environment, I could not have picked a more appropriate Committee of which to be Chair. I thank all of the Environment Committee members, past and present, who have worked so well together in the spirit of respect and partnership for the common good. I was delighted to have initiated the inaugural Environment Week, which I hope will be an annual event. I also express my gratitude to the very able Committee staff whom we rely on so much to function effectively. I also pay tribute to the environment sector whose expertise and commitment have been invaluable to us.

As the only ever MLA from an ethnic minority background, I was glad to be in a position to set up the all-party group on ethnic minorities and human trafficking, as well as to lobby extensively with the voluntary sector for a racial equality strategy, which was finally published last year. I hope that MLAs will continue to monitor progress on those issues and to speak out against racism. I will be watching you.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Lo: As one of the few pro-choice MLAs, I was naturally disappointed that the two amendments to the Justice Bill, one tabled by colleagues and one by me, to allow abortion in very limited circumstances did not pass. We cannot afford to ignore the issue; women need our help.

I want to thank my constituents. It has been an enormous privilege to be an MLA for South Belfast, a constituency that is so vibrant and diverse.

Finally, I want to thank all the Members of the Assembly with whom I have worked. In particular, I would like to thank my Alliance Party colleagues for their support and friendship. I look forward to seeing more positive changes in the next mandate. I wish you all the very best for the future. Thank you.

Mr Allister: Self-praise is a poor recommendation. I say that in the context of the contributions of the DUP/Sinn Féin cabal that controls this House. To many, this House and these institutions are a byword for failure and squander. The primary responsibility for that rests on those who control the House; those who heap self-praise upon themselves today.

When I was elected to the Assembly in 2011, the then First Minister, Mr Peter Robinson, boasted that the Assembly should be judged on delivery. I do indeed hope that the people will judge it on delivery because that delivery has been so abysmal that it deserves the judgement of the people on it. If that is to be the benchmark, bring on the delivery of the verdict.

Those, of course, who created the dysfunctional mess tell us that they have made a fresh start — a commentary in itself that that which they have presided over needed a fresh start. They had run it into such chaos that that is what it required. There is no doubt that they hope now to con many people that they who created the mess will in fact create a fresh start.

That fresh start, of course, was possible only by the DUP's sweeping murder under the carpet. A Government panel reported that the IRA still existed and was still armed, that it had murdered again, and that it still had an army council that had control over party and paramilitary organisation. All that was swept under the carpet for the purpose and sake of keeping the limos and the Government positions and carrying on as normal. I trust that that, too, will not be forgotten; that the price of that fresh start was indeed that ignoble start of sweeping murder under the carpet.

Mr Speaker: Thank you —

Mr Allister: The truth is that these institutions —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Allister: — because they defy the basic dynamics of democracy and deny the people the right to change their Government and have a proper opposition will need a lot more than a fresh start.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for those warm and generous comments. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Agnew: I would like to say that it has been a privilege to serve the people of North Down over the last five years. Further to that, I am proud to have represented the views of Green Party members and supporters across Northern Ireland, as currently our sole MLA.

11.15 am

One of my early victories was the number of people who contacted me when I made speeches to say that they felt for the first time that someone was representing their views. As someone who had previously felt that Northern Ireland politics did not reflect me, I take it as a privilege and a position of responsibility to articulate those views and to make the arguments for the policies and values of the Green Party in Northern Ireland. However, I was never satisfied just to be here. Being elected was not, in itself, enough, which is why, in December, when my private Member's Bill became law with the Children's Services Co-operation Bill being enacted, it was a very proud day for me and my party. We were able to say that we had promised change and had delivered it in an area as vital as children's services. It was a Bill about cooperation. For that reason, I thank the Bill Office, OFMDFM and Members across the parties for their cooperation in bringing forward that very important law.

I have also sought to lead on issues such as marriage equality, transparency and environmental protection. That is why, although I go into the election confident but not complacent, I will be making the argument that we need to keep a Green presence in the Assembly and to increase it, because equal marriage, transparency and environmental protection are still works in progress in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the naughty corner will be emboldened by having more Greens at the other side of the election, and I am confident that we will provide an effective opposition to whoever make up the next Executive.

To those such as you, Mr Speaker, who are not seeking re-election, I wish you well. I believe

that there is not only a life after politics but most likely a better life after politics. It is one that I look forward to but, hopefully, not as soon as May.

On your point, Mr Speaker, on the number of women in the Assembly, it has been a failure of our parties to date to get women elected, and that is why my party introduced quotas and, for the first time, is standing nine female candidates out of a total of 18. That is 50% of our candidates, because we believe that the Assembly should reflect our society.

Mr B McCrea: I rise for the last time to address the Assembly. I thank the people of Lagan Valley for the privilege of representing them over the past nine years. It seems like only yesterday that I first got here, awestruck by the names on the doors of people that I had seen only on television, and, yet, here we are.

The highlight of my time here was when I chaired the Committee for Employment and Learning. There were some great colleagues there: Jim Allister, before anybody would talk to him; Fra McCann, a great inspiration; Chris Lyttle; and Pat Ramsey. Those were good days. I enjoyed dealing with the challenges of further and higher education, youth unemployment, NEETs and careers advice. That was real politics. It was what I enjoyed. I carried on that work on the all-party group on science and technology, and, when I am gone from this place, I hope that those who are still here will take up the challenge of science and technology, because that is where the jobs are and that is where the future is.

I also enjoyed my time on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. I believe passionately in the arts. Arts are not an overhead. They inspire us, they unite us and they give us hope. We need to do more for the arts. Hopefully, whoever follows me will also take the lead in championing the arts.

I am proud of what I achieved and of what I tried to achieve. For those who follow me now and in the future, I will give them a famous quotation from Winston Churchill:

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal..."

— what matters is to have the courage to go on. I will go on. I will leave this place with my head high, with my colours flying, with my dignity intact and with all conviction about what is good for Northern Ireland. In conclusion, two roads diverged in the woods, and I took the road less travelled. That has made all the difference.

Ms Sugden: First and foremost, I pay tribute to all the people of East Londonderry. It has been my privilege to represent them in the House. After the loss of my predecessor and dear friend and mentor David McClarty in 2014, my constituents welcomed me into East Londonderry as their representative, and we have done fantastic work since. In my role as an MLA, I am most satisfied when I am serving my constituents, whether it be their individual needs or working with the community and voluntary groups that I have met over the past two years. It will be my privilege to continue to serve them when I am returned to the House in May.

Mr Speaker, I want to pay tribute to your leadership of the House. The way that you have conducted yourself and the way that you have harboured a sense of respect in the House should be commended. You are a gentleman. You have treated me, as a Back-Bench Member and an independent of the House, with fairness and courtesy, and you have given me many opportunities. I sincerely wish you well in your retirement.

I want to thank all the MLAs of the House. A quality of a good politician is to build relationships. It is how we get things done, and it is certainly something that I have sought to do with every side of the House. I really appreciate that every Member has welcomed me and embraced me, and we have built up those good relationships, so that we have got work done. It has not necessarily been work reported in the news, but we have done work behind closed doors. Contrary to what a lot of people think, we do sometimes do something up here.

I give best wishes to all those who are not seeking re-election. In particular, I pay tribute to my constituency colleagues John Dallat MLA and Gregory Campbell MP/MLA, particularly Gregory Campbell. We have an awful lot of work to do in East Londonderry, and I look forward to working with him when I am returned as an MLA and he continues his work as an MP.

I wish to pay tribute to the staff of the House. We have the craic. It makes the hour and a half journey coming up here much more enjoyable. Again, they have welcomed me. They are as much part of the fabric of this place as the Members and their staff, and that should be acknowledged.

Politics in Northern Ireland is changing. It is a generation since the Good Friday Agreement. That signals that we have to now embrace the

new generation. Time will be a great healer in Northern Ireland — nothing else — and until the people who were involved in the Troubles are no longer involved in politics, I do not think that Northern Ireland will truly move on. The people who will remain here, maybe for the next five or 10 years, who were involved in the Troubles will pave the way for a new generation. That is important.

This mandate has not been perfect. It has actually been quite frustrating. I am a student of politics — many degrees and all that — but the one person whom I take a lot of my experience from taught me that politics is about people. We need to embrace that in the next mandate. Last year, when we saw Ministers going in and out of office, that was not respecting people. If I can encourage anything in the next mandate, it is that we start putting the people of Northern Ireland first.

Mr Speaker: On behalf of the Assembly, I congratulate you on your recent engagement.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCarthy: I wish to express my sincere gratitude to a great many people for giving me the chance to represent them in the Assembly for the past 18 years. First, I want to thank God for giving me the health and the strength to perform my work and my duties on behalf of the community. I want to thank my wife and my family. I want to thank the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland and my good colleagues on each side of me and in front of me and to thank David Ford and Stephen Farry, as Ministers, for their work in the Assembly.

I thank my voters in Strangford, my loyal staff in Ards, the volunteers and the many groups I have worked with during the past 30 years as a public servant. I thank everyone in this Building for their help, courtesy and comradeship over the years. That goes right from the security outside the gates to those inside the Building, from the cleaners to the chief executive of this place. I say, "Thank you". We are all ordinary people simply doing a job, and everyone has been extremely helpful.

I am very proud to have served as a member of the Alliance Party in the Assembly. Alliance has played a pivotal role for years in establishing a power-sharing Administration, respect and diversity in Northern Ireland. First came the Good Friday Agreement, then came the M-Day — the miracle day — on 8 May 2007, when the late Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness walked down the steps in the

Great Hall to tell the world that hostilities were over and they were going to work together for the good of all the people in Northern Ireland. We truly have come a long way, and thank God for it. What a pity so many people had to suffer. We must never, ever forget all our victims.

I thank all 107 Assembly colleagues for their help, friendship and cooperation over the past 18 years. I will never forget the outpouring of sympathy, almost three years ago next month, when my family was plunged into unimaginable grief. You all helped to get us through that dreadful period. I thank Martin McGuinness. Martin McGuinness made his way to my room on the third floor and spent 20 minutes with me offering sympathy on behalf of himself and his party. That is something I will never forget. That is what human nature is all about.

I wish everyone here every success for the future. Leaving the Assembly, I would like my legacy to be advancing mental health and learning disability, which can no longer be the Cinderella of the health service, and advancing apartment owners' protection and the preservation of our precious townland names. As I leave the Assembly this evening for the very last time, I hope to be replaced by a bright, young and enthusiastic lady called Kellie Armstrong, who has the welfare of Northern Ireland at heart.

I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all our colleagues good luck for a bright future and a healthy retirement. For my final few words, I appeal to our First Minister and deputy First Minister and their new Executive to keep Northern Ireland stepping forward faster and to create a better future in peace and prosperity for everyone, particularly senior citizens. I have never raised my voice in the House until now, when I will say this loud and clear: hands off our bus passes. Hands off our bus passes. *[Laughter.]*

[Applause.]

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call Mr John McCallister.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh míle maith agat and slán go fóill. Ta tae yez aw an sae lang the noo. Thanks very much, and goodbye. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCallister: It would have been such a shame to have to have him removed on his last day.

Mr Speaker, I will begin by paying tribute to you and the respect agenda you have set in your

time in the Speaker's office. That has been an important contribution, as have the speeches you made outlining that and how we respect the diversity of our community. That has been important in the Assembly, in its culture and the feel it gives to it coming out from the prestigious office that you hold. That is important, and I wish you and your family well in your retirement.

I am, like Ms Sugden, one of those who hope to be back here in a number of weeks, and it never fails to impress any of us coming up to this Building. I remember vividly from nine years ago, when I was first elected, the enormous sense of pride I had in arriving at the Building for the first time as a Member and the contributions that everybody made.

11.30 am

While there is partly a disappointment in some regards about what the Assembly and Executive have achieved, the one thing that they have achieved is to have got people talking from very different and difficult backgrounds. As Mr Hamilton said, it is much better having a robust debate in here than division on our streets. Through positions on various Committees, I have watched people engage. Suddenly, some of those divisions come down, because healthcare is important regardless of what side of the community you are from. What we do about tackling poverty and educational underachievement hits everyone. Sometimes, with those issues, you see that being broken down.

In this term, I am particularly proud of the private Member's Bill to reform the way that the Assembly does its business, and I hope that the messages from all of the political parties seem to be that there is a will to have a much more collective and cohesive Executive on the other side of an election. I hope that that means that people start to deliver and that the Executive will be held to account by a robust opposition and, indeed, possibly by an emboldened "naughty corner", for want of a better phrase. It is important to have that challenge and scrutiny.

To everyone who is retiring, I wish you all well and every success in the future.

Mr Speaker: The final Member who I have time for is Deputy Speaker John Dallat.

Mr Dallat: Mr Speaker, I had not planned to speak because I realise that, even though it is our last day, we are scheduled to sit here until 9.15 pm. However, it would be remiss of me

not to pay tribute to you as Speaker and to the previous Speaker, Willie Hay, who initially moulded me into the role of Deputy Speaker. I want to also briefly say thanks to the people in all of the political parties who made life exceptionally easy for me. You have been more than good. There were times when you could have had my scalp and you did not do it.

If I were to give some advice to new Members coming in, that advice would be this: if you want to be happy in this Building, get to know the people outside the Chamber — the cleaners, the ushers, the security people and, in particular, the ones in the canteen. They are the heart and soul of the Building, and, as I leave it, I am exceptionally proud of them. They come from the north, the south, the east and the west of this city, and, if you really want to know what is going on, you ask them because they are the heart and soul of this place.

Mr Speaker: I thank all of those who contributed to that discussion in that session.

Assembly Business

Plenary Business: Monday 14 March 2016

Mr Speaker: As all business on yesterday's Order Paper was considered, we will move on.

Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2016

Mrs Cochrane: I beg to move

That, as set out in section 2(4) of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Act (Northern Ireland) 2000, this Assembly approves the revised scheme [NIA 329/11-16] laid before the Assembly on 8 March 2016 for payments to political parties for the purpose of assisting Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly who are connected with such parties to perform their Assembly duties.

I move the motion on behalf of the Assembly Commission. Members will be aware that the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Act (Northern Ireland) 2000 provides for the Commission to bring a scheme to make such payment to the Assembly. Any payment to a political party under the financial assistance for political parties (FAPP) scheme can only be made for the express purpose set out in section 1 of the 2000 Act, and that is for assisting Members of the Assembly who are connected

with such parties to perform their Assembly duties.

That purpose is replicated at article 1 of the scheme. The FAPP scheme does not provide payments to individual Members, nor does it provide payments to parties for any purposes other than assisting Members of that party to carry out their Assembly duties.

In tabling the motion today, the Assembly Commission seeks to meet two objectives. First, in line with its continuing commitment to deliver savings in its controllable running costs, the Commission unanimously agreed to reduce its operating expenditure by 5% for the 2016-17 financial year. While the Commission's budget for 2016-17 was unchanged from the 2015-16 figure, the Commission is mindful of the cuts applied across the wider public sector and agreed to reduce its controllable costs by 5%. That level of cut has been applied to the rates of assistance payable to parties under the revised financial assistance to political parties scheme.

Secondly, the Commission unanimously agreed some further revisions to the FAPP scheme to give effect to the proposals for additional funding to be made available for opposition parties in the Assembly from the start of the new mandate in May 2016. That followed the Assembly's endorsement on 8 February 2016 of the statement of proposed entitlements for an opposition, as set out in the Fresh Start Agreement, and the Assembly's call for the Speaker to take forward the implementation of those actions before the end of the mandate. That proposal will mean that, should an opposition party or parties be in place after the May election, funding will be reallocated from all the other parties to help to meet the increased funding payable to an opposition party or parties. Therefore, the revised scheme includes different payment rates to cover the different scenarios of there being no opposition party or of there being one or more opposition parties.

Members will also note that the changes to the number of Departments have a further impact on the FAPP funding. Currently, no payments are made in respect of a Member who holds a ministerial post, so the reduction in the number of Ministers will also have a modest impact on the funding that is available.

The proposed changes today will ensure that all parties take their share of the cuts that the wider public sector faces but, at the same time, ensure that the proposals for additional funding for an opposition party or parties, as set out in

'A Fresh Start', are met. When considering the matter, the Commission was, however, also very aware of the changes that are likely to be brought about by Mr McCallister's Bill, by wider developments relating to the development of opposition parties and by any future cuts that might be made to the Commission's budget. The Commission therefore agreed that this was an interim measure and that a fundamental review of the entire FAPP scheme should be carried out as soon as possible in the next mandate, including any required legislative change to ensure that we have an open, transparent and fit-for-purpose scheme.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for her contribution not just on this motion but as a member of the Assembly Commission. You have held that post with distinction right through your term.

I am grateful that the need to apply a cut to the payments under FAPP is recognised as a necessary part of any package of measures to ensure that the Assembly Commission meets its agreed budget reductions in 2016-17. The Assembly Commission unanimously agreed the planned 5% cut and the reallocation of funds between opposition and non-opposition parties after the next Assembly election in May 2016. The fundamental structure of the scheme and, therefore, the nature of the split of the funding under FAPP between parties of certain sizes and between the two elements of the scheme — general party funding and funding for the Whips' offices — were not a specific consideration for the Commission at this time. The Commission was concerned with the twin aims of meeting the budget cut for 2016-17 and implementing the intent of the Fresh Start Agreement. In doing so, the Commission fully recognised that the proposals for an opposition and how that might develop and the level of budget cuts that have been levied in recent years may require a more substantive review of the entirety of the FAPP scheme.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs McKeivitt: I will.

Mr Allister: Speaking to the need for a more radical approach, how does this come anywhere close to meeting the needs of an opposition, which is opposition to a Government with, presently, 19 special advisers, each costing an average of £106,000 a year, and an army of civil servants to their back? What we have is the suggestion of a few pounds thrown at an opposition to provide opposition to that. Where is the equality of arms that would be

necessary to provide for a real and effective opposition if all we are suggesting is £60,000 to fund two researchers at £30,000 each, when there are 19 special advisers who are paid £106,000 each? Where is the equality of arms?

Mrs McKeivitt: My party did not sign up to one part of the Fresh Start deal, but we definitely support this part. Under the current Budget, it is a cost-neutral effect. That is why it is proposed that the Commission will agree that the FAPP scheme should be reviewed in the new mandate. This approach is a one-year measure.

I thank Members for their support. As I said, it was agreed unanimously at the Commission, and we look forward to its implementation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, as set out in section 2(4) of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Act (Northern Ireland) 2000, this Assembly approves the revised scheme [NIA 329/11-16] laid before the Assembly on 8 March 2016 for payments to political parties for the purpose of assisting Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly who are connected with such parties to perform their Assembly duties.

Ministerial Statements

Sign Language Legislation: Initiation

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure wishes to make a statement on the initiation of the sign language legislation process. I am pleased that the Assembly is able to provide a signing service for this item. We are slightly ahead, but I hope that the signer will turn up soon. I think that we should proceed, Minister.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Before I begin my statement, I will refer to today's first item of business, which will, hopefully, allow time for the signer to come in. I wish everybody who is retiring from the House well. It has been a pleasure to work with everyone across all parties. There were cross exchanges at times, but I believe that most Members, if not all, have done their business with integrity. It was a privilege to work with them. I wish you, a Cheann Comhairle, all the best in your retirement. In particular, I mention

my party colleague who is not standing again, Bronwyn McGahan. It has been an absolute privilege to work with her and everybody else.

I will now move on to the statement. With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I want to update the House on my intention to publish and consult on a framework for promoting sign language, including proposals for legislation.

On 1 December 2015, I announced my intention to publish and consult on a framework for promoting sign language that would include proposals for legislation to be taken forward in the new Assembly mandate. I outlined to the House that, although Irish and British sign languages were recognised as languages in their own right in 2004 by the then Secretary of State, Mr Paul Murphy, there was no statutory protection for either language, they were not covered by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and there was no formal Executive-agreed policy or strategy document for Irish and British sign languages. I informed the House that I intended, with Members' help, to change that position, and that remains the case.

I will outline the work that my Department has carried out to date on the three key actions that I announced on 1 December 2015: the pre-consultation, Executive engagement and public consultation. I announced my intention to engage in a period of pre-consultation. My officials held a series of preconsultation meetings in December 2015 and January 2016. Those meetings were held with a variety of key stakeholders, including representatives of the key deaf organisations on the sign language partnership group, members of the deaf community and parents of deaf children. Queen's University, which has held a master's course for Irish and British sign language interpreters, and Ulster University, which is in the second year of a postgraduate certificate in education course for deaf Irish and British sign language teachers, also contributed to the process.

The concepts, views and ideas discussed during the preconsultation process have been incorporated into the draft framework.

The framework, therefore, is the product of meaningful and continuous dialogue with the key stakeholders. It was vital that every opportunity was given to the representatives of this marginalised community to contribute to the framework, which has the potential to change their lives by tackling social exclusion. The feedback from the pre-consultation is reflected in the co-designed nature of the framework

document, of which the deaf community and its representatives can justifiably claim a sense of shared ownership.

11.45 am

As I informed the House in December, I had already written to ministerial colleagues to seek their support for and commitments to the framework. In November 2015, I wrote informing them of my intention to put forward an Executive paper outlining my Department's policy proposals to support improvements to access to services for deaf sign language users and their families. At the same time, I forwarded a copy of the sign language road map review final report, which was the result of a deaf-led process of consultations between Damian Barry, who is the deaf author of the road map report, and Departments, amongst other stakeholders, to examine the provision of services to sign language users, with a series of recommendations on how to improve service provision.

Following the period of pre-consultation, I produced an Executive paper to accompany the sign language framework with proposals for legislation. The paper made the case for the need for such a framework with proposals for legislation and informed colleagues of my intention to publish and consult on the framework before the end of this month.

I have been encouraged by the support of ministerial colleagues to date, and I acknowledge their feedback and their suggestions in taking this process forward; indeed, I have been very encouraged by the support from Members of the House as a whole, including members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, whom my officials have briefed.

I acknowledge that the building of the sustainable infrastructure necessary to support Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language users and their families will involve financial investment, particularly in its early stages. There may be concerns in some quarters about such an investment in times of austerity. However, the Programme for Government 2011-15, priority 5, titled "Delivering High Quality and Efficient Public Services", states:

"Citizens have, whether in times of recession or not, the right to expect excellent public services and value for money. As an Executive, we are acutely aware of the need to deliver, and this is why we have identified this as a priority."

Sign language is about including some of the most marginalised people in our society, and it must be a priority for all of us. The framework and its accompanying proposals for legislation are predicated on the need to improve access to public services for a marginalised community that has experienced generations of inequality and social exclusion resulting from historical underinvestment in access to services through their language of need. When we are acutely aware of the poor life outcomes experienced by this community, the financial costs argument is less compelling.

My December statement acknowledged that this would be a challenging programme of work, but I have since taken the necessary steps to bring us to the point where we can publish and consult on the sign language framework with proposals for legislation. As I have outlined, I have ensured that the co-designed framework reflects the views and needs of the deaf community after an extensive period of pre-consultation. I have engaged with my Executive colleagues to seek their support for the policy proposals in the framework. Further Executive agreement will be sought in due course on the final policy proposals for legislation, following the consultation process and before agreement to draft the Bill is sought.

I want to outline the upcoming consultation process because it will be unique in the North of Ireland. My previous statement outlined that the consultation document would be made available in the form of an online survey, with additional formats on request, including Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language translations, and I went on to say that the 12-week consultation would be widely publicised and open to everyone who wished to respond. The consultation will now run for an extended period of 16 weeks. There are two reasons for that: first, in the run-up to the Assembly election, departmental representatives will not be able to attend public consultations; and, secondly, the extended time frame will ensure that key stakeholders and the community will have the opportunity to engage with departmental representatives after the election.

This will be the first time that the deaf community will have had the opportunity to engage in public consultation solely on their issues. The feedback that my officials have received from deaf organisations suggests that there will be a big demand from deaf persons to have their say, and rightly so. They have waited a long time for the opportunity.

Secondly, this will be a consultation on policy proposals for sign languages. Sign languages

use hand shapes, movement of the hands, body language, facial expressions and lip patterns to convey meaning. They are visual languages, and this will be the first time in the North that a public consultation will be carried out with sign language as a primary method of communication. Therefore, the usual written medium for consultations will not suffice. The framework consultation documents will be translated into Irish and British sign languages, and, likewise, responses will be translated from those languages. The availability of language interpreters throughout the consultation may also impact on the ability of the deaf community to get its views across. The extended consultation period will allow for that. It is entirely appropriate and right that a framework co-designed with the deaf community for the deaf community should be delivered in their language of need.

My officials' preconsultation meetings with the deaf organisations highlighted the use of social media by the Scottish deaf community during the consultation process that led to the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. Facebook played a prominent role in sign language users responding to the consultation document in their native British Sign Language. It is my intention that this consultation will be sign language-friendly; after all, that is the point of the framework. Access to sign language should be viewed as a right and not an inconvenience. It is planned, therefore, to maximise social media opportunities. That will include setting up a Facebook page dedicated to the consultation that will allow people to submit responses in text or by video, enabling them to use sign language if they wish. The page will be promoted across the other official Executive social media and online platforms.

In short, the aims of the framework are described under three themes: prevention, to ensure that future generations of deaf children and young people reach adulthood with the best chance of securing full social inclusion and better life outcomes; correction, to increase social inclusion for the current generation of deaf people, many of whom have left education with few academic qualifications, by providing access to ongoing personal and social development to enable them to participate fully in their society; and care and protection, to recognise and protect the cultural and linguistic rights of Irish and British sign language users and to build the sustainable infrastructure necessary to promote and support them and their families.

Some may wonder how a framework can be translated from a document to society to make

a meaningful difference to people's lives. My view is that implementing the framework has already begun. In 2015-16, my Department has targeted increased funding at projects that outline a template of support for deaf people from birth to old age. I have committed funding to the National Deaf Children's Society for increased numbers of family sign language courses, including courses delivered in the home by the British Deaf Association, to equip parents and families with the signing skills to communicate with their deaf children. Research highlights that such early intervention communication can improve educational outcomes for deaf children.

DCAL is also funding Jordanstown School to deliver British Sign Language levels 1 and 2 courses for parents of deaf children who wish to develop their signing skills with their children. I was delighted to visit those classes in January of this year and meet the parents and their children. I have the utmost admiration for their drive and determination to give their children the best possible start in life, and I am determined to help them through this framework. My Department is also funding St Joseph's Centre for Deaf People to deliver deaf awareness and age-specific British Sign Language classes across 40 primary schools in counties Antrim and Down. In addition, selected secondary schools are receiving deaf awareness and Irish or British sign language classes through our funding of Ulster University's signing for improved deaf awareness project.

That project also delivers such classes to all four university campuses to make them deaf-friendly and to inspire the future professionals who will deliver services to deaf children to learn sign language.

DCAL has also funded Action Deaf Youth to deliver a British Sign Language level 1 course for deaf children and young people and for children of deaf adults to promote social inclusion and to provide the qualifications necessary for future careers as interpreters and sign language tutors. Those DCAL-funded projects directly contribute to the prevention aim of the framework. We have previously funded such courses up to level 6, which has enabled young deaf people to access those careers. This year's funding represents the start of a new cycle that will hopefully build up to level 6 courses over the next few years.

DCAL has committed funding to the translation of material for the driving theory test into British Sign Language. That will help deaf people learn to drive and potentially increase their

employment options. My Department is also funding the Foyle Sign Language Centre in Derry to deliver Irish and British sign language courses to the families of older generation sign language users to allow them to communicate more effectively with their parents and grandparents. That funding also delivers deaf awareness and sign language classes to local businesses and the voluntary community to encourage greater social integration between older sign language users and the local community, as well as providing for social activities. The projects contribute to the correction aim of the framework.

The care and protection aim of the framework is self-explanatory. In my December statement, I informed the House that I had listened carefully to what the deaf community was saying. They want legislation to safeguard their right as a cultural and linguistic community and want to access services in their own language. In short, they want the care and protection that sign language legislation will bring. This has been a challenging programme of work, and I thank the deaf community and other stakeholders for their engagement and their contributions to the framework.

In December, I asked this question of each and every Member of the House: what choices would you make if your child or grandchild was born unable to hear? I also referred to Emma, the hearing mother of a young deaf son, Patrick, who highlighted the difficulties that families such as hers face when they are informed that their child is deaf. I have met Emma several times, and I know the choices that she is making for Patrick. She is leading a growing number of parents of deaf children who are speaking up for children and demanding better interventions for their child and their family.

As I have stated previously, I believe that one word sums up why we must deliver Executive recognition of and protection for sign language: "inclusion". Current and future generations of sign language users and their families must have access to the services that our Departments provide in their own language. Patrick deserves the same rights, accessibility and inclusion throughout our society as his hearing peers will enjoy. I encourage you and your constituents to respond to the consultation and ensure that Patrick and deaf adults and children across the North receive those rights.

Mr McCausland (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): The members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, across all the parties, were very

supportive of the initiative. There is a recognition that more work needs to be done in the area to meet the needs of people in the deaf community, so people are very supportive of that.

The Minister pointed out that you cannot really put a cost on these things, but, if we are to look at things that might be done going forward, does she have some sense of the costs? Is she happy to make sure that the resources will be made available?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I thank the Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee for his continued support. He is right to say — I mentioned this in my statement — that there are some difficulties in getting absolute costings at this stage. However, there will be emerging themes as the consultation process develops. Indeed, there were emerging themes in the preconsultation process around tuition, sign language classes for British and Irish sign language tuition and support for families. We already know what those costs are, but they are likely to increase. We will also have to try to predict what additional services will be needed.

The final cost will be published when the Bill is brought to the future Executive for support. Without making any assumptions and albeit that the costs will certainly be higher in the first instance, I believe that it will be money well worth spending, particularly given the legacy of inequality that this community has faced. I believe that all Members want to put right that wrong.

12.00 noon

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for the statement. It is very welcome among the deaf community, with whom I work closely, particularly the Hands That Talk folk in Dungiven. I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on the provision of a signer here today. It is important that, when we deal with this issue, signing is provided. Thank you for that.

Will the Minister outline what support she has given to sign language users?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. As I outlined in the statement, the support that we have given in DCAL has ensured that sign language classes for parents and family members take place. There was a gap there, and we met it. We have also provided good leadership. With my officials, I

have invested a lot of time in ensuring that, once the road map was brought forward and the gaps were identified, we very quickly tried to meet those gaps. That is why we did the pre-consultation and why we are putting it out for consultation today. I have no doubt that that will be continued by the people who brought the process to us thus far and my officials. I believe that all Members, going back to December of last year right through to today, will give good regard and respect to the consultation and will encourage full involvement and participation in it to ensure that support for the deaf community is not left with the Department. We all need to come in behind a group who have faced decades of discrimination through a lack of investment and inclusion.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is a very proud day: this has been brought to the House on the last day of business.

Our party is very supportive of the proposals to promote and increase the use of British and Irish sign language. Ahead of the debate, I made enquiries with the events team in Parliament Buildings to ensure that we offered sign language tour experiences here. I was pleased to learn that we do with prior notice. Will the Minister advise whether, during the preconsultation period, any assessment was carried out in departmental arm's-length bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Museums Council, to ensure that sign language tours and educational programmes are offered at every venue? If not, will she ensure that such an assessment is carried out?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her comments and, indeed, her support as a member of the CAL Committee. It is not just the museums; I suspect that every ALB right across each of the Departments will provide sign language support on request. The deaf community say that that prohibits them from accessing culture, arts and leisure and all Executive services across the board on an equal relationship with others. That needs to be corrected. I would be absolutely shocked if that did not come out as part of the consultation.

The Assembly, through the Speaker's office and events, has led by example, but, again, it is on request. When we are looking at and organising events and people are asked about the requirements that they have, once those requirements are made known, provision happens. In my opinion, for tours that are organised across all the Departments, including

my ALBs, it should be built in rather than having to be asked for. I would like to see that being corrected as part of the consultation process.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for her very full paper this afternoon. I was going to ask about cost, but that has been covered. Obviously, from the point of view of using signing and having available an Irish version and a British version, there could be complications.

I am just wondering about tours, for example, where it would probably be over the top to have two, with one obviously having to be more dominant. How similar are the sign languages?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe the Member's question is based on the intent to give this as much support as possible. The sign languages are based around Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language. In November, I went to a world conference for the deaf that was hosted in Belfast. There are differences even within British Sign Language. For example, colleagues from Scotland were talking about differences in what they use compared with those from Australia. This is Sign Language Week, as luck would have it, and some of the participants who were up yesterday were talking about the differences in the languages.

Let us try to be as inclusive as we can. I think that, up until this point, all Members have tried to show respect and due regard — I do not believe this will not be the case from here on in — and to be as inclusive as possible. Let us use the consultation process to find out as best we can exactly what the needs are. Let us, collectively across each of our parties, put our best foot forward to try to ensure that people in the deaf community have services, information and access and can participate like the rest of us.

Mr Hilditch: I certainly welcome the statement. There appears to be a lot of best practice out there, particularly in countries such as the Scandinavian countries, that have been a bit in front of us here in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister ensure that, in promoting sign language, best practice will be gleaned from other jurisdictions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is "Yes", but I just want to let the Member know that we have some of the best experts here on our own shores. From as far back as 2004 and going right through, those experts have delivered a very robust road map. They have taken all the expertise and experience from right across and

tried to build the best possible road map for deaf families here. They have already done that. We should not undervalue or fail to appreciate the skills and expertise that we have here. We have them here, and we need to support them.

I believe that the consultation period will not only support the work that has been done thus far but will help inform the Assembly, the Executive, future Assembly mandates and all the arm's-length bodies in going forward. These people not only have the expertise but are making progression plans to pass those skills and that expertise on to the next generation. In fairness to them, they are way ahead of the rest of us. This consultation process is very important to ensure that, whatever legislature they are responsible for and accountable to, we get the expertise and experience of everyone who has brought this forward. We will then build that in so that we have the best possible legislation for our deaf families here.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister mentioned the Scottish Act in her statement. Is she aware that the Scottish legislation is based on a national plan, whereby local authorities contribute? Will the consultation include the Scottish plan?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, the short answer is "Yes, it will". In Scotland, all the local authorities, government bodies and arm's-length bodies signed up to a plan. We want to have legislation not only to give protection to those who need sign language support but to ensure that services and goods and, more importantly, access are available to members of our deaf community. So, yes, we will look at Scotland and at the Scandinavian countries, but we will go as far as Australia and New Zealand. We will go as far as we can to look at examples of other legislatures to ensure that we have the best possible legislation for our deaf constituents and deaf families.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive statement. I was not meant to be in the Chamber; I just happened to be sitting here. I am glad that she brought up Emma and Patrick, because it was my office that Emma contacted in May 2013. I have to say "Thank you" to the Minister and her Department, because, as soon as I contacted the Minister, she set up a meeting straight away with the Department. She understood straight away the need for Emma to converse with her son. I

appreciate the work that was done there, and I am sure that the Minister will agree with me not only as the Minister but as a parent that it is essential that parents who have deaf children are able to converse with them at the earliest stage so that they have the best chance in life.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member and thank her for the work that she did to support Emma, Patrick and the entire family. It is really important, as I saw at first hand in January. Any parent, grandparent or other family member will appreciate and enjoy the communication that they have with family members — and that is for hearing family members. I can only imagine how important communication is for those, particularly children, who are deaf. It is really important. Communication is how we all evolve and develop as individuals. Without the support, I can only imagine how difficult it has been, particularly for generations of families who have been through this.

This is a good day. Karen McKeivitt was right that it is a proud day for the Assembly. We are all going forward collectively to recognise that there have been gaps in the past, to have those gaps filled and to get the strongest and most robust legislation possible to ensure that those inequalities are confined to the past.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement. I apologise to the House for being late: I was at the ETI Committee, and the ETI Minister was in attendance.

The Minister talked in her answers about inequality. She will agree and has said in her statement that the inclusivity of these services across Northern Ireland is vital. How can we ensure, when we come to the delivery of the services after the consultation, that inclusivity is the reality across the community and across the country?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is right to point out that, first of all, it has to be inclusive. It must be inclusive, and, if legislation is passed and this becomes law — I hope that it will — I hope that people will be proactive and will try to embrace the way in which they can provide inclusion. That is very important to me, as it is important for all Members.

The consultation period is crucial, particularly for service providers, should they be in local government or in services or through the arm's-length bodies of my Department and other Departments. Where our Departments have a public-facing element, we must ensure that the

new legislation not only provides access but enables participation. It is important that that is done in a meaningful way that not only meets a legislative obligation but meets the obligation of the individual who may be accessing those services.

Ulster-Scots Academy/Irish Language Academy: Proposals

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement to the House on the development of an Ulster-Scots academy and an Irish language academy.

Irish and Ulster Scots are key aspects of our cultural heritage and identity. Considering the legacy we have to deal with, it is unsurprising that many people see themselves as being 100% from one culture or the other. Of course, anyone who has visited the Public Record Office and delved into their family history will soon learn that it is often a lot more complicated than that. That is a strength. We have a range of cultures and heritages to draw from, all of which have their strengths and benefits. I encourage everyone to embrace this and draw from all areas of our culture to help define and create the future.

As an Executive, we are committed to tackling poverty and social exclusion. We want all our people to live happy and fulfilled lives. That means ensuring that they have access not only to the basics of life but to culture, heritage and tradition. Not only will that approach benefit individuals, but it will strengthen us as a society and enable future generations to experience and appreciate the unique culture that we have to offer.

However, it is not for politicians to suggest how a culture should develop. Our role is to ensure that there are networks, structures and organisations in place to facilitate its development and to ensure that our cultural roots remain accessible to all in our society.

12.15 pm

Today, I will set out how the work to develop an Ulster-Scots academy and an Irish language academy will be taken forward. I will speak first about the Ulster-Scots academy.

The idea for an Ulster-Scots academy first emerged into public view in the early 1990s. The Belfast Agreement in 1998 acknowledged the importance of respect, understanding and

tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity and made specific reference to Ulster Scots. Ulster Scots was recognised by the British Government in 2001 under Part II of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Other political imperatives include the joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments in 2003 and the St Andrew's Agreement in 2006, both of which gave a commitment that the British Government would take steps to encourage the establishment of an Ulster-Scots academy.

As Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I have been very proactive in my support for Ulster-Scots culture and, specifically, the commitment in the Ulster-Scots strategy to establish an Ulster-Scots academy. That is why my Department, through the ministerial advisory group, invested nearly £4 million and has taken forward over 80 Ulster-Scots research and development projects.

On 25 January, I gave a written statement to the Assembly to update Members on the review by the ministerial advisory group of the Ulster-Scots academy and my decision not to extend the appointment of its chair and members beyond 31 December 2015. I advised the Assembly that I had asked the Ulster-Scots Agency, working with my Department, to draft proposals to establish an Ulster-Scots academy, and I set up a programme board in my Department to assist with that work. Those decisions were based on the recommendations from a review of the ministerial advisory group, which was conducted by a member of the Strategic Investment Board.

The review commented positively on the significant contribution that the ministerial advisory group had made but concluded that it had taken its work as far as it could. I would like to state publicly how much I appreciate the contribution that the group made. The work undertaken by the ministerial advisory group will be of lasting value to the future of the Ulster-Scots academy.

I have now received the proposals from the Ulster-Scots Agency. In drafting them, the Ulster-Scots Agency consulted with key stakeholders in the Ulster-Scots sector. I am grateful to those stakeholders for their input.

The proposals are set in the context of the 'Strategy to Enhance and Develop the Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture 2015–2035'. The strategy sets out a framework for Ulster Scots over the next 20 years in a wide range of areas such as education, the media, use of Ulster Scots and public services. It also

emphasises the tourism potential of Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and seeks to develop and maximise the social and economic benefits of that. The new academy will align closely to the strategy and also build upon the achievements of the ministerial advisory group. I am happy to accept the proposals as the basis for moving forward.

Based on the proposals, the Ulster-Scots academy will be known as the Ulster-Scots Institute and will be a not-for-profit company with charitable status. It will become part of the Ulster-Scots Hub and will be located at the Corn Exchange in the Cathedral Quarter of Belfast. That is the most cost-effective location, as it will maximise opportunities for the sharing of resources with the Ulster-Scots Agency.

The institute will have a chair and voluntary board of directors who will be responsible for the effective corporate governance of the organisation. It will have a voluntary advisory council, comprising individuals with an interest in Ulster Scots and a relevant track record of research or writing to help shape the research priorities of the organisation, as well as expertise in organisation and community and economic and social development.

There will initially be seven core staff headed by a director. The core staff will be supplemented for the purpose of research by placement students and paid interns from local universities. For the purpose of lifelong learning, the staff will be supplemented by a bank of tutors, who will be engaged on a call-off basis to support the delivery of a programme of community education classes.

The institute's functions will relate to two strands, namely research and community engagement. It will not be a grant-awarding organisation. It will build on the knowledge base associated with Ulster Scots by undertaking research in relation to all aspects of Ulster-Scots language, culture and heritage. It will circulate its research findings to a range of audiences through a variety of traditional and digital platforms. It will also foster interest in Ulster Scots at community level through the delivery of lifelong learning opportunities such as workshops and accredited courses.

For it to be successful, its work must make a positive impact on the community at large. It will ensure that the focus of its work will not just be about physical outputs such as books, podcasts and television programmes but will have the potential to change society for the better with outcomes, and it will lead to a stronger community through the promotion of

social inclusion and the creation of jobs and tourism initiatives that will generate an economic return.

There will be a schedule of priorities, focused on community engagement, which recognise the specific challenges of urban and rural areas, gender and age. The institute will be funded through the Ulster-Scots Agency, which will manage the funding through its existing robust governance arrangements. It will be funded for an initial period of three years, with continuation of funding subject to the successful delivery of set objectives.

We have listened to the Ulster-Scots sector, and it has identified the need for an organisation that can deliver its research independently, with academic rigour, and the freedom to plan for the long term. The role of the institute has been shaped to ensure that it complements and adds value to the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ulster-Scots Community Network. The research that the institute produces and the cultural products and programmes developed from that will become the foundations for its work, building an engaged community that can articulate the things that are important to it, affirming its identity and ready to share its culture with everyone.

I believe that these proposals represent the best way forward, and I expect the institute to be up and running by the end of this calendar year.

I am also pleased to tell Members that I gave approval to proceed with an Ulster-Scots Lío-fa-style language and cultural development initiative on 18 December 2015. The first stage of the initiative — a series of 14 taster workshops across the North — is already under way. Seven workshops have taken place, and the rest will be delivered by the end of March. The initiative is being marketed under the Discover Ulster Scots brand.

I will now turn to the Irish language academy or, as it is known in Irish, an Gaelacadamh. Let me say that I support the passion and commitment that people from across the communities bring to learning Irish or Ulster Scots. Both have a rich and unique heritage that benefits everyone. We should work together to cherish and develop both languages and cultures in accordance with their needs.

The idea of an Irish language academy was first tabled by Foras na Gaeilge in 2006 in response to the increased demand to learn the language through adult learning and Irish-medium

education. That created a clear need for the provision of Irish outside the traditional school environment. The launch of *Líofa* in 2011 quickened the pace of growth. The great strength of adult learning of Irish has always been at community level. In the past few years, the development of the Irish language has been remarkable, but the accelerated growth has also resulted in many gaps in provision and a complex set of needs, both social and economic. These developments lead me to conclude that the early establishment of an Irish language academy is a must-do.

In making this decision, I took due account of the responsibilities to the Irish language under the Belfast Agreement and articles 7 and 8 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Article 7 relates to the need to provide support for the provision of appropriate forms and means for the teaching and study of Irish and the promotion of study and research. Article 8, likewise, relates to professional and technical training in Irish, should there be reasonable demand for it. There is also a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education, as pointed out in the 2009 Department of Education review. Irish-medium education should be a continuum, with progression throughout levels of development. The Irish language academy can help to ensure that young people in Irish-medium education have uninterrupted access, from post-primary through to vocational training, through Irish.

I asked that a scoping and consultation exercise be carried out on the establishment of an academy. It considered how economic and social development and employment opportunities in relation to the Irish language could be developed, together with adult learning, within the framework of the Irish language academy. I wanted the consultation to scope out the attitude to, and the awareness and perceptions of, an Irish language academy. Irish language development must be sustainable. Therefore, I asked for practical and deliverable recommendations that have Irish language community and stakeholder understanding and buy-in. I also asked that the scoping and consultation exercise build upon and update a 2013 feasibility study on the Irish language academy, taking account of many important recent developments.

The scoping exercise consulted a range of organisations and individuals in the sector and was coupled with rigorous interviewing techniques. It built on the previous Irish language feasibility study, which had involved other relevant stakeholders. That maximised the impact and sectoral inclusiveness of the

research process. I am very satisfied with the consultation process and the overall approach. It has proven very effective in assessing current provision and in developing robust sustainable recommendations for the Irish language academy. I extend my thanks to everyone who engaged so comprehensively with the consultation. The consultation process found that there are large gaps in current provision, especially in the areas of teaching and learning resources, accreditation structures, vocational courses aimed at ages 16-plus, and adult teacher training and support.

I now turn to the specific recommendations. There should be provision of a *Gaelacadamh* in a central location, with a large consensus on the *Gaeltacht Quarter* as the location. Moneys should be used to create resources for use across the North. There should be a specific role for *Gaelchúrsaí*, the Irish-medium vocational training provider. The roles, responsibilities and leadership role of the academy should be clearly set out. Progression routes for a new generation of learners, as well as mechanisms for ensuring cooperation between providers and sharing best practice, should be put in place.

Today, I am accepting the outcome of the scoping and consultation exercise. I accept, subject to further work being undertaken, all six recommendations. I am satisfied that, taken together, the recommendations provide a practical and deliverable basis for going forward with an Irish language academy and have the required level of Irish language community and stakeholder understanding and buy-in.

I am satisfied that the recommendations, when implemented, will form the necessary basis and framework for an academy that will ensure the delivery of consistent high-quality adult learning in Irish that is viable and sustainable; is fully in accord with the community focus and the economic and social regeneration and employment aims that I have set for the academy; can play a key role in reducing poverty and increasing social inclusion; will provide a high-quality training experience for young people and ensure that adequate pathways are available to progress to further study and employment through the Irish language; and align closely with my Department's policies and strategies on Irish language development, including the 2015-2035 strategy, to enhance and protect the Irish language and the action plan commitments to the *Ceathrú Gaeltachta*.

The key issues and recommendations drawn from the research and analysis in the scoping

exercise will inform the values and delivery of the academy during its early years. In line with practice, the Irish language academy will now be taken forward through normal business case procedures. The various elements of the academy, including the academic focus on high-quality adult learning and the community focus on economic and social regeneration and employment, will be subject to competitive tendering. Resources have been set aside for 2016-17 to ensure that this is taken forward.

In conclusion, I hope that this statement is seen for what it is: a declaration of my clear commitment to the continued support of Ulster-Scots and Irish language culture in the future. By developing, understanding and sharing the range of cultures that we are lucky enough to have, we can only enhance communities and build a thoroughly modern and compassionate society.

Mr McCausland (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Minister for her statement. A lot of issues will probably require further exploration, but will she tell us how much in revenue and capital funds have been allocated for each of the two initiatives over the next three years?

12.30 pm

Secondly, is there not an inequality in the case of the Irish language academy, which will be based in the Gaeltacht Quarter and will, therefore, probably be a social economy-type initiative, whereby the money is recycled back into the sector because they will own the building, whereas because the Ulster-Scots Institute is relocating to the hub, that means that money will be paid out of the system to the developer who owns the building.

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

Finally, I have heard references of her promoting the idea of a James Connolly interpretive centre. Can she assure us that it is in no way connected to the Irish language academy, or with Forbairt Feirste, which will probably be doing the Irish language project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the Member's last point first. The promotion of the James Connolly interpretive centre, or indeed the Somme Centre, will in no way be connected to the Ulster Scots Institute or the Gaelacadamh — the Irish language academy. On revenue, the imbalance is skewed in favour of the Ulster-Scots Institute. Over £1 million of revenue will be dedicated to the staff over the next three

years. On the Gaelacadamh, it is probably less than £150,000 per year, but there will be money for the purchase and refurbishment of a building once a successful business case has been completed.

The Member knows that I have encouraged the Ulster-Scots community to identify a cultural hub, and, in fact, I encouraged them to use the Oldpark Library, which I was prepared to gift them. It was not suitable, and they have since looked at other venues that were not suitable, but the offer is still open.

I totally agree with the Member that it would be much better for social and economic regeneration; not only would they own their own premises, but that would help to sustain and replenish the Ulster-Scots Institute. So, that offer is still there. I know that the arrangements for rent are probably contractual, but they could use that time to start looking at a more preferred option. I encourage the Member to use his influence, and for others to do likewise.

This is a good day for the Ulster-Scots Institute and for the Irish language academy, because it shows the Assembly supporting the work of two strong cultural entities that together will — and they have, and do, work together — provide a legacy of support for generations to come.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I ask the Minister to provide details of what assurance there will be to ensure that the work of the institute is of good quality.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have complete confidence that the new institute, as it is now known, will build upon the robust leadership and governance of support of the Ulster-Scots Agency, which I believe is what I have said it to be, and will involve the network, and, indeed, other Members who may have been involved with the ministerial advisory group. It will be subject to the scrutiny of my Department, based on assurance reports from the Ulster-Scots Agency. More importantly, it will be based on the needs of the sector itself. In the past, attempts were made to do it, but there were missed opportunities. I believe that the institute will now put its best foot forward and bring forward proposals and suggestions that are reflective of the needs there. Once they are brought forward, they will be promoted and proposed by the Ulster-Scots Agency and scrutinised and made accountable by my Department.

Mrs McKevitt: I was going to ask the Minister how close we are to seeing the production of dictionaries for both languages, but then I noticed that there was a difference. I ask her to explain why the Ulster-Scots Institute should proceed as a not-for-profit company with charitable status, while the same does not apply to the Irish language academy. Perhaps she might answer both questions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the Member's last question first. The Ulster-Scots Institute will be taken forward because it is completely new. It is important that we set out the governance arrangements and its legal and charitable status from the very outset.

The Gaelacadamh — the Irish language academy — is to be done by the secretariat for the Gaeltacht Quarter, which is Forbairt Feirste. It has a proven track record not only of delivering and leading on the Gaeltacht Quarter plan but in its own right. It has charitable status and all its articles and memorandums, so everything is in place. It has a proven track record, as does the Ulster-Scots Agency. It was clear, because the institute is completely new, that I would set out the structures on which it would be governed and developed.

I have asked the question about the dictionaries since coming into the Department. For Ulster Scots, the answer is simply that there has never been agreement in the Ulster-Scots community. There is a summary. Public money was spent on delivering a summary or a glossary of terms, but I believe that the institute will be looking to bring forward a dictionary. There is none at the minute.

Regarding the dictionary for the Irish language, Foras na Gaeilge has spent millions of pounds of public money, so it needs to be published. In my opinion, if it is not published this year, it will lose all credibility. I believe that, when groups on the ground are struggling and there is the notion that additional public money from this Government and the Irish Government is being ploughed into a dictionary project that people cannot see an outcome to, it will not be given the support that it has received unless it is published by the end of this year.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her statement. Both bodies are treated alike, in the sense that we expect social inclusion, the creation of jobs, tourism initiatives and economic returns. Will you flesh that out a wee bit for us?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I hope that I am wrong on this, but the Member is almost pointing out what they

are expected to do, as if they cannot do it. They are already doing it. They are already providing economic tourism potential, but we need to develop that. We certainly need to develop it more around the points that the Committee Chair mentioned on ownership of the project, ownership of the building, economic sustainability and the potential for regenerating not only the community but projects in it. The institute and the Gaelacadamh are important in that regard. They are doing it at different levels now, but we need to ensure that they are given as much support as possible to do more of it.

They need to demonstrate what impact they have had on each community and across communities. The challenge is theirs. I believe that I have done a lot of the heavy lifting. The communities are ready for this. They have been involved in the processes over a period of years and in recent months. They tell me that they can do it and that they want to do it. They need our support to do it. We have set out that stall today.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. The higher and further education sectors have suffered severe cuts to their budgets, so much so that the University of Ulster had to axe the whole of its languages department. How can the Minister justify the economic case for the creation of the two academies?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, her party colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning made the decision to cut language courses; I did not. I want to get that on the record. Secondly, the main priority is that we ensure that these communities are not further disadvantaged. There already have been cuts to programmes on the Irish language: I want to ensure that that does not become a trend. Apart from anything else and more importantly, both communities, the Gaelacadamh and the Ulster-Scots Institute have, with limited budgets, identified needs, and they will do so in the future with limited budgets. I can proudly stand over my statements. More importantly, the obligation to set up both academies was set out in agreements going back over a decade. It is unacceptable that from then until now we have established neither an institute nor a Gaelacadamh. I regret that Minister Farry has made his decisions, but I will not let his lack of vision stop me progressing for the two communities.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the creation of the Ulster-Scots hub, but I share the view of my colleague from North Belfast that the Ulster-Scots

academy needs to be community-centred as a resource to build capacity and competency in that community.

I see that the structure for the Ulster-Scots academy is set out clearly in the Minister's statement. I want to ask the Minister about the Irish academy. Where will it be centred? What will its structure be? How much will be spent on the development of that academy as it goes forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yours are quite similar to the questions asked by your colleague from North Belfast. I repeat: the structure that was set out for the institute was based on the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency. If that changes, it will be done with the approval of the Department for Communities. I anticipate that the structure that is out there at the minute will be built on, particularly by people in the community.

We are using Forbairt Feirste for the Gaelacadamh because it is the secretariat for the Gaeltacht Quarter plan. That will be built on as well.

I cannot go in and develop an Ulster-Scots hub. I have tried. I have offered premises and support. It is not my fault that the community did not identify somewhere else. Rather than waiting for that to happen — if we were to wait for that to happen in the same way as we are waiting for a dictionary to come forward, it would not happen — we identified Corn Exchange as a cultural hub. I encourage people to see it as a temporary arrangement and to use the time until the leases are up to identify other places that they can own and claim as their own and where they can provide economic and regeneration opportunities. It is not my fault that the community did not do that. I encourage Members from your party and, indeed, your community to give as much support as possible and create the demand and need. Once that is done, I anticipate that the Department would give its support.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an dá ráiteas seo ag an Aire inniu agus molaim iad. I welcome both statements from the Minister today and commend them.

An dtig liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad é mar a bheidh an Gaelacadamh ábalta caighdeán acadúil a ardú agus díriú isteach ar riachtanais áitiúla? Can the Minister tell me how the Gaelacadamh will combine academic standards with a focus on local needs and community needs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. It is important because, I think, the first piece of work that was done, particularly around the Gaelacadamh, was done with an academic approach with nothing for the vocational end of it. An element of academia is needed, certainly to look at standards, as the Member has mentioned, that go right across the board, so that, in theory, you should be able to go to an Irish class anywhere and get the same standard regardless of where you go without having to rely on brilliant múinteoirí, teachers or whoever the tutor may be.

One of the gaps that has been missing is due to the lack of support, particularly at the vocational level and for groups like Gaelchúrsaí, through higher and further education. There is a big, growing gap out there, particularly for children and young people and even for adult returners to education. That needs to be met. That gap is getting wider instead of decreasing. Given the question posed by Anna Lo about how this could be justified, this is more reason for doing it. When it came to looking at what cuts to make, it seemed that the Irish language was the first place that people went to. We need to correct that. There have been exercises through consultation, feasibility studies, engagements and interviews that have been used to determine what the needs are. The Ulster-Scots Institute and the Gaelacadamh will go forward on the basis of evidence and need from the community and processes for both. That is the best way that we can do this and build on that experience and on the developing and emerging needs as we go forward.

Mr McCarthy: First of all, the Minister might want to retract her statement trying to blame our colleague for the reduction of language services in the university. As I understand it, it was a decision made by the university, not by the Minister.

In her statement, the Minister said that the idea of an Ulster-Scots academy was first mooted in 1990. I can recall, about that time, when there was property either rented or purchased in Newtownards. It lay idle for a long time — God knows how long — because there was no support for such an activity.

What guarantee does the Minister offer that the latest proposal will not be yet another drain on very scarce resources?

12.45 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, let me clarify my position. I know that some in the Member's

party are in denial about the deficit of our Budget as a result of the erosion of the block grant by the Tory party. It is not political rhetoric; it is true. The erosion of the block grant and the decisions that each of the Departments had to take have been made. You are right: the university made the decision, but it made it on the basis of money. I believe the university made the wrong decision and that there needed to be leadership from a Minister, regardless of how their grant was affected, to make decisions. I have done it in my Department, and other Ministers needed to do the same thing.

I also met the Member's colleague on Gaelchúrsa, and I was absolutely shocked at the lack of support that was given to that community, particularly for children and young people. However, I do not know and do not remember the premises that the Member is talking about, but I accept what he is saying and that that is his perception.

I saw other Members nodding their heads. A decision was made to purchase or to rent or lease a building that was not used. I want to ensure that that does not happen here. That is why we agreed to the Corn Exchange. It is down to Members right across the Chamber, not just within the DUP, to ensure that they give proper leadership and do not nitpick or cherry-pick around the Ulster-Scots Institute and Gaelacadamh to make sure that they meet the needs of the community and the people whom we all serve, rather than the needs of some political parties.

Mr Humphrey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. My North Belfast colleague Nelson McCausland and I directly asked the Minister about the level of funding that will be put in to the new Irish language academy, and the Minister failed to answer those questions. Is that good enough in this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): It is at the discretion of the Minister to give the answers. It is not for me to make a judgement on that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Further to that point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I mentioned it, but maybe because the Member was late or maybe was not listening —

Mr Humphrey: I was here.

Ms Ní Chuilín: OK; let me repeat it. The Ulster-Scots institute will receive over £1 million in revenue, and, when it comes forward with its robust proposal for premises and on the basis

of an economic appraisal and business case, that will be considered. It did not do it in the past —

Mr Humphrey: The Irish language is what I am talking about.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Irish language will get less than £150,000 a year. When the proposals for premises are brought forward, which they have been, they will be considered. So, it is much less than the Ulster-Scots Institute has got thus far. That has answered your question. The difficulty with the Member is that, like previous answers, he got an answer to his question, but he just does not like the answer that he got.

Mr Humphrey: You did not answer it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I did.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please. That was not a point of order, but I am sure the Member and the Minister are happy that they got their very strong views on the record on the final day of this Assembly. That concludes questions on the statement.

Executive Committee Business

Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be affirmed.

This debate is the first of two that will be held today to complete the statutory processes needed to accomplish the reduction in the number of Departments promised in the Stormont House Agreement and reaffirmed in the Fresh Start document.

In the months since the completion of the Fresh Start Agreement in November last year, the legislation needed to reduce the number of Departments from 12 to nine and to realign functions has been progressed and is now almost complete. The Departments Act needed to establish the statutory framework for the nine-Department model was passed in this Assembly on 2 February, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have since made a

commencement order to bring its operative provisions into effect from 8 May 2016, shortly after the election.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have also made a transfer of functions order to reallocate statutory responsibilities between the nine Departments. The purpose of the motion before Members today is to have that order affirmed by the Assembly, as required by the Departments (NI) Order 1999, which is the parent legislation for the transfer of functions order.

The making of the order and its affirmation by the Assembly are essential to the restructuring process. The purpose of the order is to transfer statutory functions from one Department to another so that the allocation of departmental responsibilities after the election reflects the finalised arrangements in appendix F5 of the 'Fresh Start' document. The nine future Departments after the election will incorporate all the powers, functions and services of their 12 predecessors. No functions are done away with, and no policies are terminated, as a consequence of restructuring.

Reform of the structures of government here has been an issue for a long time. There has been a commitment in the Programme for Government to agree changes to the structures that will apply in the next mandate, and, in 2012, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee produced a report on the reduction in the number of Departments. In 2014, the Stormont House Agreement contained a commitment to a nine-Department model being established in time for the 2016 election, with the future allocation of departmental functions to be agreed by the parties.

The Executive discussed departmental restructuring on several occasions in the early months of last year and decided on the names and responsibilities of the future Departments. On 2 March last year, those decisions were announced to the Assembly by the former First Minister. The allocation of functions was further refined during the talks process that led to the Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan last November. The final allocation of functions was set out in appendix F5 of the 'Fresh Start' document. The Departments Bill was introduced in the Assembly shortly after that.

Throughout 2015, a scoping exercise was conducted across the Departments to identify existing statutory functions in primary legislation that might need to be transferred. That was a complex undertaking, and the work required careful checking by legal advisers. However,

completion of the task before the end of 2015 enabled a draft transfer of functions order reflective of the future departmental responsibilities as set out in appendix F5 of the 'Fresh Start' document to be prepared and issued for scrutiny by the Committee for OFMDFM in January.

Officials briefed the Committee on the purpose and content of the order in late January. We are grateful to the Committee for its urgent work in considering the order, and to the other statutory Committees that contributed to the process. We acknowledge the pressure that the Committee had to face given the limited time frame available. I am pleased to say that the Committee's report to the Department, which we received on 11 February, advised that it was content for the order to be made.

I would like to briefly explain the structure of the transfer of functions order. Article 1 cites its title and provides for its coming into operation to coincide with the operative date of the Departments Act (NI) 2016. Article 2 contains definitions of a number of terms used in the order, key amongst those being that "transfer date" means the date on which section 1 of the Departments Act comes into operation, and that will be 8 May 2016.

The substantive part of the order is organised by reference to the six Departments from which statutory functions are transferring, and schedules 1 to 5 are further subdivided by reference to the future Departments that will receive those functions. Where a significant part of a dissolving Department is transferring to one future Department, there is no need to specify all transferring functions. Articles 9 and 10 of the order provide for the continuity of legislation, documents, legal proceedings and other activities and for the transfer of assets and liabilities. Finally, article 11 references schedule 6, which contains necessary amendments to legislation needed to give effect to the transfers.

With the Executive's agreement, the order was made on 25 February by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly in exercise of powers conferred by article 8 of the Departments (NI) Order 1999. However, it can only have effect if it is affirmed by the Assembly, and, in line with article 1, it will come into operation on 8 May, shortly after the election. The order is an essential part of the restructuring process and is a natural complement to the Departments Act passed by the Assembly just last month. It is vital that the order is affirmed if we are to achieve the timetable for restructuring set in the Stormont

House Agreement and realise the benefits of a more streamlined and efficient Administration. I commend the motion to the Assembly and request that the order be affirmed.

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Mr Deputy Speaker, perhaps you will first grant me an opportunity to respond to devastating news reaching the Assembly that a prison officer from my constituency has died further to the evil terrorist attack on his life on 4 March. I take this opportunity to send my heartfelt and deepest sympathy to the family and loved ones of this brave man and my support to his colleagues, who work courageously to serve every member of this community to keep us safe. This Assembly and our entire community must redouble our support for prison officers and the heroic work that they do, and we must isolate the men and women of violence who are involved in this. Finally, I call on anyone with information to search their conscience and soul and provide the PSNI with the information needed to ensure that the evil intent of these men and women does not prevail in our community. I thank you for the opportunity to do that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Trying to move on, I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order. I thank the junior Minister for her opening remarks on the motion.

At its meeting on 30 November, junior Ministers briefed the Committee on the need for accelerated passage for the Departments Bill. While the Bill set out the high-level framework for the nine-Department model, members heard that the reallocation of the statutory functions is provided for in the order that we debate today.

At that meeting, the junior Ministers committed themselves to work with the Committee on its consideration of the order. Although that commitment was welcomed, members were of a view that, due to time pressures, the opportunity to scrutinise the policy proposals in the order was likely to be limited. The Committee therefore wrote to the other Committees early in December to ask for their views on the proposed transfer of functions. We agreed to ask Committees for details of their consultation with, or representations from, stakeholders.

The Committee was briefed by OFMDFM officials in January on the restructuring of the new Executive Office. We wrote to relevant

OFMDFM arm's-length bodies to seek their views on the proposed transfer of functions relating to OFMDFM. The Strategic Investment Board, the Planning Appeals Commission and the Victims and Survivors Service indicated agreement. The Children's Commissioner expressed concern that sponsorship of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People would fall to the Department of Education, which will have responsibility for services and policies that impact on children's lives. The commissioner believes that that may compromise the commission's independence.

The OFMDFM Committee received a briefing on the policy proposals in the order on 27 January 2016. Following the meeting, a draft of the order was issued to all Committees for information and consideration. On 10 February, the Committee noted the responses received from Committees. Most were content with the proposed transfers, although concerns were raised, for example, on organisational structures of new Departments, the relative weight that may be given to some functions in new Departments and the risk of a diminished voice. The OFMDFM Committee therefore recommended that a short, focussed review of the transfer of functions should be undertaken six months after the order comes into operation. That, we believe, will provide an opportunity to assess the efficiency of the new arrangements and identify adjustments that may be required.

The OFMDFM Committee formally considered the order on 2 March 2016 and, notwithstanding the points that we raised, agreed that it should be affirmed by the Assembly.

Speaking as an Alliance MLA, we as a party have supported reform of the Executive and Assembly, rationalisation of Departments, the reduction in the number of MLAs, the creation of an opposition, a voluntary coalition and an end to sectarian designation. As an Alliance MLA, therefore, I support the transfer of functions. However, I have concerns about the extent of the consultation that was possible in the time frame that we were given, and I support the Committee's call to ensure that there is a short focus review of the new arrangements.

1.00 pm

As a party, we have concerns that the Employment Service is being placed in the Department for Communities rather than the Department for the Economy. We have ongoing concerns that civil law remains split between Health, Justice and Finance. The Alliance Party fought to ensure that

"Environment" was given named recognition in the departmental title, and we hope that environmental protection continues to be a priority of that new Department.

I also have concerns about key strategies that will cross from one Department to another in the new mandate — for example, the important childcare strategy, given the increasing costs that many of our families face, community relations and social investment. I sincerely hope that the new Departments are able to transition and deliver on those arrangements as smoothly as possible.

Mr Frew: I rise to support the Transfer of Functions Order. It is a good day that we are at this point. I know that this is a mechanism to deliver the statutory requirements for the transfer of functions to the new nine Departments. As someone who never really supported the set-up of 12 Departments, I believe that this is a good day. It will lead to better efficiencies and cohesion, but I plant a warning that the Ministers who are involved in the new Executive will be vital to the delivery of anything good and fresh that may come out of this move. I believe that we need to get away from the silo mindset. We need to be more cohesive and all going in one direction, which, as parties, we have failed to do collectively over the last term and beyond. I stand here with a hope that that will change as politics evolve and mature in this place. That can be only a good thing for the people whom we all serve in Northern Ireland.

I look forward to the day when, hopefully, we will see an opposition, which will lead not only to a more respectable opposition, not necessarily leaving it all to the Committees, but to a more streamlined government and Executive. That will further help to drive this country in one direction as opposed to five — now four — different directions. It is a very good day, and I understand the points that Chris Lyttle made.

It would be remiss of me not to echo Chris Lyttle's remarks regarding the atrocious terrorist attack that has taken the life of a brave prison officer. I echo everything that Mr Chris Lyttle said, and I hope that the House will stand up in the face of evil terrorism.

Mr Attwood: I entirely endorse and agree with the comments made by the last two Members on the terrible news that the prison officer who was attacked recently has died. There seemed to be some sense that the prison officer was in the process of recovery, and to hear this news in the last few minutes makes a terrible

situation appear even worse. The sympathy of our party and, no doubt, everybody in the House goes to his family, his colleagues and the Prison Service generally. I concur with Mr Lyttle's comment that the single best response of every citizen is to share every single piece of information that they may have about this attack with the PSNI, and all should respond in that way.

Had there been an opportunity to amend the order before the House today, the SDLP would have sought to amend it because there appear to be tensions in the proposals on the transfer of functions. I do not think that this is the day to elaborate greatly on that matter, but I ask the junior Minister to respond to two points that represent the issues that the SDLP would have elaborated on had there been a better procedure in that regard.

The first point is that functions are being transferred from FM and dFM to the new Departments, but not every function is being transferred. On the face of it, that creates a tension. On the one hand, for example — unless I am very much in error, and I do not think that I am — responsibility for older people and children is being transferred to another Department, but the power to appoint the respective commissioners of the two statutory bodies is retained by FM and dFM. Here we have a situation where the function is transferred but the power of appointment is retained. The function is transferred in its totality, and the expertise, the staff, the specialism and the depth of knowledge will be in a different Department from the Department that appoints. Unless I am in error, that looks incongruous. Surely the power of appointment should fall to the Department that has exclusive responsibility for the function, but that is not to be the case. In this instance, the power of appointment is to be retained by FM and dFM. I ask the junior Minister to explain why that is the case. There have been occasions during the last two mandates when the issue of appointment by FM and dFM has become a matter of some tension. There were questions raised about a number of appointments of victims' commissioners over the last decade, and some would say that questions were raised about one or two appointments in other areas. Why retain the power of appointment when you transfer in totality all the other powers on those matters to another Department?

The second issue is that it is one thing to transfer function; it is another matter to retain function but transfer responsibility. The reason I make that point is that there is an event upstairs at the moment at which the fullest

range of victims and survivors' groups are putting forward proposals on, for example, models of compensation for those subjected to institutional abuse or clerical abuse outside the institutions and those who had experiences in mother-and-baby homes. The people of great authority and very harsh experience who are in the Building are here in the context of FM and dFM retaining the functions in respect of victims and survivors, and yet, two or three weeks ago, it was decided in the Executive to transfer to the Department of Health the responsibility for scoping out what may or may not happen in respect of those who were subjected to clerical abuse and those who lived in mother-and-baby homes. I suggest that the Minister might want to explain why, when we are going through the elaborate exercise of reducing the number of Departments and reconfiguring their functions, the responsibility for further scoping out the issue of victims and survivors is devolved to the Department of Health while the function is retained by FM and dFM. It is another example, I suggest, of something that, on the face of it, looks incongruous.

I might have wished to elaborate on other matters, but, given the limitations on what we can do on this motion and given other news, I leave it there.

Mr Allen: Like other Members who have spoken, I would like to convey to the family of the prison officer who has died following the heinous attack on 4 March my deepest sympathies. My thoughts are with them. We must do everything as a society to bring those responsible to justice and take them off the street. They are not representative of the wider community in Northern Ireland.

This is important legislation. The current system of Departments was established in 1998. No one claims that it was the perfect or optimum system, but it was of its time, and, for the most part, it has served us well. However, most things in life should be subject to scrutiny and monitoring with a view to updating and improving, and how we conduct the business of government should be no different.

Departments exist to deliver for the people they serve. What the people of Northern Ireland want is a system of government that delivers for them, their families and their communities. They are not obsessed with the number of Departments or what names they are given; they want to see results. A reduction in the number of Departments offers the prospect of more effective and efficient government. That is to be welcomed. It is essential that we foster and develop a culture of joined-up government and break down the silo mentality, which, as

others have mentioned, has been the hallmark of too many ministerial decisions. So many issues cut across departmental responsibilities and require a cross-departmental response. In a political system where one party or perhaps a two-party coalition governs, that can present challenges when Ministers from the same party jealously guard departmental budgets and responsibilities; in a system such as ours, where multi-party coalitions have been the norm, cross-departmental working can be extremely difficult to achieve. That is something that all parties and Departments must strive to address. After all, we are all here to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. Their health, education and employment prospects are what all of us should be concerned with.

The revised Departments motion is not perfect. It represents the biggest challenge to administration here in 17 years. There are already concerns at some of the functions being transferred from one Department to another and doubts as to whether they are in the most appropriate location. For example, I am aware of concerns that unemployment is included in the Department for Communities and not the Department for the Economy. I am also aware that there are concerns over some of the functions retained by the renamed OFMDFM. The Ulster Unionist Party therefore wants to see a review mechanism built in to identify and address any unforeseen problems that may arise as the new departmental responsibilities and functions roll out. We should not be precious if problems are identified and changes need to be made.

Ms J McCann: Before I conclude, I will reiterate what other colleagues have said. I express my party's condolences and sympathies to the family of the prison officer who has died. I reiterate that the people who carried out that attack do not represent the community. If anyone has any information, it should be passed to the PSNI.

I am grateful to Members for their contributions. As I indicated at the outset and as has been said in the Assembly during debates on the Departments Act, reform of our institutional structures is a long-standing issue. Reducing the number of Departments has long been recognised as a key element of reform. With the passing of the Departments Act last month and the making of the transfer of functions order, we are close to realising that reform.

1.15 pm

The Assembly endorsed the nine-Department structure for the future Executive when it passed the Departments Bill, and there is now broad consensus on the allocation of functions to Departments under the new model.

Together, the Departments Act 2016 and the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order 2016 create a framework for the most extensive reorganisation of departmental systems since 1999. The establishment of a streamlined nine-Department system in May will provide opportunities for improving the way in which we do business. It will enable productive synergy to be achieved from the outset of the mandate.

I will now take the time to respond to some of the issues that Members brought up. The Deputy Chair, Mr Chris Lyttle, mentioned the consultation with the Committee. We would have preferred to have spent a longer period on it, but we did not have a lot of time in which to bring it forward.

Mr Attwood mentioned that some appointments functions will remain in OFMDFM in its new form. Those functions have been retained so as to maintain a sense of independence. You will be aware that OFMDFM is a joint office, in which the First Minister and the deputy First Minister act in a joint capacity. That helps ensure that important and high-profile offices have the support of the broader community. That is one of the reasons that those functions will remain there.

He also mentioned victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse. I hosted today's event on redress in my capacity as a party MLA. One of the reasons that the scoping papers on clerical abuse and on mother and baby homes have been anchored in the Department of Health is because the Safeguarding Board is part of that Department. The board has the necessary skills and expertise and is able to take a more sensitive approach when looking at such issues.

Mr Attwood: Will the junior Minister give way?

Ms J McCann: Yes.

Mr Attwood: The junior Minister said that, when it came to appointments, it was necessary for some public appointments to have cross-community support. If that is the logic that she is deploying, I suggest that those who believe in that argument should bring proposals forward so as to do the exact same for all appointments made by the Justice Minister. The House appoints the Justice Minister on the basis of what? Cross-community support. If you

believe that that office requires cross-community support, given the importance of so many of the persons nominated by the Justice Minister's powers — to the Probation Board, the Policing Board and the Judicial Appointments Commission — why is there not a need for cross-community support for those very sensitive matters? If you believe that there is a need for cross-community support for some matters, why do you not apply that logic and have OFMDFM appoint people to those sorts of posts? If that is the logic of your assertion, why do you not follow that logic through and apply it in other places? If you do not apply it in other places, why do you reserve that power to OFMDFM?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be well aware of the issues around the appointment of the Justice Minister. I am not here to go into all that. There have, however, been examples of splits having taken place between the appointment and sponsorship roles for the Equality Commission, the Police Ombudsman and other offices.

Finally, I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and for the questions and issues that they raised. A leaner, more joined-up Administration, with improved cohesion in and between Departments is in all our interests and will be this Assembly's legacy to the next mandate.

Assembly affirmation of the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order is a necessary part of the process. I therefore ask the Assembly to approve the motion.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be affirmed.

Ministerial Offices (Number and Functions) Determination 2016

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That the Ministerial Offices (Number and Functions) Determination 2016 be approved.

This motion is the final statutory process that the Assembly needs to take to achieve a reduction in the number of Departments and a smaller Executive after the May election. The determination is a formal document required under section 17 of the NI Act 1998. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister must make a new determination when an Act of the Assembly establishes a new Department or dissolves an existing one. As the Assembly has recently passed the Departments Act 2016, which will dissolve three existing Departments, a fresh determination will be needed.

The determination provides the basis on which the departmental Ministers will be appointed at the start of the next mandate under the d'Hondt system for most Ministers and by Assembly vote for the Minister of Justice. The determination was signed by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on 1 March, and we now seek the Assembly's approval with cross-community support. It sets out the titles of the eight future departmental Ministers and their functions in the Departments that they will take charge of. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the future Executive Office are not listed because they are provided for separately in primary legislation. The same formula has been used in the two previous determinations in 1999, and in 2010 when the Department of Justice was established.

This does not change the status of existing departmental Ministers for the time being. They will remain in post until election day on 5 May, in line with section 16A of the NI Act. The determination, if approved today, will not take effect until the first meeting of the next Assembly in the week following the election on 5 May. The Departments Act 2016 and the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order 2016 will have come into effect over the intervening weekend, giving legal authority to the names of the future Departments and establishing their statutory functions.

That approach will align with the arrangements in the Westminster Bill, which extends the time available for agreeing the Programme for Government in advance of the appointment of

Ministers. There was a commitment in the Stormont House Agreement to extend the time available for that negotiation from seven to 14 days. The Westminster Bill will disapply the requirement in Standing Orders for d'Hondt to be run within seven days of a determination coming into effect but only if it takes effect during the period starting with the first meeting of the new Assembly. The commencement provision in the determination therefore gives greater flexibility to party leaders to negotiate the next Programme for Government before the appointment of Ministers. The determination is a significant document that will play an important role in the creation of future, more compact Executives. Its importance is acknowledged by the requirement for cross-community support.

The Assembly already passed the Departments Act, which establishes that future nine-Department system. It just affirmed the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order, which reallocates statutory responsibilities between Departments, and it can now put the final piece in place by approving the determination, which will give titles to future Ministers and assign them departmental responsibilities. That will complete the statutory requirement to fulfil the commitment in the Stormont House Agreement that was reaffirmed in the Fresh Start Agreement — the commitment to a reduction in the number of Departments to nine in time for the 2016 Assembly election.

Debates on the Departments Act showed that there is general support for a more streamlined departmental system and a smaller Executive. We look forward to seeing that in operation in the next mandate. The approval of the determination will be an important step towards that goal. I commend the motion to the Assembly and urge that the determination be approved with the necessary cross-community support.

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I will speak very briefly on behalf of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the Ministerial Offices (Number and Functions) Determination 2016. As the junior Minister outlined, the determination before us today will form the basis for filling ministerial offices in the next Assembly mandate. It reflects the ministerial positions following the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Departments to a nine-Department model. The Committee considered the determination at its meeting on 9 March and

was content for it to be approved by the Assembly.

Mr Lyons: Before I address the determination, I add my voice to those who have already spoken to condemn what happened to the prison officer who was attacked on 4 March and who has subsequently died. We obviously all condemn what happened. It is good that that condemnation has taken place, because it did not always take place. It is important to remember that he was an individual with a family and that he will leave behind those who will miss him and who have loved him. It is a tragedy for them, and it is obviously right that, as an Assembly, we send our prayers and best wishes to his family and friends at this time and stand together and say that we utterly condemn what has happened, we find it utterly appalling and there was never any justification for taking the life of someone who was serving in that way. There is no justification for it taking place now, and there never will be any justification. Although other Members took the opportunity to express those sentiments, I think it is right that we all stand together and say it with one voice.

Moving on to what is before us, like Mr Lyttle, I will be brief. The Fresh Start Agreement obviously has the support of my party. There are a number of things within it that we want to see take place, and legislation is required for that to happen. We are getting towards the end of the process now, and it will require the determination to go through so that departmental responsibilities are properly allocated, Departments are created and the appropriate titles are given. The position of my party on the issue has been made very clear. All that is left to say is that we will support the determination.

1.30 pm

Mr Allen: This is a fairly modest piece of legislation before us today in size, but not in importance. It sets out the new ministerial offices and Departments due to come into effect in the new mandate. We support the creation of a more streamlined system of government at Stormont and wish to see services delivered in a more effective and efficient manner. A reduction in the number of Departments should help to achieve that. It is my opinion that the people we seek to serve are not obsessed with the number of Departments or what names they are given; they want to see results on the ground. That is what we should turn our attention to as we move into the new mandate.

Ms J McCann: I mentioned earlier that the determination is a formal document, but its approval is more than a mere formality. Without this determination coming into effect at the appropriate time, the Ministers of the future Executive will not have their legal titles and their responsibilities for their Departments will not be clearly set out. It is an important document constitutionally. That is why it requires cross-community support to be validly approved by the Assembly. It is the final step that this Assembly needs to take to prepare for the restructuring of the Executive Departments in May. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have made the appointed day order, which will dissolve three Departments and rename seven others on 8 May, shortly after the election. The transfer of functions order will come into force at the same time, reallocating the functions of Departments. This determination will then take effect at the first meeting of the new Assembly later that week, when Ministers will be appointed to a new Executive in the early weeks of the Assembly and will take responsibility for a streamlined nine-Department Administration with an agenda for action in an agreed Programme for Government.

We are coming to the end of a process that started with the last Programme for Government. It was the subject of a report by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. It became a firm commitment in the Stormont House Agreement and was reaffirmed, with challenging deadlines, in the 'Fresh Start' document. This Assembly has met the deadlines. Thanks are due to the Assembly and its Committees, particularly the OFMDFM Committee, for the time and effort that it has invested in the process since last November. Beyond the Assembly, extensive preparatory work has been undertaken in Departments to make ready for restructuring. Everything suggests that the reform will be accomplished in May, with minimal disruption to public services and longer-term gains in efficiency. I urge the Assembly to endorse the motion and give its approval to the determination with the necessary cross-community support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I remind Members that cross-community support is needed for this motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Ministerial Offices (Number and Functions) Determination 2016 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): As there are no dissenting voices, the motion is duly passed.

Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mrs Pengelly (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that the Westminster Parliament should consider the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 February 2016, dealing with the power in clause 1(4) of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, to nominate two members of the Independent Reporting Commission; and the establishment of new measures relating to the financial responsibility of the Assembly contained in clause 9.

The Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 10 February. It gives effect to a number of commitments contained in 'A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan'. It has now passed all its stages in the Commons with only minor amendment and awaits passage through the Lords. Subject to parliamentary approval, it is expected to obtain Royal Assent before the Assembly election on 5 May. I am conscious that representatives of the parties that take their seats in Westminster have already had the opportunity to debate and seek to influence the Bill overall, although most of the issues raised there relate to excepted matters, which are the Secretary of State's responsibility and are therefore outside the terms of this motion.

The majority of the provisions in the Bill deal with matters that are excepted or reserved to the Westminster Parliament and, therefore, do not require an LCM. There are, however, two provisions that do require an LCM as they place new responsibilities on Northern Ireland Ministers. In the interests of efficiency, it was considered sensible for these provisions to be included in the Westminster Bill rather than be detached and progressed, perhaps to a different timescale, through Assembly legislation.

The first is the power for the First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, to nominate two of the four members of the Independent Reporting Commission. The commission will

be established and sponsored by the United Kingdom and Irish Governments and will have the overarching objective of promoting progress towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland. Clause 1(4) of the Bill enables the First Minister and deputy First Minister, jointly, to nominate two of the four commissioners, with the other two to be nominated separately by the United Kingdom Government and the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

The second set of provisions requiring an LCM concerns the establishment of new measures relating to the financial responsibility of the Assembly and is contained in clause 9. These provisions will introduce greater transparency into the budgetary process by providing for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to lay a statement before the Assembly at least 14 days in advance of laying a draft Budget. The statement will specify the amount of UK funding for the financial year, as notified by the Secretary of State. A further statement will be required to be laid alongside the draft Budget showing that the amount of United Kingdom funding required will not exceed the amount available and set out in the first statement. Where the amount of UK funding is revised, the Minister must lay a further statement, within four months of notification, showing the revisions to expenditure proposals where changes are required as a result of the notification. These proposals must not exceed the revised amount of United Kingdom funding.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister laid a legislative consent memorandum before the Assembly on 12 February. This was referred to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I wish to record the appreciation of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the work of the Committee, in consultation with the Committees for Justice and Finance and Personnel, on this memorandum and for its report confirming support for the legislative consent motion.

While it is preferable for the Assembly itself to legislate on devolved matters, there are occasions when it makes sense to utilise a Westminster Bill rather than initiate a parallel process; such as now, for example, when the nomination provisions that form part of the motion would have been detached from their overall context. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Office of the

First Minister and deputy First Minister on the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill legislative consent motion. I thank the junior Minister for her opening remarks.

The Committee considered the legislative consent memorandum on 17 February and noted that the Assembly's consent would be required in respect of two provisions. As the junior Minister has outlined, the first provision, in clause 1(4), is with regard to the power for the First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, to nominate two members of the Independent Reporting Commission. The second provision requiring consent is with regard to the establishment of new measures relating to the financial responsibility of the Assembly in clause 9.

Given that these provisions are relevant to the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Justice, officials from those Departments joined with an official from OFMDFM to brief the Committee on the LCM on 17 February. The Committee also sought the views of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Justice. During the briefing, the Committee heard that the provision relating to the nominations of two members of the Independent Reporting Commission is part of a wider set of provisions relating to an excepted matter. Rather than dealing with this provision separately, UK legislation is being utilised as a measure of efficiency and practicality. The DOJ official confirmed that that Department had no objection to the provision but added that consultation with the Minister of Justice was expected on this matter.

In its response to the Committee, the Committee for Justice advised that it had also consulted with the Department of Justice. The Department's response, which was forwarded to the OFMDFM Committee, reiterated the view that, whilst the Minister of Justice accepts that the provision in clause 1(4) is consistent with the Fresh Start Agreement, he would expect to be consulted by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on nominations.

As for the provision relating to the financial responsibility of the Assembly, the Committee heard that the LCM gives effect to a commitment in the Fresh Start Agreement. That states that the UK Government will legislate, with Assembly consent, to ensure that the Assembly cannot consider spending plans that exceed the block grant allocated by the Treasury or the Northern Ireland Executive's borrowing limits when planned spending relies

on those funding sources. The DFP official advised the Committee that that provision will not change the application of financial practice, because Northern Ireland is already required to live within the Treasury control totals. It will, however, formalise the process, as agreed in the Fresh Start Agreement.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel also sought the views of DFP on that provision. The response, which was copied to the Committee, advises that, as well as formalising existing processes, it is hoped that the LCM will provide for improved transparency in respect of funding sources, spending controls and assumptions underpinning the Budget position.

The Committee considered those views and its position on the LCM at its meeting on 2 March. The Committee recognised that, should the provisions in the Bill not be extended to Northern Ireland, agreed aspects of the Fresh Start Agreement may not be implemented at this stage. The Committee also accepted that the inclusion of the provisions in UK legislation is a practical approach.

During the discussions, some Members indicated the intention of their respective parties to table amendments to the Bill at Westminster. Their support for the Committee's position on the legislative consent motion was, therefore, without prejudice.

With those positions on the record, the Committee agreed, at its meeting on 2 March 2016, to support the legislative consent motion to extend certain provisions of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill to Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyons: As the Minister and the Deputy Chair made clear, we have the legislative consent motion before us. It has two provisions regarding the Independent Reporting Commission and clause 9 of the Northern Ireland (Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill. Those provisions are sensible, and the Deputy Chair outlined the Committee's scrutiny role. At this stage, that is the correct route for us to go down to ensure that the provisions in the Fresh Start Agreement can become reality.

As was mentioned, it is important that we have financial controls in place. Although the LCM will not change the arrangements for the way the Assembly spends its money and how much it spends, it will formalise them, which is good. It is good to show that we take our finance responsibilities seriously.

My party will, obviously, support these, as there are important determinations to be made in relation to the Fresh Start Agreement, which has our full support.

Mr Attwood: This is the last occasion on which I will speak in the Chamber in this mandate. It is yet to be determined whether I will have any speaking rights in the next mandate, but I take this moment to speak about you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Over your long years of service, you have been relentless in pursuing the policies and politics that you believe in. You brought colour to the SDLP Assembly group and outside it, and you have been a relentless servant of Irish democracy. As your political career ends, although your political contribution will not end, I put on the record, on behalf of me, my party and, I am sure, everybody in the Chamber, how much your work has been appreciated here and outside of here, both in dark days and in better days.

If I have one regret, it is that, as you will recall, we once hatched a plot to ensure that you were made Speaker, but, when the opportunity presented itself, your service and your status as one of the elders of the House were not fully recognised. Save that, your career has been a monumental contribution to Irish politics and to this part of the island that you love.

1.45 pm

I turn, then, to the LCM. Last week, the SDLP took the opportunity to table about a dozen amendments to the Bill proceeding through Westminster. In our view, they would have enhanced what was proposed at Westminster. There are two or three matters that I want to press the junior Minister on, two of which arise immediately from the content of the LCM and one that arises from the broader content of the legislation, which has now been passed by the House of Commons and is on its way to the House of Lords.

Without prejudice to our view on 'A Fresh Start', one of the areas on which some progress was made — the junior Minister will recall this — was the commitments entered into, on paper at least, on criminal and paramilitary activity. The junior Minister will recall that, of the dozen papers that the SDLP contributed to the autumn talks process last year, quite a number dealt with the legacy issue, but two dealt with criminality and paramilitarism. One was on a whole-community approach to criminality and paramilitarism, and the other was on a whole-enforcement approach to paramilitary and criminal activity. Unlike some others, we

shared those documents with all parties in an effort to upscale the outcome of the negotiations. In some ways, you can see that contribution in the new commitments entered into in the Westminster legislation on criminality and paramilitarism.

The amendment that the SDLP tabled at Westminster last week proposed that two members of the IRC — the Independent Reporting Commission — be appointed by the Northern Ireland Justice Minister following consultation with the First Ministers and subject to the approval of the Executive Committee, instead of being jointly appointed by FM and dFM, as the LCM proposes. My question for the junior Minister is this: given that better work was done in Stormont last autumn on paramilitarism and criminality, would ours not have been the better model? Given that the IRC will monitor what goes on in the community and given that what goes on in the community is of concern to all of us, would it not have been better if the LCM had had that process, with the buy-in of all of the Executive to the nominations to the IRC? It is a variation, if you like, on a theme raised in a previous debate: why are FM and dFM taking unto themselves the appointment of chairs or chief executives of certain public bodies under the transfer of functions order? Would it not have been better to source appointments to the IRC in a process requiring the approval of all parties that choose to go into the Executive Committee on the far side of the election on 5 May rather than just the First Ministers? I am not making the point in that regard that, I have no doubt, will be made before the debate is over, unless I misread the situation, about how anybody with any background should have the authority to appoint to an IRC. That is not the point that I am making, although it may be a point that is made after I sit down. I make the point that, if the threat of paramilitarism and criminality is one that is shared by all parties and all citizens, it should have been a process of a shared outcome when it came to the appointment of the IRC.

The second point that I want to make to the junior Minister is about the budgetary processes. I have to say that, when questions were put to the Minister of Finance during the Final Stage of the Budget Bill a couple of weeks ago in relation to the budgetary process that arises from 'A Fresh Start', I did not get much satisfaction in terms of answers in respect of why this was being required and what the range and potential of these provisions were in respect of the budgetary processes. Having said that, we welcome the provisions that are now in the legislation in Westminster, but we argued that we should go further. We asked,

"What is the real thinking behind all of this?". We argued that we should go further in terms of budgetary processes beyond the welcome addition of the statements that are to be laid in the House in respect of the block grant.

In the amendment that we tabled at Westminster last week, we argued for the integration of a lot more rigour into the new budgetary clause in order to have a lot more accountability and transparency. I do not intend to read into the record the amendment, which runs to a full page. It would have interrogated what is now in the Bill in Westminster so that this House would have a lot more knowledge, oversight, accountability and input into the budgetary processes. My colleagues in London got some sense, in respect of some of the arguments that the SDLP MPs made on our amendments, that there might have been some margin of sympathy — even from DUP MPs who, as you know, sit behind the SDLP MPs. I suggest to the junior Minister, given that that amendment was rejected and given its extensive scale — no doubt, people will see the fingerprints of Mark Durkan MP all over it — that she consider it and have a discussion with whoever is Minister of Finance after the election in order to scale up the operation of that amendment in terms of the Budget provisions going forward in the future. Both issues are very much sourced in the LCM today.

I want to raise the three following points very briefly. First, there is the need to record what the new Pledge of Office means and what the new pledge by Members of the Assembly will mean, once the new mandate is confirmed. It is no coincidence that in the Pledge of Office that is now amended, the first paragraph of that amendment says that Ministers shall:

"support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it".

Those words are definitive and absolute:

"support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it".

The obligation, further to that amended Pledge of Office, has three pillars: "unequivocally", "word and deed" and "all efforts".

Although I may be straying slightly beyond the LCM, let us be very clear about what those words mean. There have been events on this island in very recent history — in recent weeks — when issues about unequivocal support for the rule of law in word and deed, and all efforts

to uphold it, have once again become problematic. That is before the ink on the page of the Westminster Bill is even dry.

A second point arises from that, and I urge the House to look at it. The SDLP amendments — maybe the SDLP comes up with this more often than others — produced a model to create a process around the Pledge of Office. Rather than have words on a piece of paper that people can raise their hands to and thereafter be problematic about, the SDLP proposed a model whereby the Pledge of Office and the commitment of Members could be monitored.

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. The SDLP model was to create the role of a pledge adjudicator, appointed by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and involving our Lord Chief Justice. If an issue arose with the conduct of a Minister or a Member, there would then be a process whereby that could be interrogated, rather than left for others to determine.

Mr Lyons: The Member is making points about the Pledge of Office. He may think that they are valid points, but we are talking about an LCM today. What has the Pledge of Office got to do with what is in front of us?

Mr Attwood: Maybe the Member was not here for my first two points, which were very much sourced in the LCM. However, there is a piece of legislation at Westminster that has relevance to this Chamber every day hereafter until the law might be changed. You may not want to consider those matters, but, if we do not, they will come crashing in on us sooner or later.

My final point is that the SDLP proposed building into the Westminster legislation obligations not just on councillors but on others who sit on public bodies. Those obligations would relate to the Nolan principles and would upscale and upgrade the standards around public office at a time when we know from the bitter experience of recent weeks and days that questions still remain unresolved about standards in public office.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Question Time is scheduled to begin at 2.00 pm. I ask Members to take their ease until then. After Question Time, we will return to the debate on the LCM, and the next Member called to speak will be Mr Andy Allen.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that questions 3, 6, 9, 10 and 13 have been withdrawn.

Journey Times: South Belfast

1. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the most recent assessment of journey times on the Ormeau Road and Ravenhill Road, Belfast. (AQO 9867/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen (The Minister for Regional Development): The Ormeau Road is one of the city's busiest radial routes. Care must be taken in assessing such data, as traffic conditions can vary due to numerous and varied vehicle and pedestrian interactions along the route. The latest journey-time information my Department has for the Ormeau Road is from 2013. The data relates to journey times for cars, vans and HGVs. For a road stretch between the Ravenhill Road roundabout and Annadale Embankment, the average speed was approximately 3.7 mph, and between Annadale Embankment and Cromac Square, in the city, the average speed was approximately 7.3 mph. That information is for the morning peak period of 7.30 am to 9.15 am. An assessment indicates a marginal decrease in journey times on both sections from 2011 information. However, from 10.30 am to 3.30 pm, the average speed from Ravenhill Road roundabout to Annadale Embankment was approximately 16.2 mph, and from Annadale Embankment to the city was 9.9 mph.

As a comparison, at peak times, bus journey times have been available through the BusTrak system since 2007. From that time up to 2014, the bus speeds on the Saintfield Road/Ormeau Road corridor have remained constant at between 5.9 mph and 6.8 mph. That includes the time taken to stop and pick up and set down passengers. Data for bicycle journeys on the Ormeau Road corridor are not routinely collected. A small number of timed journeys from Cairnshill Park and Ride to Belfast city centre via the Ormeau Road — that is about 3.8 miles — have indicated a typical off-peak journey time of 20 to 25 minutes. There is no

journey-time information available for the Ravenhill Road.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive answer. She will be aware that this is a pressing issue, not just for those of us who live in south Belfast and use those roads every day, but as she says, it is a wider commuter corridor including from the Saintfield Road. I appreciate the efforts by the Department, including the work on bus and cycle transport. Ultimately, we need to get more cars off the road to reduce congestion, but I think that those speeds — I believe that, in 2013, it was the slowest road in Belfast, and I do not imagine that it has improved greatly for drivers —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can we have a question, please?

Ms Hanna: Can the Minister advise when a new assessment will be given and what further actions might be taken to facilitate workers in south Belfast and further afield who are trying to get to work in the city centre?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question, and I take on board what she has said. I have spoken to officials about this, having looked at the responses received, and I have asked them to update the data, with bus lanes included in that and the enforcement associated with it. We are trying to encourage people to use public transport, and I have very good information about Cairnshill Park and Ride, which is used by an average of 500 vehicles a day. There has also been somewhere in the region of a 12% increase in the number of passengers using buses. We also want to encourage the safe use of cycles on that route. The Member representing the area will be cognisant of the fact that there are somewhere in the region of 4,000 pupils enrolled in schools within that small area. There are seven schools with very high enrolment in that particular area, which adds to the congestion, so it is also about encouraging schools to use active travel methods.

There are things that can be used to encourage people out of their cars and on to public transport, but it is also about making the environment much safer for them to do so.

Mr Lyttle: I seek the assurances of the Minister for Regional Development that the Lagan footbridge and cycle bridge, which will connect the Ormeau Road and Ravenhill Road areas of south and east Belfast, remains part of the Department's plans, despite unionist

councillors' opposition to the planning permission that was granted by Belfast City Council for that exciting project.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. He rightly says that planning permission was granted in February for the footbridge. The bridge orders have also been made for that facility. Obviously, we are in a situation where budgets are being developed. The project has a potential cost of between £8 million and £9 million, so it is very much subject to funding being made available. While I recognise that it would be of benefit to cyclists and walkers and would perhaps aid in the reduction of congestion as we move forward, the residents also have to be taken into consideration. Further conversations will have to be had with them, and, obviously, any future Minister would need to do so before making a final decision on the facility.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With the indulgence of the Deputy Speaker on your last Question Time, Minister, I congratulate you on your short but successful tenure. We got some things over the line in south Belfast.

Given the two-hour traffic jam that is the story of south Belfast every morning, is the solution not to take the Belfast rapid transit (BRT), which will be a great success in east and west, and — whoever is Minister — expand it into the south of the city, perhaps right from the city centre to Carryduff?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his kind comments. I am fully committed to Belfast rapid transit and have been. It is important that we look at expanding it not only to the south of the city but to the north. Work will commence on an assessment of that, and the route should be identified. Obviously, it is looking at an area where there is a lot of traffic, so that it can ease that congestion, and where there will be people who will use it. A natural route would be from Cairnshill down the Ormeau Road. I would be very much in favour of that as a proposition. There is an outline timetable for that, but it is, obviously, provisional at this stage. They are looking to prepare an options assessment in 2017-18, to prepare the business case in 2018-19, to have a detailed design and implementation in 2019-2020 and for it to be operational in 2022. Obviously, that is all very provisional, but I am hopeful that that will be a positive outcome for that area and will ease the congestion described by the Member.

A26: Safety Enhancements

2. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the safety enhancements on the A26 Lisnevenagh Road. (AQO 9868/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: I can report that the safety review of the A26 Lisnevenagh Road is now complete. It concludes that, whilst there is not an unusually high incidence of collisions along that route, given the volume of traffic using the road, the number of fatal collisions is a cause for concern. Transport NI has identified three sites that warranted further investigation and where collision remedial measures can be introduced to influence driver behaviour and reduce the risk of collisions. The sites that have been singled out for further investigation are the Barnish Road/Creevery Road junction; Woodgreen Road and Maine Road junction; and Cromkill Road junction.

Police investigations of the fatal collisions are ongoing. However, I am aware that there is great interest in the matter from a number of local MLAs. I intend to have meetings with local representatives at which I can detail the proposed measures. Transport NI officials intend to make a joint presentation with the PSNI to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council to inform members of the council of the findings of the report and to seek their support for the proposed collision remedial actions.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her answer and for the invite to the information session that will be held, I think, next Monday in Ballymena.

With regard to those three sites specifically, Minister, can you give any more detail at this stage of whether you are undertaking purely remedial exercises or whether there will be substantial investment to make those junctions safe for all road users? I acknowledge that you said that there was not an unusually high number of collisions, but I think that the number of fatalities on that road is something that concerns all the local elected representatives. Since I last raised the matter with you in topical questions, we have seen the unfortunate death of Karla Cameron at the Woodgreen junction.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, I acknowledge the comments that he has made. With regard to each of those areas, they are very site-specific in relation to the recommendations that will be put to members. That will include the provision and review of street lighting and legislative changes to ban right-turning movements on at least two of those roads. Enhanced signage

and road markings will also be included in that. Obviously, that will become clearer when we have the conversation.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her answers to date and for taking up my invitation to come down on site to the Woodgreen junction to see for herself the risks that drivers have to take daily, sometimes more than once.

The Minister mentioned three specific sites. I agree with her that they are indeed very dangerous crossings, but I want to say to the Minister that I believe that there could well be a fourth crossing that is potentially very dangerous, which is the Valley Road/Shankbridge junction —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can we have a question?

Mr Frew: — that is very close to Carnaghts Primary School. I have met the principal, Mr Ian Henderson, who has been campaigning for many years for road improvements. Will the Minister consider placing a fourth junction into the system?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The safety review considered all junctions along the route, with particular attention being paid to locations where at least four collisions had occurred in the last three years. Records show that there has been one collision at the Valley Road junction in the last three years. That collision occurred on 16 November 2014. That junction currently has junction warning signs, map-type advance direction signs and advance warning signs of the school on both approaches to the junction on the A26. The junction will benefit from the recommendation in the report that a route treatment be completed to refresh and replace the signs and lines to ensure consistency of information to drivers.

Mr Allister: The Minister speaks about collision remedial measures, which sounds very good, but the only thing that she then spoke about was extra street lighting, extra road markings and a ban on right turns at a couple of junctions. Surely, Minister, it will take much more structural change than that to bring safety to those deathtrap junctions, particularly at Woodgreen. I trust that the Minister is prepared to do more than what has been suggested.

Miss M McIlveen: I appreciate the Member's comments. I will meet Mr Allister at that junction on Monday morning in advance of the meeting with the other MLAs. At the meeting, it

will actually be useful for all of us to sit around the table with the engineers, look at the proposals and talk about the available options for each junction. As I said, each junction is different and very site-specific, and there will be recommendations for each of them. The opportunity to have those conversations will be on Monday. Out of that, we can pursue any further suggestions or changes that others may feel are appropriate.

Knockmore/M1 Link Road

4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposals for a link road between the Knockmore area of Lisburn and junction 8 of the M1. (AQO 9870/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: In the Belfast metropolitan transport plan 2015, the Knockmore to Sprucefield link road, known as the M1/Knockmore Link, has been identified as a developer-led proposal. This means that it is the responsibility of the developers of adjacent land to deliver the road scheme as part of their development. As a consultee to Planning Service, my Department has in the past engaged in pre-application discussions with a potential developer.

However, as delivery of the link road is dependent on future development of west Lisburn by other parties, it is not possible for me to provide an accurate timescale at this time.

2.15 pm

On 28 January 2016, I met Dr Donaldson and other members of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council to discuss the road scheme proposal. I subsequently wrote to Dr Donaldson on 2 February 2016 to confirm that my Department will undertake a preliminary traffic assessment of what the traffic impacts would be on the surrounding road network by the provision of the M1 Knockmore link. It is envisaged that the results should provide objective evidence for further discussion between Transport NI and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council officers. The results of the traffic assessment should be available by the end of March 2016, after which I will write again to Dr Donaldson about the outcome.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. After all the razzmatazz of the photographs in the 'Ulster Star' and so on, it does not sound as if the project is anywhere near the point where it might be put on the list to go ahead. You said

that the funding model is developer-led. Is the developer of the surrounding land supposed to pay for the entire cost of the road, or is there input from other sources?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. At present, no funding has been identified in our current budget for the provision of the Knockmore link. As I said, it has a developer-led designation. I met the council, along with others, including those from SIB who have an interest, and the proposal that was put to the Department at that time was a partnership model, which would include all three partners. Hence I asked my officials to conduct a survey to see whether or not it could be regarded as a strategic road. I found that to be a productive meeting, and I was encouraged by the proposal that was put to us by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. I believe that, moving forward, my Department needs to look at alternative means of funding. That may include partnerships with local councils and others in order to deliver on key roads.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As somebody who travels the M1 daily, I know that there is activity taking place on the Maze/Long Kesh site. There was a proposed junction to go from the M1 into the site. Is that still a commitment of the Department, or has it been scrapped?

Miss M McIlveen: I am aware of proposals for the provision of direct access to the site from the M1 and from Sprucefield. The provision of the infrastructure is really a matter for OFMDFM and the Maze Long Kesh (MLK) Development Corporation to fund and deliver it. As a consultee to the development, Transport NI has met key stakeholders, including the director of the MLK Development Corporation, just to provide advice on the site. My officials will be available to give advice on road design aspects of any proposal that comes forward. I understand that a series of transport management meetings organised by the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society took place again in advance of the 2015 Balmoral Show, which was held at the Maze site in May 2015. That advised of temporary signing and general traffic management arrangements in order to minimise the likely traffic disruption during the event.

As part of the Halftown Road safety improvements, there has been work carried out. A 970-metre long and 3-metre wide footway/cycleway has been constructed along the frontage of the MLK site at Halftown Road. There is a piece of work around exploring the

potential to extend the Northern Ireland cycle network to the site, and footway/cycleway work has commenced along the frontage of the site.

A57: Dualling

5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of anticipated growth in passenger numbers and airline routes, whether she plans to dual the section of the A57 from the M2 to Belfast International Airport. (AQO 9871/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: I recognise the importance of transport links to our ports and airports. The regional development strategy 2035 identifies Belfast International Airport, along with George Best Belfast City Airport and the airport in Londonderry, as strategically important transport interchanges. The implementation of my Department's strategic road improvement programme has enhanced regional access to Belfast International Airport. Current dual carriageway improvement works to the A26 and recent announcements regarding the A6 flagship project will reinforce that.

In 2014, Transport NI commissioned a feasibility study to identify potential options to improve strategic links between the M1 and M2/M22 and Belfast International Airport. A number of potential route corridors were examined, several of which will be taken forward to the next stage for further study. No commitment on funding can be given at this time. The next review of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland may, however, provide an opportunity for my Department to look at the prioritisation of new schemes. At that time, connections to Belfast International Airport can be considered along with other existing and proposed schemes elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron: I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for the good job that she has done in her term of office. Given that this is her last Question Time, I wish her all the best. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she advise what the findings of the feasibility study were and what discussions her Department has had with Belfast International Airport as a result of those findings?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. The study identified a number of potential route corridors, including improvements to the A26 and A57. The next stage will be to refine the options with a view to undertaking a more detailed options appraisal. As with everything, progress will, obviously, be

subject to funding. My officials regularly meet officials from Belfast International Airport and the other two airports. Those meetings mostly concern airport noise and control-of-land issues, but transport-related issues come up and are explored. In the coming months, my officials will meet members of the Belfast International Airport consultative forum to discuss a number of transport-related issues, including access to the airport, parking and traffic management matters. Previous engagement by the Department with Belfast International Airport staff included talks with Mr John Doran, the then managing director, and that resulted in Transport NI commissioning the feasibility study to examine the links between the M1 and M2/M22 with Belfast International Airport.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I commend the Minister on her time in office. Does the Minister agree that an extension of the railway system to Belfast International Airport would be not only a boost to the long-term sustainability of the airport but a great attraction for service users?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. When you travel to the Continent, get off at the airport and see excellent rail services, you absolutely want that for home. I recognise the strategic importance of our airports and of their having good links to our major towns and cities. However, we have to set that in a context of priorities for investment, particularly given the challenges as we move forward. You also need to understand that, within any recommendations for improvements, the establishment of a rail link to Belfast International Airport would require in the region of 10 million passengers, and the latest figures for 2014 indicate that there were just over four million passengers. I recommend to the Member the very good bus link service from the airport to the city centre. I understand that it operates every 10 minutes at peak flight times and at a minimum of every 30 minutes at all other times.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I also commend the Minister for her work since taking over the role. In discussions with representatives of Belfast International, they say to me that the biggest inhibitor to growth is not transport links but air passenger duty. Have there been any discussions between you and ministerial colleagues on APD?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Unfortunately, that is outside the remit of my Department, but I am happy to have

a conversation with colleagues and pass that information to him.

York Street Interchange

7. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the York Street interchange project. (AQO 9873/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: A public inquiry into the York Street interchange project was held in November 2015. In due course, my Department will publish a departmental statement setting out its response to the recommendations in the inspectors' report and make the report available for inspection. My Department has commenced the procurement process and intends to have a design-and-build contractor on board this summer to help to fully develop the scheme in order to be in a position to commence construction towards the end of 2017.

The development and construction of the scheme to the programme that I outlined is very dependent on the availability of finance. A full economic business case will have to be approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel before any commitments can be given to start construction.

Mr Ross: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her term of office, not least because everybody else has, and I would not want to seem discourteous to her. *[Laughter.]* Ulster University has relocated much of its product to the city centre and will be very much part of the project and how it moves forward. I think particularly about the safety of students who will want to cycle to the campus or even walk from the surrounding area. Will that be part of the project developed by her Department?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I met representatives of Ulster University to discuss its project and what the Department can do to assist, particularly as it moves a considerable number of students into the city centre.

Measures are included in the scheme to provide better connections between Yorkgate Station and the campus for those who want to walk or cycle. The scheme proposal includes high-quality footway links along both sides of York Street. Those will replace the existing fractured arrangements and take account of the increased pedestrian movements associated with the development.

Inbound and outbound cycleways are included along the length of York Street. Enhanced cycle provision, including improved connections to the streets at either end of the scheme, which arose from the consultation, was presented at the public inquiry. The inspectors' report gives their views on the matter, and a departmental statement will set out my Department's response in due course.

We look forward to the university relocating and the regeneration of that side of Belfast. Hopefully, it will improve and assist with plans for improved public transport in and around that area.

Mr Patterson: Given that European funding could make up 40% of the total package for the York Street interchange, has the Minister given thought to the effect that Brexit would have on the future of this much-needed project?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. At this stage, it is too soon to comment, as we have not yet had the referendum. I guess that we will cross that bridge at that time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Chris Hazzard is not in his place. David Hilditch is not in his place. I call Kieran McCarthy.

Roads: Ards Peninsula

12. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development for her assessment of the condition of the roads in the Ards peninsula. (AQO 9878/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: My Department has a duty to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. Regular inspections of the road network are carried out and defects prioritised for repair depending on their severity. Roads may also be repaired as part of planned programmes of work, such as resurfacing, surface dressing or larger planned patching subject to available resources. In the current financial year, over £900,000 has been spent on resurfacing schemes in the Ards area, and I can confirm that approximately 55% of the allocated budget for resurfacing in the Ards and north Down area has been spent on roads in the Ards peninsula. I believe that that represents a significant investment in monetary terms and a commitment to maintain the roads in the Ards peninsula. As a Member for the area, I welcome that investment and recognise the importance of investing in our road maintenance in Ards and across Northern Ireland.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our time for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Mr McCarthy: I wish the Minister well. *[Laughter.]*

A5: Phase 1(b)

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of Kieran McCarthy and me, I commend you on your time in office. Is that OK, Kieran?

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

T1. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the commencement of phase 1(b) of the A5. (AQT 3661/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. I announced a public consultation for the whole scheme in February, and that will go on to 4 April. This relates to the environmental statement for the full length of the scheme, along with a new draft direction order, draft vesting orders and stopping up of private access. That is for the length of the route from Newbuildings to Ballygawley, and that obviously includes the 1(b) section. The current funding profile agreed to 2020-21 would mean that 1(a) is commenced in 2017, which means that it should be completed by 2019, with 1(b), which is south of Omagh to Ballygawley, hopefully commencing at the latter part of the five-year budget period. That will require some further work with DFP on the funding package and is very much subject to budget.

Ms Boyle: Minister, I thank your officials and staff for their assistance during the consultations and the exhibitions that have gone on throughout. Their assistance was greatly appreciated not just by us MLAs but by others, including those who will be affected on that road. Minister, what has your feedback been to date on the exhibitions at the consultation?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. I have spoken to officials about this. The exhibitions were very well attended: we had in the region of 1,054 registered attendees. Feedback from officials was that it had been positive, with the vast majority of those attending very supportive of the scheme. However, I am aware that there are those who

have concerns about their properties, and that is absolutely understandable, given the impact that the scheme will have on those families as we move forward through the scheme. My officials will work closely with those landowners to assist them in any way that they can as we move forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Disabled Parking Provision: East Belfast

T3. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Regional Development what parking provisions are in place for disabled people in East Belfast. (AQT 3663/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Disabled parking bays are available in East Belfast as they are across Northern Ireland. They are in a number of areas, including provision in car parks, on-street parking and in private shopping centres. If the Member has a particular area that he believes my officials should look at and that would benefit from additional disabled bays, I will be happy to discuss it with him.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, I have been approached by constituents with concerns about the Belmont Road. They are concerned about the parking bay that is already in existence there being abused by individuals who do not have or are not displaying a disabled badge. I know that we are heading towards the end of the mandate, but can the Minister give me a commitment that her officials will provide enforcement and look to add bays?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware that traffic attendants are in that area at least five days a week. It is for them to ensure that badges are displayed in the correct manner and that penalty charge notices are issued to prevent such behaviour continuing in those bays.

I am more than happy to meet the Member alongside officials to discuss further the issue arising at that particular point along the road. I appreciate that it is a very busy road. There are lots of shops in the area, as well as cafes and restaurants, so there should be frequent movement of traffic in those parking areas anyway. As I said, I am happy to discuss it further with the Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 4 has been withdrawn. Daithí McKay is not in his place to ask question 5.

Broad Road/Greystone Road Junction: Limavady

T6. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the requested improvements to the Broad Road/Greystone Road junction in Limavady. (AQT 3666/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of his interest in the area. I advise him that Transport NI has a scheme proposal to provide a roundabout at the junction. I can say that detailed design and acquisition procedures are well-advanced, and the scheme will move forward, subject to the completion of land acquisition and the necessary finance, as always, being in place.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for her reply. I commend her on her term of office as well.

That junction is very busy, and many road users find it very hazardous. I realise that the Minister is very busy, but I and some of my colleagues would greatly appreciate a site meeting with her at the junction.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. My diary secretary will be panicking at the number of meetings that I have agreed to before the end of this session, but I am more than content to meet the Member in his constituency.

Blue Badge Scheme: Update

T7. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on her Department's blue badge scheme. (AQT 3667/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The blue badge scheme, which already provides a wide range of parking concessions for people with severe walking disabilities and those who are partially blind, is valued by all those who need extra support. Last year, my Department published the findings of a consultation process, and a number of key recommendations emerged that, I am pleased to say, received wide-ranging support from blue badge holders and other stakeholders. The recommendations included extending the eligibility criteria to include

children between the ages of two and three with specific medical conditions. I am pleased to announce that that will come into force from 1 April. Furthermore, facilitating existing benefits such as the personal independence payment to support applications will come into effect when welfare reform is enacted in June 2016.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am very glad that the last question that I asked in this mandate — of her anyway — delivered some good news. There had been some concerns about the fact that, historically, there was at times a backlog in processing blue badge applications. A lot of time was involved in getting them processed. Is the Minister able to advise us whether anything has been done to ensure that a more streamlined application process is in place to ensure that those much-needed passes are not bogged down in bureaucracy?

Miss M McIlveen: I had the pleasure of being able to go up to Enniskillen to meet those involved in the blue badge processing unit, and I commend them for the work that they have been doing. Obviously, they had been under a great deal of pressure. The backlog is being worked through, and I am glad to say that the new system will simplify the process by allowing applicants to apply online.

The blue badge was introduced over 30 years ago, and, during that time, the scheme has been operated at a significantly subsidised rate of just £2. To simplify it and make it a faster system, some slight adjustment in cost will be required, which will see the fee increase from £2 to £10.

But the service will be improved and that will allow us to move towards cost recovery.

Caw Roundabout: Safety Measures

T9. **Mr Diver** asked the Minister for Regional Development, after commending her on her work to date and wishing her well on her return to the Assembly, to outline any plans that her Department has to put measures in place to make the Caw roundabout safer, given that it is an issue of great road safety concern in the Foyle constituency — concern that he is sure that Mr Middleton, who is sitting beside the Minister, will share. (AQT 3669/11-16)

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. There is a survey, and an initial analysis has been carried out in relation to collision history in and around that particular roundabout. My officials are carrying out a much more detailed assessment of that area in

order to establish what remedial measures are required. At this stage, I do not have that information. It should be with my Department within the next couple of months.

Mr Diver: I thank the Minister for her response and look forward to the results of that review. Will the Department ensure that it is taking into account the significance of that particular roundabout, which is, obviously, on a cross-border route? A lot of traffic, not just in the Foyle and Derry area, goes through it; the route is transnational in nature. A much-publicised incident recently involved the PSNI; even they had an accident on that route. Whatever the criteria used in the Department, can we ensure that roads that are of particular risk are brought to the top of whatever list is being considered?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, I am familiar with that roundabout. As he says, it is busy. Approximately 50,000 vehicles use it daily, which is quite incredible. Traffic surveys have been carried out in the last couple of years in advance of this. However, I think that it would be prudent of us to wait for the assessment to be concluded and to move forward from there, with regard to where it sits within the priority.

Road Maintenance Funding: Mid Ulster

T10. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much extra has been allocated this year for road maintenance in the Mid Ulster District Council area. (AQT 3670/11-16)

Mr McGlone: I offer my apologies for not being present for a question yesterday. It appears that the agenda moved much more rapidly than I had anticipated.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I do not have very specific information on that, but he will be aware that I was able to secure additional funding in the November monitoring round. Also, in the earlier part of this year, I was able to secure some initial efficiency savings, amounting to somewhere in the region of £3.2 million, which is being distributed around the divisions. With regard to the mid-Ulster area — I am not sure whether this includes all of the Member's constituency, but it certainly includes Cookstown, Magherafelt and Dungannon — an additional estimated £1.4 million was received for structural maintenance and around £800,000 for routine maintenance.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for her response. The key issue is that I have received numerous complaints about potholes and the increased damage done. I had a complaint fairly recently from a guy who sent me a photograph of the rim of his car, which had been very severely buckled. I do not have to have the information today, but could the Minister provide me with details in writing, at some stage, on whether there has been an increase in the number of claims for damage, as a consequence of potholes, in that particular area in mid-Ulster?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I think that all Members in the Chamber could probably relay similar stories from their areas. As you are aware, additional moneys have been made available. Divisional managers have been working very hard to get through backlogs and are prioritising main routes in that. There are figures for claims made for damage to vehicles, and I am happy to provide that information to the Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our questions to the Minister for Regional Development. We will now move on to questions to the Minister for Social Development.

2.45 pm

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that question 6 has been withdrawn.

Gas Heating: East Belfast

1. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister for Social Development when the 710 Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in East Belfast with Economy 7, oil or solid fuel heating, will be converted to gas in accordance with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive programme of heating replacement. (AQO 9882/11-16)

Lord Morrow (The Minister for Social Development): I thank the Member for her question. The Housing Executive has advised me that, pursuant to your previous question on this matter, a further 46 homes in East Belfast have been converted to gas, leaving 664 that have Economy 7, oil or solid fuel heating still to be converted. Of those, 358 are included in heating replacement schemes that are either ongoing or due to commence by April 2017. A further 181 homes have refused to have gas installed. The remaining properties are in two

of the tower blocks that the Housing Executive does not currently plan to convert to gas.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he provide an update on the policy that his Department has on converting houses from oil heating when they are on the gas network?

Lord Morrow: The Housing Executive policy is to install gas heating in accordance with its programme in properties where gas is available and it is technically feasible to do so.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us whether the Housing Executive is working to a time frame for converting costly and environmentally damaging electrical heating appliances to gas?

Lord Morrow: Yes. That is the intention where it is doable, but it may not be practical in every instance. Surprisingly, and similar to the answer to the main and supplementary questions, some people, in particular, elderly people, do not want changes in their home. They do not want the hassle. There is no enforcement when a tenant says, "Look, I would prefer to carry on with things the way they are". But yes, the objective is to replace Economy 7.

Mr Diver: Are there any thoughts or plans in his Department to reduce the qualifying period that people have to meet to have their heating upgraded to a more modern system, such as the modern gas system, given that this would be a very clear way of taking people out of fuel poverty?

Lord Morrow: The Member raises an interesting question about whether it is possible to reduce the qualifying time. There are no plans to do that at the moment. However, since it has been raised, I will look at this in the few days that I remain in the Department. I think it is something that should be looked at, and, if it is practical to do so, I cannot see why it cannot be done. But there will still be restraints, not least financial restraints, on doing the whole thing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that they should continue to stand if they wish to ask a question and be called.

Social Housing: Insulation

2. **Mr Lyons** asked the Minister for Social Development how he is improving insulation in social housing. (AQO 9883/11-16)

Lord Morrow: The Housing Executive makes long-term investment in tenants' homes through planned programmes of work, including a number of different schemes aimed at preventing heat loss, improving energy efficiency and insulation. Those include the upgrading of roof space insulation, the replacement of single-glazed windows with double glazing and the replacement of old inefficient heating systems with modern fuel-efficient boilers.

Its external cyclic maintenance (ECM) schemes cover any issues relating to the external fabric of the dwelling and, where damp, mould growth or condensation have been identified, it is addressed. The response maintenance programme is also used to remedy immediate problems that may arise.

In relation to new-build social homes in the social housing development programme, the Department is currently considering whether additional housing association grant funding should be provided for schemes where thermal efficiency exceeds current building regulations standards. Consultation is currently ongoing, and a final decision is expected later this year.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Minister for his answer and for all the work that he has carried out in the Department since he took office. I very much appreciate that he has taken the time to meet me on a number of issues that I have brought to his attention, and insulation is one of them. Further to that, will he confirm whether the findings of the cavity wall insulation inspection report of 2014 by the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) will be taken into account by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)?

Lord Morrow: Yes. I can confirm that the Member has been quite consistent and, indeed, persistent in relation to this issue. I have met him to discuss it in some detail. The issues contained in the SERC/NIHE report on cavity wall insulation are a UK-wide issue and are not unique to Northern Ireland. The Housing Executive has told me that it has no current plans to isolate the specific properties that are referred to in the report from the remainder of its stock.

I wrote to the Housing Executive about this matter further on 8 February to ask how it will rectify the situation in the remaining homes. It is the Housing Executive's intention to bring forward programmes of work related to insulation for properties that have been identified by the recent stock condition survey as in most need and in line with the asset management strategy. This work will require a focus on the significant number of properties that have, to date, not benefited from any insulation work.

Furthermore, essentially the Housing Executive's view is that the limited resources that it has available for investment should be determined by a strategic response to the formidable body of evidence that has been provided by a comprehensive survey of one quarter — around 22,000 — of all its homes, rather than an issue-specific report that is based on a sample of just 206 homes.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. Many people across the North, including people in rural areas, live in private rented or social housing that has little or no insulation. What strategy does the Department have to deal with that serious issue?

Lord Morrow: I take the Member's point. The joint DSD/Housing Executive asset commission has provided the Housing Executive with comprehensive and robust data on the condition of its stock and a holistic understanding of its long-term future investments. The Member mentioned the private sector, and it should be noted that grants and funding have been made available to private landlords to tackle the issue. I encourage private landlords — I ask all Members to do likewise — to make use of the grant aid that is available. Sometimes, it is the case that there is not enough awareness of exactly what is available, but that may change in future. Hopefully, it will not be long until we see the whole of the housing stock, whether it is in the private or the social sector — it has to be acknowledged that the private rented sector is one of the major landlords in Northern Ireland — making use of the funding that is available in order to address the issue that he raised.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. There are schemes to replace windows and, if I picked him up right, there will be schemes for cavity wall insulation. Does he intend to look at schemes for the replacement of front and back doors? Homes are being improved for insulation purposes through cavity

wall insulation and window replacement, but the doors still remain a problem.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for his question. In some areas, schemes are being taken up to replace front and back doors.

If the Member has a particular area that he has a particular interest in, he can let me know as I walk past him today, or he can call in. We will take a look and let him know where exactly that scheme is, if it is on at all. If he talks to us about it, there is a better chance that it will be on a scheme.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your answers thus far. Clearly you will be aware that many Members have been lobbied by the cavity wall insulation industry with regard to the failures of cavity wall insulation in a number of properties, particularly Housing Executive properties. Will the Minister explain to the House why, given the high failure rate of cavity wall insulation and its importance in delivering appropriate warmth to homes, the Housing Executive is not conducting camera inspections of cavity walls?

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for his question. Cavity wall insulation is a subject that has been tossed around for quite some time. It has to be said that there have been what I would call honest attempts to deliver on that matter. In some cases, there have been some issues with it. My Department is looking at that with the Housing Executive to see if there is a high list of deficiencies and where those deficiencies exist.

The Savills report, which is a comprehensive report commissioned by the Housing Executive on all its housing stock, has just been published. When that report has been gone through in some detail, those are the very issues that we expect to be teased out, and that will leave the Housing Executive better placed in the future to tackle the issues that Mr Dickson raised.

Housing Stress: East Belfast

3. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Social Development how the number of people in housing stress in East Belfast compares to the figure in May 2011. (AQO 9884/11-16)

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for his question. In 2011, the waiting list for East Belfast stood at 2,125, of which 1,058 applicants were deemed to be in housing

stress. The current waiting list for East Belfast stands at 1,661, of which 904 applicants are deemed to be in housing stress.

Although that remains a challenge for the area, I am happy to advise that, as part of the 2016-17 to 2018-19 social housing development programme, there are plans to deliver 311 new homes. The delivery of those new homes and the reletting of existing stock will, hopefully, go some way to addressing the housing stress in East Belfast. The Housing Executive continues to keep housing need under review and to develop plans to help those in housing stress.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he outline how many homes will be developed in East Belfast under the social housing development programme?

Lord Morrow: The Housing Executive plans to deliver 311 new social start units across East Belfast under the new housing programme between 2016 and 2019.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for authorising his officials to meet me about a Clanmil Housing shared neighbourhood development at the former Lisnasharragh High School site in East Belfast. Would he be minded to support the inclusion of mixed tenure and a small number of affordable homes in that development?

Lord Morrow: I am prepared to look at and consider that. In the short time that is left to me in post, I would need to be at it very soon. I give an undertaking today to look at that. I have listened carefully to what the Member has suggested.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister please give a breakdown of the East Belfast housing stress figure in relation to council boundaries? That would accurately reflect where housing stress lies so that it can be more effectively dealt with.

Lord Morrow: I do not have the figures in front of me for the breakdown that the Member has requested. However, it is something that we can take a look at following today's Question Time. If those figures are obtainable and can be extracted, I will forward them to the Member so that she will see exactly where the issues are in relation to the question that she has asked. I am sorry; I do not have that information in front of me.

3.00 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Land acquisition is one of the biggest obstacles identified by the Federation of Housing Associations in relation to social housing new build. Will the Minister advise not only what land is available for social housing in East Belfast but whether his Department or the Housing Executive will take strides to acquire land right across Belfast?

Lord Morrow: Land acquisition has always been a major issue, and it does not get resolved quickly. In my constituency and in the town of Dungannon, where I live, there are always problems about where we can get land for housing. Let it be said that the Housing Executive and those tasked with the job of identifying areas for build are pursuing these issues and trying to plan not just 12 months but years ahead. I assure the Member that that is prevalent and ongoing in the Department and in consultation with the Housing Executive. If she has suggestions about her constituency, she might want to talk to the new Minister when she comes back after the election.

Welfare Reform

4. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the average and maximum level of benefits protected by the planned mitigation measures as part of welfare reform. (AQO 9885/11-16)

Lord Morrow: The average and maximum levels of benefits protected each year by the planned mitigation measures as part of welfare reform are as follows. The employment and support allowance (ESA) time-limiting average is £5,327, and the maximum is £5,327. The adult disability premium average is £3,640, and the maximum is £10,024. The disability protection average is £2,005, and the maximum is £7,287. The social sector size criteria average is £666, and the maximum is £1,200. The £26,000 benefit cap average is £2,811, and the maximum is £14,340. The carer's allowance average is £2,564, and the maximum is £6,390.

The maximum amounts for social sector size criteria, benefit cap and carer's allowance have been based on an average of the top 10 highest benefit amounts protected under those schemes through the welfare reform mitigation measures. That is to protect the confidentiality of individual cases as the components that make up those benefit amounts will depend on individual circumstances. That is in accordance with the 'Code of Practice for Official Statistics' from the UK Statistics Authority, which states that official statistics must not reveal the identity

of an individual or organisation, or any private information relating to them. The benefit cap figure quoted is based on the £26,000 benefit cap and has been based around capping households on their entire universal credit award. Initially, the benefit cap award will apply to housing benefit before the introduction of universal credit.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister's two minutes are up.

Lord Morrow: Ultimately, the full universal credit award will be subject to the cap.

Mr Allister: Amongst that plethora of figures, I will focus on the welfare cap. I think that the Minister is saying that he is protecting the benefits of at least 10 families at a level above £40,000 a year, because the average protection is £14,000 on top of the benefit cap. Is it correct that there are multiple families of that order still receiving benefits in excess of £40,000? Is the Minister comfortable with that? Does he think that it is a good spend of public money?

Lord Morrow: Sometimes, it is not a matter of what the Minister is or is not comfortable with; it is about what the regulations clearly state must happen. I never have any control over that.

I will double-check the number of families for you, because I know that you will be interested in the exact detail. I will forward that to you.

Mr Frew: Does the Minister know how much a working family would have to earn each year to bring their net income above £26,000?

Lord Morrow: An annual net income of £26,000 is equivalent to a gross income of approximately £33,700.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister met the expert panel on welfare? Is the panel content that the mitigation measures will help to protect those most in need?

Lord Morrow: Yes. I have to assume that the expert panel is content. I would be bitterly disappointed — I suspect that the House and others would be, too — if it were not. After all, it is the expert panel that has been providing these figures for us and doing the work. As the questioner and I referred to, they are the experts and we are led by them. If it transpires later that, in fact, they are not confident,

questions will have to be asked, but I am assured that they are.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. In light of recent announcements emanating from GB, particularly on cuts to ESA and the personal independence payment, has any assessment or evaluation been carried out, or even any connection made with the Departments in GB, to establish the consequential budgetary and policy implications for welfare reform here in Northern Ireland?

Lord Morrow: The mitigation scheme is designed to provide financial support to claimants who are in receipt of benefits when the welfare reforms are introduced. Furthermore, the introduction of a time limit means that affected claimants will be notified of the change only a few months before their benefit is reduced or stopped altogether. Effectively, the one-year time-limiting rule will be applied retrospectively. Anyone who claims benefit after the welfare reforms are introduced will be made aware of the conditions that apply to that benefit at the time of application. This means that employment and support allowance claimants will be aware that the contribution-based element will be paid for only one year if they are in work-related activity. They will be aware of the impact a year in advance and have time to prepare for the benefit ceasing.

Social Housing: South Antrim

5. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the new social housing planned for South Antrim in the next two years. (AQO 9886/11-16)

Lord Morrow: I can advise that work on 248 new social housing units is planned to start in the South Antrim parliamentary constituency area over the next two years. You will also be interested to note that, so far in the 2015-16 financial year, 74 new social housing units have been completed in South Antrim, with a further nine nearing completion. Of course, you will be aware that programme schemes can be lost, or slip to future programme years, for a variety of reasons. Schemes can also be added to the social housing development programme through the annual housing association bidding round/programme formulation process.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for his help during his short time in post. Will the Minister expand on that information by giving

me the figure held by the Department for the total projected housing need for South Antrim?

Lord Morrow: The Housing Executive, as the arbiter of housing need, determines how many new homes should be provided in any specific geographical area and progresses schemes to meet the demand. The Housing Executive is working to address housing stress in South Antrim in a number of ways. It is addressed most notably through, for example, the reletting of existing stock, the refurbishment of void properties and the allocation of new-build schemes. The number of new social homes required is based on an annual housing need assessment. It examines the supply and demand, highlighting any areas where there are gaps, and predicts what will be required over a five-year period to develop the social housing development programme.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He will be aware that, since 2010, only about 60 new social housing properties have been built in West Tyrone. That represents the lowest number of builds in any constituency across the North. Considering the massive waiting list, with half the people on it in housing stress, does the Minister agree that it is time for action to deliver for the many people and families who are suffering across my constituency?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that they should try to link their supplementary questions to the substantive question, which, in this case, is about the South Antrim constituency. The Minister may or may not be able to reply.

Lord Morrow: South Antrim and West Tyrone are a wee bit apart, but that in no way diminishes the Member's concerns, because what applies in one part of the Province is very often replicated in other parts.

What is happening in his constituency, and I am not being glib, is not much different from what is happening in other regions and areas of Northern Ireland: there is housing stress and housing need in West Tyrone, as there is in South Antrim. Across Northern Ireland, of the applicants on the housing list, 50% are in housing stress. However, I should share one statistic with the Assembly that I found quite difficult to understand when I investigated the matter further. To be put on the housing stress list, you require just 30 points. So, if you have a score above 30 points, you are deemed to be in housing stress. That is a matter that I want to look at to make sure that all those who are

really in housing stress and housing need are given the consideration that they deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Social Housing: County Fermanagh

7. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Social Development how many new social houses were built in County Fermanagh in the 2015-16 financial year. (AQO 9888/11-16)

Lord Morrow: Unfortunately, the information is not available in the format that the Member asked for. I can, however, advise that 47 social houses were completed in the former Fermanagh District Council area in the 2015-16 financial year. Those new homes were built in the Enniskillen area.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his answer. There is an old guise that you should never ask a question that you do not know the answer to. The question that I submitted asked the Minister how many social houses had been started in the 2015-16 financial year, but somehow it was changed. What astounds me about the answer is that one social house was started in the whole county in that time, namely a single bespoke unit in Brookeborough.

Can the Minister give me an assurance that there is a commitment to building social houses in rural areas? The perception amongst rural dwellers is that there is no point in adding your name to the social housing waiting list because there is absolutely no expectation that houses will be built in rural communities. I am looking for an assurance from the Minister that those houses may be built in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his question.

Lord Morrow: I can give the Member the assurance that there is no attempt to leave County Fermanagh out of any future social housing development. I say this to him, which he might find useful: there were 82 new social housing starts in the former Fermanagh District Council area between 2010-11 and 2014-15. That equated to a total spend of £9.7 million, of which £4.9 million was made up of housing association grant. Furthermore, the Housing Executive has identified a total projected housing need for the Fermanagh area of 117 units in the period 2014-19, of which 100 units have been identified for Enniskillen. Between April 2016 and March 2019, it is anticipated that

a further 137 units will be delivered in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone parliamentary constituency area. I hope that he finds that useful.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period for listed questions. We turn to topical questions.

Social Housing: Grosvenor Barracks, Enniskillen

T1. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he supports the proposed transfer of the site of the former Grosvenor barracks in Enniskillen, which has been earmarked for the development of 200 social housing units, from his Department to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, given that that would remove the ability of social housing providers to develop on that site. (AQT 3671/11-16)

Lord Morrow: I assure the Member that I am not doing anything to obstruct, nor am I being awkward about, the building of new homes in County Fermanagh. After all, and I am sure the Member has noticed, I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone in the Assembly. As a Member for the area, I am sure that it will come as some comfort and relief to him that very often his concerns about housing are mine.

3.15 pm

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his attempt to answer the question. I put him on notice that it was not he who initiated the process, but I am looking for him to intervene and stop it as a locally elected representative.

There are roughly 1,000 people on the housing waiting list in Fermanagh, and nearly 300 of those are in stress. As Mrs Kelly indicated, land acquisition is a significant issue for housing associations. Can the Minister indicate whether, in theory, he would be supportive of the transfer of a 17.2 acre site out of his Department to the local authority, which could then decide whether to sell it on the open market, thereby taking away the housing association's ability to deliver on the site?

Lord Morrow: My task and responsibility is to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of social-sector housing right across the Province. Like the Member, I am favourably disposed to ensuring that includes Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I think that he is trying to dance on a pinhead, but if he wants to talk about the issue,

my door is open, and he is welcome to discuss it with me.

Belfast Streets Ahead: Phase 3

T2. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on how his Department intends to develop the Belfast Streets Ahead phase 3 public realm improvement project. (AQT 3672/11-16)

Lord Morrow: My Department submitted a planning application in April 2015 for the Belfast Streets Ahead phase 3 project. It received approval from the Belfast planning office in November 2015. Subject to additional approvals, economic appraisal and traffic regulation orders, as well as funding, the construction stage of the phase 3 project will take place from early 2017 to mid-2019. Furthermore, my Department continues to work closely with Belfast City Council and the Department for Regional Development to plan for the successful delivery of that phase of the programme by summer 2018.

The estimated cost of the project is around £32 million over four years, and my officials are in discussion with Belfast City Council about a potential contribution toward the cost of the scheme. It has agreed on £5 million in principle, but that is subject to committee ratification following the outcome of the competitive tender.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that some will make the criticism that the focus is often on Belfast city centre. Can he explain the rationale for continuing to invest in Belfast city centre?

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for her question. When she hears the answer, she may agree with me that there is good rationale for that.

A report by TLT — a top-50 UK law firm — has highlighted untapped potential for retailers here in Northern Ireland, placing us among the top three regions with the greatest opportunities for development. Belfast is the main retail centre here, and the enhancements to the public realm in the city centre delivered through the Belfast Streets Ahead programme have attracted new businesses and investment to the city centre. It is important that we continue to build on that. In addition, the £3 million Bank Square regeneration project has now been completed, and we are already seeing the positive benefits of our investment in that area, with the recent announcement of plans for a new boutique

hotel on Bank Street and the regular use of the square for performances, exhibitions and the FolkTown artisan market.

Voluntary and Community Sector

T3. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Social Development what he is doing to ensure that, when the new Departments are established, the role of the voluntary and community sector is enhanced, given that, coming from the voluntary and community sector, she is very aware of its valuable work for Northern Ireland, albeit its budgets have been severely cut in recent years by various Departments. (AQT 3673/11-16)

Lord Morrow: Maybe it would be appropriate at this time, as I understand that Anna Lo will not be seeking re-election to the House, for me to wish her well. I had the honour, or privilege, of serving under her when she was, and still is, Chairperson of the Environment Committee. Despite differing on issues sometimes, I think that we struck up a good workmanlike relationship and just got on with things. I acknowledge the great work that she has done, and I wish her well in the future. I suppose, some time, we might even say that this place will not be the same without her. So, all the best to you, Ms Lo.

In relation to the question; yes, the voluntary sector is a vital one in Northern Ireland. It would not be my desire that it would be made smaller. Indeed, I think there is potential for it to play an even greater role in the affairs of the Province in the days ahead. However, with the incoming new Department, the new Executive, the new Minister and the new intake of Assembly Members, I have to be truthful and say to you that this will be strictly a matter for the new Minister and Department.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his kind words. I want to thank him too for his always very valuable contribution to the Environment Committee. We definitely had a very good working relationship.

When the voluntary sector is being cut, I think that the role of volunteers is more important than ever before. Would the Minister support the development of policy on active citizenship and volunteering?

Lord Morrow: Yes, I think I would. I am quite happy to say it as briefly as that.

State Pension Age: Impact on Women

T4. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development, after thanking him for his work as Minister at what will be his last Question Time before the election, whether he agrees that women have been adversely affected by the acceleration of the state pension age increase; an appropriate question the week after International Women's Day. (AQT 3674/11-16)

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for his question. I believe that he is referring to the recent media coverage that criticised the Government for failing to inform women that their state pension age had changed despite the original legislation having been enacted in 1995. While it is unfortunate that some women appear to have been unaware of the change to their state pension age, we must recognise that reform is necessary to ensure that our pension system remains affordable and sustainable in the future.

When the timetable for increasing state pension age was revised in 2012, the original proposal was to increase pension age to 66 by April 2020. This would have meant that some women would see their pension age delayed by up to two years. The proposal was subsequently revised, delaying the increase to 66 to October 2020. This was specifically designed as an easement for those women worst affected by the change. The maximum delay is therefore reduced to 18 months.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his answer. I seek his views on this point. He mentioned the change in the dates for the increase in pension age to 66, from April 2020 to October 2020. Does he believe that that was a cosmetic change by the Government?

Lord Morrow: No, I think that there was a really good reason why it was made. I know that the Member is not speaking from a personal point of view. I want to have another look at that one, and I will come back to the Member on it.

I should say, before I sit down, that it was remiss of me to not acknowledge that Judith Cochrane will not be returning here. I have always found Judith to be very affable, amenable, helpful, encouraging and, sometimes, very educational to talk to.

Causeway Volunteer Centre: Funding Cuts

T5. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Social Development how, based on his comments to Ms Lo moments ago, he can justify the decision to further cut core funding for the Causeway Volunteer Centre by 5.7%, which represents a 40% cut since 2011. (AQT 3675/11-16)

Lord Morrow: I seldom try to justify cuts, but sometimes I have to do it. I can tell the Member who asked the question most sincerely that my budget has been cut severely. That was not of my making; it was not what I desired. However, I have to live within budget restraints. Again, if there is an organisation or group in the Member's area that she is particularly concerned about, I urge her to call at room 132 to tell us about it. If there is something we can do, let us hear about it, and we will make an honest attempt to do something.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate the Minister's comments, and I appreciate that his budget has been cut. However, I sometimes think that we are pulling the rug from beneath us by cutting the likes of the community and voluntary sector. If we included them in our public sector, we would make great savings. Has the Minister considered how, in his Department, he can use the community and voluntary sector so that we can save money, instead of making further cuts?

Lord Morrow: The Member makes a salient point, and I think it is a good point: in reality, the voluntary sector often saves money. That point is not missed, and, indeed, when it comes to funding the voluntary sector, that is one of the issues that is analysed and carefully considered. I believe, as I have said to others — I mean this sincerely — that the sector plays a vital role in the communities in which they are based. I suspect that the group that the Member speaks about — maybe there is more than one — is no different. I assure her that that is very much taken into consideration.

Portrush Public Realm Scheme: Update

T6. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Portrush public realm scheme. (AQT 3676/11-16)

Lord Morrow: Yes, I think I can, if I can pick it up here.

In 2011, Coleraine Borough Council commissioned a feasibility study that determined that it was technically possible to build pontoons and extend Portrush harbour to

create a marina with up to 220 berths at a potential cost of between £10 million and £14 million. In June 2015, further work was commissioned to determine whether other value-for-money development options were possible. It is anticipated that additional work will be completed by 31 March 2016.

A master plan to explore opportunities for the development of the land side of the harbour is expected to commence in the summer of 2016. In addition, my Department has committed half a million pounds from its 2016-17 capital budget to allow design work to commence on a public realm scheme for Portrush and the redevelopment of Portrush train station. Those projects are time-critical, and it is essential that the capital build elements are completed before the Open Championship in 2019. My Department has also provided funding of £1.5 million for a public realm scheme in Portstewart. That scheme is under way and will be complete by the end of May 2016.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for that answer. He pre-empted my supplementary question: I was going to ask him whether he could be definitive about a start date for the Portrush scheme and whether he could guarantee it would be finished in time for the Open Championship.

Lord Morrow: I will be definitive, and I will give the Member an assurance that every determined effort will be made to ensure that Portrush is looking very slick when that important event comes along in 2019. The Member can go back to Portrush tomorrow and tell everybody that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our time for questions to the Minister for Social Development. We now move on to questions to the Assembly Commission.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that question 6, 9 and 12 have been withdrawn.

3.30 pm

Parliament Buildings: Energy Efficiency

Mr Hilditch: I apologise for my absence earlier, which was due to three Committees going on at the same time.

1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Assembly Commission how it plans to make Parliament Buildings more energy-efficient. (AQO 9897/11-16)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will be aware that, in the recently completed roof project, the Assembly Commission took the opportunity to refurbish or replace all of the existing roof-mounted mechanical and electrical services and, where appropriate, to incorporate renewable technologies in the scheme, specifically photovoltaic (PV) panels, rainwater harvesting and solar thermal tubes. Electricity generated by the PV panels is now being used to supplement the Building's energy supply, and some of the hot water supply is provided by means of the solar thermal power.

It was anticipated that these improvements would reduce the Building's energy consumption by a minimum of 25%, and early indications illustrate that savings in excess of that figure have been achieved to date. Other energy-saving initiatives include the introduction of motion-sensor lighting, the replacement of light bulbs in the building with more energy-efficient LED bulbs, the rerouting of pipes and cables for more efficient use and the installation of mains timer sockets where appropriate. The currently displayed energy certificate for the Building gives us a D rating, and the score has improved from 97 last year to 89 this year, which is an excellent achievement for a building of this nature. The Commission will continue to explore all practical means to increase the energy efficiency of the Building.

Mr Hilditch: I wish the Member well, as I understand that she is not attempting to return to any future mandate. I wish her all the best for the future. Can I ask —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can the Member direct his microphone? We are not picking up the question.

Mr Hilditch: Sorry. I ask if the Commission can ensure that a much better controlled and efficient heating system is in place for future mandates, as it has been a somewhat controversial one here, with sometimes too much heat.

Mr McCarthy: Hot air.

Mrs Cochrane: I will not comment about hot air. The roof project incorporated an upgraded building management system that controls the heating throughout the Building. Staff monitor the heating at set points across the Building and adjust these when necessary. This system, combined with new boilers and sustainable development in the roof itself, has reduced overall energy consumption by 30%. If the Member has a specific issue with his office and does not want to continue to have to wear his thermal vest in the winter and his string vest in the summer — *[Laughter.]* — I am sure that, if he speaks to the relevant building control staff, they will be able to assist.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. During this mandate, many visitors and Members have commented on the heat in the Building and in the offices, as the Member mentioned. Can the Member tell me the cost of heating the Building each year during this mandate?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. I do not have those exact figures in front of me, although I have said that the costs have come down by 30%. I am sure that I can provide that information to the Member.

Parliament Buildings: Disability Access

2. **Mr Allen** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on how it has improved disability access in Parliament Buildings for Members, staff and visitors since May 2011. (AQO 9898/11-16)

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will be aware that, in the recently completed — sorry, I am on the wrong question. Apologies.

The Assembly Commission is determined to make Parliament Buildings accessible to all, and strenuous efforts have been made over a number of years to improve access for people with disabilities. On the ground floor of the Building, a Changing Places facility was installed in 2011, providing fully accessible toilet facilities for people with profound disabilities. Parliament Buildings is one of the few public buildings to have such a facility. In the summer of 2012, the Commission installed front ramped access to Parliament Buildings to ensure that all visitors are able to gain access via the primary entrance to the Building. Parking for people with disabilities is provided in the east and west upper car parks adjacent to the

Building, and we have recently increased the number of spaces available.

The Assembly Commission also holds the Louder Than Words charter mark, which demonstrates its commitment to improve access and services to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. In November 2012, the Commission became the first organisation to receive the National Autistic Society autism access award. Minor physical alterations have recently been made to the reception areas in the Business Office and stationery office to improve access for wheelchair users, and changes are proposed in the Members' Bar in the near future.

The Commission has also recently approved a programme of works that will include improvements to the existing lifts and to access from the lower ground floor to ground floor level, particularly for people with physical disabilities. Further improvements, including automatically opening corridor doors, are also planned.

Mr Allen: I thank the Member for her answers. Whilst I place on record my utmost thanks to the Commission and those involved behind the scenes for addressing the accessibility and facility deficiencies in the Building, has the Commission implemented any regular monitoring of access services and facilities to make sure that they are as up to date as possible? It was only when I came into the Building that we recognised that there were a number of deficiencies.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his supplementary. He is absolutely right: until he came into the Building, we had the bare minimum of what was required. It is only through his being here and the invaluable advice that he has given to the Commission on his access around the Building that the massive strides have been made to make this place more disability-friendly and more accessible.

We as a Commission have made a commitment to keep this issue under our power and to keep looking at it — as will the future Commission, whatever it may look like and whoever might be on it — because we know that there are still a lot of things that we could do. We have debated a lot of things in the Commission, which, I have to admit, are based on finances. I know that the Member has been happy, to date, with the actions that have been put in place. On behalf of the Commission, I thank him for all of his help.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Member clarify if there is a first-aid station in the Building?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. From memory of having to use it once, I know that we have a first-aid room in the Building; it is on the second floor. You will notice around the Building, signs to do with the first-aiders, who are trained in first aid, who are available in the Building. Again, from memory, I believe that we have at least five defibrillators in the Building. They are stationed on most floors, and people are trained to use them.

Mr McKinney: I thank Mr Allen for his question and the Commission for its answers, which rightly underscore the need for proper provision. Has consideration been given to those who may not be disabled but could have conditions that somehow restrict their movement or ability to access the Building, particularly given that they have to park long distances away from the Building when they come here?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. Again, as part of the overall restructuring and looking at disabled access to the Building, extra parking spaces have been provided at the east and west doors, although I do understand that there is a long way to walk within the Building. I do not know how we can overcome that. I do not know whether we can get parking. We cannot get it at the front door, albeit if we could, we would. We may have to look at the back door and the slope as a possibility, or maybe some of the new parking bays at the back are disabled parking bays. It is something that we will continually look at. It is an issue that is fed to members of the Commission by members of our parties, and it is something that will be kept on the agenda, because it certainly has been a difficult building to access over the years.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for her response and, particularly, the provision of the changing places facility in the Building. I can say from personal experience that is vital when it comes to personal hygiene etc. Does the Commission advertise or alert people to that provision being here, because it could mean the difference between people coming or not coming?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question, which is a very good question. It is one that I am unable to answer as a Commission member, but I can answer it from a personal level. A year ago, I had a visitor in the Building who was paralysed from the neck

down and required changing facilities. I was not a Commission member at the time, and I was unaware that we had the changing places room. I had offered my office for his carer to assist in his needs. So, I think you are absolutely right: we need to advertise more that we have those facilities available here.

Usher Services: Staff Reduction

3. **Mr Swann** asked the Assembly Commission for its assessment of whether the reduction in staff in Usher Services has had an impact on Members discharging their duties or public access to Parliament Buildings. (AQO 9899/11-16)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. Due to budget cuts in recent years, the overall staffing of the secretariat has reduced by some 60 staff. To meet those cuts, the Commission undertook a business efficiency review programme in 2012 and also ran a voluntary exit scheme in 2015. Those have resulted in a decrease in the number of staff in the Usher Services business area. Natural wastage has also been a factor in that decrease. The head of Usher Services, in consultation with colleagues, has, however, realigned some functions in an attempt to ensure that business demand continues to be met and that there has been no impact on Members discharging their duties or restrictions placed on public access to Parliament Buildings. To date, as far as we are aware, that has been successful, but planning is under way for staffing levels in the new financial year to establish how best any vacancies might be filled.

Mr Swann: I thank the Commission member for her answer. I draw to her attention, for any staffing review, the fact that Members have complained to me that, when they were going down to attend activities and publicity events on the apron, the fence gate was locked, and Members were unable to attend the activity on the other side of the fence. Unlike some Members, I was able to climb over the fence, but I can assure you that I would not advise it.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. It is an interesting point. I will certainly take that back to the relevant director to raise with the head of Usher Services, as we would not want to curtail any Member going down there, and we really do not want to see you hurdling the gate either. However, we also have to maintain a balance of having the gate locked for security reasons. Yes, I will take back that issue.

Social Media Misuse

4. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on secretariat staff on suspension for alleged misuse of social media. (AQO 9900/11-16)

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for his question. While the Assembly Commission does not make any public comment on personnel matters, especially when those matters are ongoing, I can confirm that one member of Assembly Commission staff is currently suspended as part of a disciplinary process involving the alleged misuse of the Commission's social media policy. I can also confirm that, following appropriate investigations under the Commission's disciplinary procedures, three members of staff have been disciplined in respect of breaches of social media policy.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the member for her answer. I completely appreciate that, when we are dealing with personnel, there should be confidentiality. However, in a general sense, will the member assure me and the House that there has been even-handedness in the way in which the matter has been dealt with and that original thought in social media and the use of social media would not be viewed in the same way as retweeting or reusing somebody else's quotations? Obviously, those two things would, in the real world, be viewed as two very different scenarios.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The social media policy was introduced to secretariat staff in 2014, and they were provided with training on the policy. The policy covers the acceptable use of social media by staff engaged by the Commission and has a particular focus of maintaining standards of behaviour from all staff and that their impartiality cannot be called into question. The guidance and training provided covered a lot for all members of staff and MLAs in the Building.

Ms Hanna: I thank the member for her answers. Will she advise whether the Commission staff who are involved have had any opportunity to appeal the judgement that was made about their activity on social media?

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for her question. The disciplinary policy includes an appeal mechanism that fully complies with all legislative requirements. It is in process.

Mr Allister: Is it not wholly shameful that a Commission that turns a blind eye to ripping off hundreds of thousands of pounds by a bogus research company then seeks to make an example of easy targets like security staff who apparently retweet some comments by political journalists? Is that not wholly disproportionate?

Is it not time that those staff were relieved of the pressure that has been put on them by the austere approach taken in this matter?

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for his question. It would be wholly inappropriate for me to discuss sensitive information in relation to an ongoing personnel matter.

3.45 pm

Parliament Buildings: Car Parking

5. **Mrs Overend** asked the Assembly Commission when it will take action to resolve permanently the inadequacy of car-parking facilities for staff and visitors in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 9901/11-16)

Mr Gardiner: I thank Mrs Overend for her question. The Assembly Commission recognises the car-parking problems experienced by users of Parliament Buildings. The Commission is aware that some users of Parliament Buildings have experienced difficulty parking on busier days. Facilities directorate has, however, been able to ease the pressure on parking through staffing, some physical realignment of the lower east car park and by virtue of the provision of the overspill car park that came into service in 2011. Those measures provided the Assembly with an additional 40 spaces and have been well received by many car-park users. A further 35 parking spaces, including two for charging electric vehicles, are now available for upper car park users at the rear of Parliament Buildings.

Assembly senior management has already been involved in discussions with DFP to look at the possibility of obtaining further car-parking provision for users of Parliament Buildings. Unfortunately, at this time, DFP reports that there is little prospect of obtaining further spaces in the Stormont estate. However, facilities management will continue to monitor the situation.

Mrs Overend: I thank the commissioner for that response. The provision of 40 additional places was welcome, but that was four years ago. It is

clear that more action is needed for members of organisations and members of the public who come to meet MLAs and staff in the Building. Does he agree that it is unacceptable that they have so few spaces and have to park so far away?

Mr Gardiner: I thank Mrs Overend for her further comments. I support her sentiments and thank her for her supplementary. The Commission is aware of the ongoing and often serious parking difficulties at Parliament Buildings. I hope that the next Commission will identify it as an area for consideration with all speed. I hope that that is acceptable to Mrs Overend.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): As I said earlier, question 6 has been withdrawn.

Training for New Members

7. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the induction or capacity-building training that will be provided to new Members in the next mandate. (AQO 9903/11-16)

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for his question. I pay a personal tribute to Mr Maginness at this, his last Question Time. In true, typical Alban fashion, he continues to be concerned for the running of the Assembly and for its Members right up to the last minute. Politics is a profession rather than a vocation, and continuing professional development is as important in political life as it is in any other profession. Therefore, it will be important for Members newly elected in May 2016 to be provided with an appropriate induction to the business of the Assembly, as well as ongoing professional development to support them in their role as public representatives and legislators.

Supported by the Assembly Commission, Politics Plus is developing a new Member induction programme. It will be implemented following the election in May and focus on the role of the MLA in representing the interests of the electorate and scrutinising the work of the Executive. Whilst the programme has been designed for new Members, returning Members are also free to participate as they require. The induction programme to be delivered by Politics Plus will supplement those already provided by the Business Office on the procedures of the Assembly, including Standing Orders, and by the Bill Office on the legislative process. New Members will also receive induction support from the Assembly's Research and Information

Service, Finance Office and Legal Services, as well as other offices of the Assembly as appropriate.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the representative of the Commission for her kind words. I have enjoyed working with Karen McKeivitt and, indeed, with the Commission. In the programme, will there be an emphasis on dealing with legislation, particularly draft legislation? It is a process that needs considerable skill and knowledge. Is that available?

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The induction programme provided will cover a wide range of areas, including strategic planning; ethical leadership; speech delivery; dealing with difficult conversations and conflict resolution; effective Committee scrutiny; the role of the Committee Chair; analysing complex information; working with the media; using social media; crisis management; managing reputational risk; and the Members' code of conduct. Members attending the induction programme will also receive briefings from employment law specialists, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and the Northern Ireland Ombudsman.

If Members have any further ideas that Commission members can bring to the politics programme, our doors are open, and we would be only too willing, before the end of this mandate, to include any information that they would like included in the programme.

Education Programme: West Tyrone Schools

8. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Assembly Commission to outline how many schools from West Tyrone have taken part in the Assembly's Education Service programme since May 2011. (AQO 9904/11-16)

Mr Gardiner: I thank Mr Buchanan for his question. Between May 2011 and the present, 36 school groups from the West Tyrone constituency, with 900 participants, have availed themselves of the Assembly's Education Service programme through visiting Parliament Buildings. In that same period, the Assembly's Education Service has delivered outreach programmes to six groups in the West Tyrone constituency, involving a total of 768 participants. The Education Service also facilitates Let's Talk events in each constituency on a regular basis. Those events afford an opportunity to older school pupils to question

and debate with local politicians at constituency level. You will be pleased at that. All post-primary schools in a constituency are invited. One such event has been held in the West Tyrone constituency in each of the past three years, with an average of 34 pupils attending each event. Six of the 11 post-primary schools in the area have participated in at least one event.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Member for his response and for outlining the number of events that have taken place in the West Tyrone constituency. Based on the feedback received by the Commission, can the Member outline what benefits the schools have found for pupils in the events?

Mr Gardiner: Thank you for your supplementary. The main Assembly website and the dedicated Education Service website contain all the relevant information for groups wishing to take part in the education programme in Parliament Buildings. The Education Service also has a specific Twitter feed to raise awareness of the service.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 9 has been withdrawn.

Committees: Reduction in Departments

10. **Mr Givan** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the impact the reduction in the number of Executive Departments will have on the resourcing of Assembly Committees. (AQO 9906/11-16)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. It is anticipated that the reduction in the number of Departments from 12 to nine will result in an equivalent reduction in the number of Statutory Committees. As a result, the Committee staff complement will be reduced by nine staff. In addition, the Research and Information Service staff complement has been reduced by three, and the staff complement of the Official Report has been reduced by two.

Mr Givan: As we welcome the reduction in the number of Departments and the reduction in the number of MLAs at a future election, how much money can we anticipate the reductions saving the taxpayer, who has to fund this institution?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The savings that I will refer to are specifically in this Building, but, until the new staffing structures have been finalised, I cannot give you a completely accurate figure.

However, the release of staff across the Assembly under the voluntary exit scheme will save more than £800,000 per year, and the reduction in complement arising from the changes in the number of Committees has facilitated a significant proportion of those savings.

Mr Dickson: In respect of the reduction in the number of staff to reflect the reduction in the number of Committees, can the Commission indicate that it took into account that the remit and depth of the work of those Committees will be substantially more than the existing Committees? While there is to be a reduction in staff, can we be assured that it will reflect the additional work that those Committees will have?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. Whilst every effort will be made to ensure that there is appropriate support for all Committees, the reduction in the staffing complement that we have already started to progress means there will be limited opportunity to take further account of the increased remit of a number of the new Statutory Committees.

The Commission regularly reviews the services that we provide, and I am sure that the new Commission will keep this under review and reassess our budgetary priorities. I am sure that the important scrutiny work of the Committees will not be overlooked.

Parliament Buildings: Lit Up

11. **Mr Girvan** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the dates in 2016 that Parliament Buildings will be lit up in support of good causes. (AQO 9907/11-16)

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. At its meeting on 11 November 2014, the Assembly Commission agreed the policy for the external lighting of Parliament Buildings in order to manage the use of the system while preserving the dignity of Parliament Buildings.

In line with the policy, the Commission scheduled up to four days during the calendar year for events of its choice. In 2016, the four days chosen were Monday 8 March, International Women's Day, when it is lit up purple; Thursday 17 March, St Patrick's Day, when it will be lit up green; Tuesday 12 July, when it will be lit up orange; and Friday 11 November, Remembrance Day, when it will be lit up red.

The Assembly charity of the year for 2016, Positive Futures, is allowed five days during its 12-month term. To date, no additional requests have been granted in relation to the other eight days scheduled for events in support of charitable, community and non-profit organisations during the calendar year. Such requests will be considered by the Commission as and when they are received.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Member for her answer. Part of the reason I asked the question is that there is a fear that it could be used by others to make a political statement. Are criteria set down to ensure that it is for charitable events as well, such as autism and organisations such as that?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. In line with the policy, only events organised at Parliament Buildings or within the Stormont estate that are DFP-approved will have access to the lighting system. Only charitable, community or non-profit organisations based in or having a significant connection to Northern Ireland, and celebrating a significant anniversary — for example, first, fifth, tenth, twenty-fifth etc — or an occasion, may be permitted to have Parliament Buildings illuminated in their special colour.

Women in Politics

13. **Mr McCartney** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the action it will take to encourage women into politics. (AQO 9909/11-16)

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his question. We got to the end of Question Time and got them all in. Mr Deputy Speaker, could I have an additional minute to answer the question?

It is an obvious fact that women are under-represented in political and public life. The evidence is there. We have too few female MLAs and woefully too few women on boards of public bodies while we have men who sit on multiple boards.

Returning to the question, in 2015, the Assembly Commission, through Politics Plus, established a Women in Politics programme. The programme was aimed at female elected representatives in order to provide support for the development of their political careers, and, particularly, it was to encourage female councillors to put themselves forward for elections and to build links between local and

central government. It is anticipated that a second cohort of that programme will be commissioned in 2016-17.

4.00 pm

A young female leaders academy was launched in October 2015. Its purpose is to create awareness of the added value that women bring to the public and political sphere. Through this initiative, the young women will learn about the opportunities that are available to them, particularly in political life, through shaping policy and instigating positive change. The Speaker is also responsible for leading Assembly Women's Week. Assembly Women's Week was an initiative brought forward by the Speaker to not only mark International Women's Day 2016 but to end the mandate of the Assembly with a positive focus on improving female representation in the Assembly and public life generally.

In addition to the above programmes, in February this year the Speaker established a reference group on a gender-sensitive Assembly to advise him and future Speakers on initiatives and programmes that enhance the role of women in political and public life. The reference group includes MLAs from each of the five Executive parties, as well as one representing the smaller parties and independent Members.

Most recently, the Assembly women's caucus was established and launched last week. That is a huge step forward in demonstrating our commitment to supporting women who enter politics. The members of the caucus will work together, irrespective of political party affiliation, to ensure that the political culture of the Assembly is more reflective of the gender balance in our wider society. The caucus will also provide an additional driving force to support and encourage more women to enter political life. This Assembly Commission is justifiably proud of the actions it has taken to encourage women into politics.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of this, the final Question Time of this Assembly. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

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

Executive Committee Business

Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly agrees that the Westminster Parliament should consider the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 February 2016, dealing with the power in clause 1(4) of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, to nominate two members of the Independent Reporting Commission; and the establishment of new measures relating to the financial responsibility of the Assembly contained in clause 9. — [Mrs Pengelly (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister).]

Mr Allen: The Ulster Unionist Party supports progress. We support moves to bring an end to paramilitarism in all its forms in Northern Ireland; to frustrate and close down associated criminality; to free communities from suppression; and to support those who genuinely want to move down a peaceful path. It is very welcome to see that we will now have an extension of the period for the appointment of Ministers, which will allow two weeks for negotiations of the Programme for Government (PFG).

In our 2011 manifesto, the Ulster Unionist Party proposed that we totally change our approach to drawing up the Programme for Government. We proposed that it be negotiated before everyone took up their positions in Departments and the silo mentality set in. We believe that will be a hugely positive change in how we do business that could vastly improve the outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland, and we are delighted that other parties have come round to our idea and that we are now seeing it become a reality.

I should also point that we do not think the Bill is perfect.

We tabled a number of amendments to the Bill at Westminster that we believe could have improved it, such as amending the definition of a victim and changing the method of election for the First Minister and deputy First Minister. There are gaps, and opportunities for

improvements have not been taken. I think that, with hindsight, we will regret not taking those opportunities.

Mr Allister: Following on from Mr Attwood's contribution before Question Time, I join in wishing you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a long and happy retirement. The relief that comes, I am sure, from escaping this place will be most enjoyable. I want to record my appreciation for your courtesy to me, even when I have stretched your patience. I think that you have performed your role in a very credible and suitable way. So, best wishes in that regard.

I turn to the subject in hand: the Provisional IRA indisputably is a paramilitary organisation. It is one that the Chief Constable advised us, just over six months ago, had murdered again. It is one that a government panel, after studying all relevant data, advised us still exists, still has access to arms and still has an army council. The First Minister, back in September, correctly advised us that Sinn Féin is inextricably linked to the Provisional IRA. Yet what we are being asked to consent to today is that the deputy First Minister should be inextricably linked to the appointment of commissioners who are supposedly going to independently review paramilitary behaviour. I do not consent to that. I do not think it at all appropriate that one of that ilk, identified as the leadership of a party that his partner, the First Minister, says is inextricably linked to the IRA, should have any hand in any such appointments.

Of course, the situation is more ludicrous when that same individual and that same party deny, in face of all the evidence and in face of death on our streets, that the IRA even exists. And so we have this remarkable situation where supposedly credible bodies are to be established to monitor the activities of paramilitary organisations, of which the Provisional IRA has always been chief, yet one of the sponsors of that situation and one of the appointers — one of those making the appointments — is someone who not only is affiliated with such an organisation, according to the First Minister, but cannot even honestly admit the existence of that organisation. What a farce. Of course, two of the four appointments are to be made by OFMDFM. Points have been made that they would be more appropriately made by the Department of Justice, but we all know why they are being made by OFMDFM. It is very simple. It is one for the DUP, and one for Sinn Féin. It is so that they, who are inextricably linked, according to the First Minister, to one of the paramilitary organisations supposedly going to be

monitored, have the luxury of appointing a placeman to the monitoring body.

That is how ludicrous and absurd this proposition from Fresh Start is. Yet, no doubt, this House, as it swept murder under the carpet, will sweep the absurdity of that under the carpet today and nod through that ludicrous, absurd situation. I, for one, do not consent to such appointments. I regard them as an insult to the many innocent victims of that and other paramilitary organisations.

The other proposition that we are asked to consent to, I do concur with. It is quite clear, after the shenanigans of this time last year, with fantasy Budgets and all that nonsense, that the Treasury decided that it was time to rein-in Stormont in regard to future budgetary arrangements, and rightly so. Therefore, in this Bill, there are restraints, requirements and expectations to be met in budgetary terms. I think that that is necessary, and I certainly consent to that. But, as for the first: not in my name, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mrs Pengelly (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am grateful for Members' contributions to this debate. I will speak for a short while on those contributions. I welcome the support of the Committee, as outlined by the Deputy Chair, Mr Chris Lyttle.

I want to thank my colleague Mr Gordon Lyons for his support. He is not in the Chamber, but I thank him for support in relation to this matter and also for his valuable work on a range of issues arising from Fresh Start and his very constructive contributions, not only in this debate, but in relation to various matters arising from the Fresh Start Agreement.

I turn to the comments of Mr Alex Attwood. I have read through the amendments that the SDLP put down in the House of Commons, so I know that it has been very active in laying those amendments and in its scrutiny of this legislation. He raises points in relation to the appointments process. Certainly, we want to maximise confidence and ensure the effectiveness of this commission. I have heard his point. This is a legislative consent motion, and the Bill itself is has substantively gone through its processes in another place. However, we are supportive of the proposal to consult with the Justice Minister in relation to these appointments. In that, we are balancing efficiency and effectiveness with what is workable. With the First Minister and deputy First Minister making those appointments, in consultation with the Justice Minister, it

represents well in excess of 70 Members of the House. So we have tried to ensure and maximise buy-in, insofar as is workable.

Mr Attwood raises points in relation to the Budget issue. I welcome — I think we should all welcome — the focus on living within our means. It is absolutely critical for the future of Northern Ireland, the Assembly and the Executive that we take a strong and sensible approach to the Budget. Unfortunately, we have not always seen that or had that demonstrated. However, I think that these new proposals will enhance that. We must live within our means; that is positive and welcome, and it will create additional transparency. The Member refers to attempts to increase knowledge on these matters. I would say that it is not only welcome to increase knowledge; it is absolutely essential that there is increased knowledge in this Chamber and in our local democratic institutions.

Mr Attwood raises matters in relation to the pledge. Despite what he has said, it is not a devolved matter, therefore I will not go into the detail of that.

I turn to the matters raised by the Ulster Unionist Party Member Andy Allen.

I step back in amazement at the attempts by the Ulster Unionist Party to take credit for the good things, while, in fact, it walked away, gave up responsibility and took the opportunity to critique and criticise from the sidelines. Government is difficult, and perhaps it was too difficult for some who were originally in the Executive. However, I can give the Member a commitment that we will continue to fight for what is best for Northern Ireland by doing all that we can to make Northern Ireland work. That is about sticking with it, working hard and making improvements. That is what we are doing today in the latest of a long line of necessary improvements to the system.

4.15 pm

In relation to the comments from the Member for North Antrim Mr Jim Allister, we will continue to negotiate and secure the best for everyone in Northern Ireland. We firmly believe that that is devolved government, local democratic accountability in the form that we have it and building a new future, not wallowing in the past but doing everything we can to support victims and provide the best chance of justice.

Today, we heard the tragic news of the death of the prison officer caught up in the recent

disgraceful terrorist and criminal act just off the Cregagh Road. That has no place in the new Northern Ireland that we are trying to build. It is wrong, and it must stop. My sympathies lie with the family, friends and local community, who, I know, are in shock at the news. That is why we must continue to make democracy work, no matter how difficult it is. We cannot and should not go back to the days when such barbaric and criminal acts were common. We are committed to building a better future in which such atrocious acts are crushed out and removed.

I thank Members for their contributions and for the questions and issues that they have raised. I hope that I have been able to answer some of those, at least, to their satisfaction. 'A Fresh Start' has provided a basis for addressing some of our most challenging and intractable issues. It does not resolve them all, but it is a positive step forward. I can give a commitment to many, including victims and survivors in Northern Ireland, that we will continue to strive to resolve the outstanding issues. The positive moves brought forward by 'A Fresh Start' continue to fulfil our commitment to move forward with strong leadership in order to build a better future for all in Northern Ireland. I ask, therefore, for the continued support of Members to allow these provisions of the Bill, which require the Assembly's consent, to proceed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the Westminster Parliament should consider the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 February 2016, dealing with the power in clause 1(4) of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, to nominate two members of the Independent Reporting Commission; and the establishment of new measures relating to the financial responsibility of the Assembly contained in clause 9.

Fisheries Bill: Final Stage

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That the Fisheries Bill [NIA 74/11-16] do now pass.

I am pleased that the Bill has reached its Final Stage and that, as a result of this small but important Bill, we will be able to avoid the threat of infraction as a result of non-compliance with

aspects of the common fisheries policy. As I have said before in the Assembly, I am disappointed that more of the package of new measures in the Bill as introduced will not be enacted, in the short term at least. Those measures would have helped to ensure that fisheries legislation in the North remained fit for purpose and that we could continue to protect fish stocks and sensitive aquatic environments. However, I recognise the time constraints on the Assembly as a result of the Bill being introduced so late in the mandate. I acknowledge that there was limited time for the Assembly and the ARD Committee in particular to consider the Bill in depth and in adequate detail. While I had hoped that some of the less controversial or less complicated aspects might have been considered, I am grateful that the key and most urgent aspect has had the support of Members and is retained in the Bill before us today. It remains my hope, of course, that any matters not taken forward this time will be brought forward in a future mandate.

I am pleased to have worked with the Agriculture Committee to introduce the power to amend the Fisheries Act 1981 in order that EU common fisheries policy rules will be directly enforceable in the North without the need for additional legislation. During the Bill's development, the EU Commission asked why such rules were not already directly enforceable here and threatened to take action as a result of our inability to do so. As stated by my officials during a presentation to the Agriculture Committee on 12 January and formally notified to the Committee in writing on 14 January, the EU has confirmed that the threat will be removed as soon as the Bill is enacted. In addition, as a result of the Bill, there will be a reduction in the number and length of pieces of subordinate legislation required to implement the CFP. It is hoped that freeing resources from having to make such legislation could, in the longer term, mean that more resources can be put into regulating the inshore area, which will, I believe, be welcomed by many in the industry.

The Bill will allow my Department to concentrate limited resources on issues important to the fishing industry rather than on the replication of EU regulations in local legislation. In support of better regulation, some statutory rules or parts of statutory rules could also, in time, be revoked. More importantly, of course, without the change made by the Bill, my Department would find it challenging to continue to implement EU legislation by the required deadlines.

It is important to note that there should be no concerns for the industry as a result of the Bill. Fishermen or others who are already regulated under the CFP will see little change. The Bill simply alters the legislative basis on which the contravention of certain EU laws will be enforced. Furthermore, as my Department is required to operate in a way that is fully compatible with EU law, the direct application of such rules as a result of the Bill will mean that there can be no scope for gold-plating.

Finally, while there will be no need to make new domestic regulations every time EU legislation changes, my Department will continue to engage with the industry early in the EU legislative process, and stakeholders will continue to feed into the policy and legislation development process.

As I said, I am pleased that the Bill has reached Final Stage and that we have retained the key clause that will ensure that we avoid the threat of infraction. I thank the Agriculture Committee and other Members for their support during the Bill's passage. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr Irwin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): The Bill now at Final Stage is obviously very different from the one introduced by the Minister in December last year, which contained 19 clauses and made important provisions regarding the regulation of sea and inland fisheries. However, the Committee had serious concerns about the introduction of the Bill so late in the parliamentary cycle and about the impact that that might have on the time available to conduct proper scrutiny. The Committee is pleased that the Minister accepted and acknowledged those concerns.

After discussions with the Minister, the Committee quickly established that clause 6 was the most urgent provision. It provides for the direct application of most EU fisheries regulations as soon as they come into operation, thereby eliminating any threat of infraction proceedings by the European Commission. An agreement was reached with the Minister that she would take forward at Consideration Stage only the clauses that the Committee was content that it had had time to thoroughly consider — clause 6 and clause 19.

This outcome was a positive example of the Committee and the Minister working together to address an urgent issue without compromising the best interests of those working in the fishing industry. The Committee is very aware that the clauses not moved at Consideration Stage

contained many important provisions. We look forward to those being brought before the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in the new mandate. On behalf of the Committee, I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the opportunity to speak at Final Stage. Coming from South Down, which has ports such as Kilkeel, Ardglass and the neighbouring port of Portavogie, I think that we should not underestimate the importance of the fishing industry, not alone for those areas but for the wider agrifood industry and our economy in general.

From the outset, the Bill has sought to modernise enforcement powers and provide greater legal clarity to ensure a balance between the protection of our natural habitat and the development of our fishing business. That balance is critical to ensuring that the industry has a successful future. During Committee Stage, Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, the Bill changed significantly.

It quickly became apparent that the Committee did not have the full authority to interrogate the Bill and, due to that, there would be no time to scrutinise the Bill in its entirety. The Bill was then salvaged when the Minister made it clear that the Bill was necessary to comply with EU procedures and to create a parallel legislative provision for Northern Ireland that would apply EU fishery control regulations as soon as they came into effect.

I welcome the work between the Minister and the Committee that followed and believe that it was a positive example of legislative cooperation. It now means that our fishermen will not be punished for infractions of European obligations.

The issues that the Bill initially tried to tackle that could not be tackled due to time constraints and relevant Committee remits still affect our current practices. New legislation that updates areas of sea fisheries, inland fisheries, licensing and penalties must be dealt with, and it is unfortunate that we are unable to deal with them at this time. With the new departmental structure and the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I am positive that those issues will be dealt with. If elected in the new mandate, I look forward to continuing my engagement with fishermen, the fishing industry and with Assembly colleagues to deliver that new legislation.

Finally, regardless of what the Fisheries Bill initially intended, or what it finally became, it will still deliver a better outcome for Northern Ireland at the end of this mandate. In the end, it may not be the catch of the day, but it is a good supper.

Mrs Dobson: How do you follow that? I imagine that most Ministers would be slightly embarrassed to have presided over a Bill like this. Having gone from what was, only weeks ago, a 19-clause Bill about ensuring protection for our marine and inland aquatic environments, in the end, we have been left with today's sorry state of affairs. Given all the time and energy that went into consulting on the original proposals in the Bill, it was only through sheer incompetence that the Department waited until the very last moment to introduce a Bill. Even then, the majority of proposals in it came far too late. Therefore, we have been left with just a single clause that deals with the enforcement of EU rules.

Let us not fool ourselves: if Europe was not likely to come in and slap a major infraction penalty on us, even that single issue would not be before us in the Chamber today. Of course, as I have said before, that would not have been the first time that DARD's ineptitude has brought infraction fines to the door of the Executive. The fact that the Department belatedly realised the importance of the clause is some comfort at least, and it may, at long last, have started to learn from its mistakes.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank those Members who made positive contributions to the debate today and throughout the course of discussions in recent debates. As we come to the end of the mandate, we have had it all in this short debate: jokes from this corner and negativity from that corner. But, sure, c'est la vie.

I thank everybody for their contributions to the debate; they have been very useful. We have a way to go, but what we have achieved is good for the industry. There are other areas that we will come back to, now that we have done the work on all the other issues that we wish to look at, but that is a job for the new mandate. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Fisheries Bill [NIA 74/11-16] do now pass.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I ask the House to take its ease for a moment.

4.30 pm

Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill: Final Stage

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I beg to move

That the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill [NIA 71/11-16] do now pass.

I am pleased to bring the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill before the Assembly today for its Final Stage. When I announced, on 23 June 2014, my intention to legislate on the issue within the remainder of the Assembly mandate, I was aware that that was a very challenging target, but I was convinced of the need to take action on the issue.

The damage that bullying can cause in the lives of children and young people can be profound and long-lasting. Too many young people continue to struggle with the problem. I committed my Department to the challenge and asked my officials to work closely with stakeholders and the Assembly to do everything possible to secure the successful passage of the Bill. Today — the final sitting day of this mandate — we have reached the final milestone.

It is only fair that I acknowledge the goodwill and efforts of the Education Committee and Members of the House in bringing the Bill to this point. Members will be well aware that the House is sometimes portrayed in the media as being too slow to act. The Bill, and the support that it has received throughout its passage, exemplifies how we can react quickly, effectively and with a unity of purpose to address issues of real importance for our citizens.

I am already on record as stating that schools already take their responsibilities for discipline, good behaviour and pastoral care very seriously. School inspections confirm that the vast majority of our schools already meet those duties to a very high standard. This is not a situation where sweeping change was required; rather, the Bill was drafted to provide a clear and consistent framework for all schools to follow, and, in doing so, to ensure that all pupils are protected to the same high standards. By providing an inclusive definition of "bullying", introducing a duty for schools to record all incidents of bullying and in strengthening the

role of boards of governors in ensuring that effective policies are followed in their school, the Bill achieves that goal.

During its scrutiny, the Education Committee specifically singled out the problem of cyberbullying, which can often occur outside of school but the impacts of which inevitably carry on into school the next day, limiting the ability of its victim to learn effectively and take part fully in school life. Cyberbullying can quickly become a criminal matter. In serious cases of cyberbullying, I believe that the correct response is that the PSNI is called in to investigate them properly. Nonetheless, I was happy to take on board the Education Committee's concern on this issue. The Bill will now provide a clear legal basis for schools to address cyberbullying by taking whatever action they deem reasonable to respond in each case. If less serious incidents can be resolved at school level before they escalate into criminal actions, that can only be to the benefit of everyone involved.

Much has already been said about the need for the Department to provide robust guidance to accompany the Bill and to ensure that the training needs of governors, principals and staff were carefully considered and addressed before the commencement of the new provisions. Following the passage of the Bill, the Department intends to engage extensively with teachers, principals, parents and key stakeholders to ensure that the supporting guidance offers clear advice on all areas of concern that they may have and that any identified training needs are properly met.

Before colluding — concluding — I apologise to the House for it having to wait on my entrance. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr Weir (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I note the last remarks of the Minister; for once, he was accusing himself of collusion rather than concluding.

I will initially speak on behalf of the Committee as part of the Final Stage of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill. If we are looking at the issue of education Bills, there is a great temptation to compare them to buses: you wait for a very long time for any to come along and then three come along virtually at once. However, I am glad to say that we have at least been able to complete all three of those Bills, which, I think, will be very useful to the wider educational landscape. Indeed, today marks the Final Stage of the anti-bullying Bill. It comes hot on the heels of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Bill

and the Shared Education Bill. I think that all of those are very positive developments.

Notwithstanding the remarks this morning, busy though these final few days and weeks have been for Committees and in plenary, I think this is a very positive and noteworthy achievement for the House. The Bill is a particularly welcome example of good law made better by the good offices of the Assembly. I place on record the Committee's thanks for the work that has gone on with the Minister and the Department and for their cooperation. We have worked collectively to try to make the best possible legislation. As with all these things, I think it was very useful that, on all sides, there was that little bit of flexibility that has enabled us to bring the Bill to this key stage.

The Committee felt that the Bill provides an important and workable definition of bullying in schools. It sets out reasonable and clear expectations for boards of governors. It will empower them to adopt good practice in tackling new and changing bullying challenges, including, as the Minister mentioned, cyberbullying on the Internet and social media. It will help the Department to devise evidence-based policy. Above all, I think, the Bill respects the good work undertaken in many schools to address bullying, and it will promote a culture of no tolerance for unacceptable behaviour in all schools.

During the various stages of the legislation, I referred to the victims of bullying and how they should take heart that the Committee and the Minister were listening and that we would do something to make a change. I think the Bill will mark a watershed in the consistent treatment of bullying victims within schools. Members and the Minister may very well recall the passage of these provisions as a key positive achievement. They would be right to do so. This is a good Bill. The Assembly, through its various stages, has made it better. On behalf of the Committee, I commend it to the House and indicate the Committee's assent that the Final Stage do now pass.

I will now speak very briefly as a Member, although I do not dissent from anything the Committee has said. We have all seen the sometimes tragic and devastating impact of bullying on individuals. Indeed, in some tragic cases, we have seen some young people lose or take their life as a result of bullying. Any steps we take on this are a very positive way forward.

There was a choice to be made at one stage of the Bill — it was suggested by at least one

stakeholder — about whether we should talk about eradicating bullying. I think it is important that we do not give false expectations. We are about combating bullying and doing all we possibly can to prevent it, but if there was a single piece of legislation that could simply eradicate it and wipe it off the face of the earth, I suspect there would be unanimity in the Chamber on that. However, if there were a simple legislative device that could do that, I think predecessors would probably have used it years ago. It is about trying to ensure that we have the best possible series of interventions, monitoring and use of information to combat bullying. From that point of view, there is no silver bullet that will simply solve the problem, but we are taking steps that will very much make a difference. Legislation cannot cure all these problems.

As the Minister indicated, the next steps will be the guidance that is issued by the Department, and we look forward to that. Crucially, no matter what the House does, there are the critical actions of what happens on the ground in schools on a day-to-day basis. We believe that schools will meet and be up to the challenge. I mentioned that there is not a single solution to this or something that will eradicate it. However, what we can do is do the best that we can.

At times in the House, we will have disagreements about many different things. However, I think that, when we pass this anti-bullying legislation to try to make a real difference to the lives of young people in particular throughout Northern Ireland, we can all look back collectively on this as being a very good day for the Assembly. We will have completed a good day's work when we pass the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this opportunity to speak. Similar to the Chair, at the outset, I thank the Committee staff and the Clerk for all the support and guidance that they have given us on not just this Bill but, as the Chair said, the SEN Bill and the Shared Education Bill, which we also worked on in recent months. The work that they do to go through each of these and to provide support to the Committee is much needed. I put on record my thanks to Peter and his team for that.

I am not sure whether the Minister will frame copies of this Bill and the other two for good keeping in future years, but it is important to congratulate him and the Department for safely seeing through in the last number of months what I think are three very important pieces of

legislation that really will make a difference to young people's lives.

I was very fortunate to be speaking with schoolchildren earlier, and they were asking questions about we do during the day. I explained that today we were going to speak on this Bill, and they were all very interested because bullying, of course, is a live issue in schools. Their teachers were also interested. That helped to bring to life what we do here. This is the last day of plenary business, but the Bill is a perfect example of what we should be doing. It was a great privilege to sit on the Committee and work on this Bill and on the two previous Bills. Congratulations to the Minister and the Department for seeing them through.

There is no need to labour on the dangers and effects of bullying; we know how lethal it can be. The same applies when we talk about how schools deal with it. It is fair to say that the majority of schools have good systems in place; they know that it is a very important issue and want to deal with it. Taking the words of the Minister, it is not so much about having a revolution on this, it is about disseminating good practice and providing a good and inclusive definition of bullying, a clear framework and a recording system. It is important to record all these incidents so that we can provide the data to those who set policies in future years on what we need to do next to take another step forward. If we cannot eradicate it entirely, we can make the classroom an even safer place to be.

Two things, finally. On the issue of cyberbullying and the notion of the classroom, I welcome the fact that the Department and the Minister were flexible and took on board some of the Committee's comments. I do not think it was ever within the gift of this piece of legislation to deal effectively with cyberbullying as a whole. However, it at least gives a platform to schools to say, "Be cognisant of this issue. Take it on board". Boards of governors now have to discuss it, so let us see what sort of ideas they come up with to tackle it. Our classrooms are changing all the time. More and more, we are moving away from books towards iPads and other good electronic tablets. That is what we need to be aware of. More and more children are engaging in this. The Safeguarding Board is doing an awful lot of work on this, but it was important that it was included in the Bill.

Finally, as the Minister said, the critical step now is engaging with the education sector as a whole around the guidance and taking that forward. It is going to be the dissemination of

good practice and everybody talking to each other, learning the lessons, looking at where things are done well, looking at how we can roll that out across the board and deciding what sort of guidance is best to use. I finish by congratulating the Minister and the Department for seeing this through. I thank the Committee staff for all their help. As I said, it has been a great privilege to work on this.

Mrs Overend: I am pleased to rise in support of the Final Stage of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

This is an important piece of legislation which aims to create uniformity of practice across all grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland in how they address bullying and how it is reported. Ultimately, the aim is to reduce bullying and make sure that improvements can be made and that all schools carry out that work. There is a lot of good work already ongoing in many schools across Northern Ireland, but, importantly, that work is now required in all schools. It is important that schools are proactive on the issue of bullying, and therefore guidelines of good behaviour, pastoral care, Internet safety and other such policies must be focused on and regularly updated.

While there was much discussion throughout the Committee Stage on the definition of bullying, the definition in the Bill is quite loose. The guidelines to be issued by the Department will need to provide clear help to the schools. I look forward to seeing those guidelines. The reporting mechanism will be an important tool for schools to enable them to look back and analyse incidents over a period of time and see what can be done differently or better when dealing with particular types of bullying.

Cyberbullying has become quite a buzzword and is, anecdotally, on the increase. I am particularly glad that the method of bullying is going to be recorded, so that schools will be able to state categorically whether that is the case. Physical and verbal bullying may be considered to be the most prevalent, but it is worth getting the data recorded.

4.45 pm

I referred to cyberbullying simply because our young people spend so much of their time with an electronic gadget in front of them. It is not that we need to discourage our young people from using those gadgets; it is about embracing and accepting them as a way of life. It is important that we take into consideration how

life changes for our young people, and, for that reason it is important that our regulations and guidelines are updated regularly.

I conclude by welcoming the Final Stage of the Bill. I congratulate all those involved in drafting and scrutinising it. As a member of the Committee, I particularly enjoyed going through the detail of the Bill, and I am glad that we have come to this conclusion.

I extend to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and all other Members retiring from this place today every good wish for the future.

Mr Lunn: Like others, I rise to welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. It is a Bill that the Assembly needed to pass. I have heard it said that we are formalising what most good schools do anyway, but it needed to be formalised. Now we have proper processes laid down, a proper definition and a proper list of motivations. In particular, we have finally managed to highlight the situation around cyberbullying and to begin the process of recognising what a serious problem it is. I remember the statistic quoted during our deliberations that about 16% of bullying incidents took place on the Internet. I think that figure is the wrong way round, actually; it is probably more like 61%. However, the Bill at least recognises the problem, and we look forward to the regulations, advice and guidance from the Department in the new mandate.

The last five years have not been what I would call a golden age for education legislation. The Chairman compared it to waiting for a bus and then two or three come along at once. At least we have managed, in recent times, to pass four significant pieces of legislation. In the mandate about to finish, the biggest failure was perhaps the Education and Skills Authority Bill. That did not come to pass, but, at least, we have its little brother, the Education Authority. Then there was the Shared Education Bill, which, of course, I welcome, and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, which is every bit as significant as the Bill we are now talking about, if not more. We are where we are. There is a lot more work to be done by those who come back in a few weeks' time.

Like others, I pay tribute to all the work done by Peter and the other Committee staff, who have been very diligent. In fact, they do most of the work for us, and then we rubber-stamp it. That is democracy for you.

While I am on my feet, I would like to pay a compliment to the Minister. I have known him as a fellow Committee member and then as

Minister for the last five years. He has been very cooperative in this type of exercise. He has always been approachable and willing to listen. I cannot remember the last time he accepted one of my amendments, but that is by the way. I suppose that is the fault of the amendments rather than of the Minister. I wish him well in whatever Sinn Féin decide to do with him.

Mrs D Kelly: I have a few suggestions.
[Laughter.]

Mr Lunn: I might have been coming to that, but the moment has passed. While I am on my feet, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you all the best. I hope that you have a long and happy retirement; you certainly deserve it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): After all that, I call the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, to conclude the Final Stage.

Mr O'Dowd: I can confirm that there has been collusion on this subject. It shows that, when we work together, we can produce positive changes in the lives of the young people we serve.

The anti-bullying legislation is important. It gives our young people confidence that we take the subject seriously, gives a direction for our schools and our school leaders and ensures that there are policies and legislation in place to assist and support schools in dealing with bullying and challenge them when they are not dealing with it properly. The Committee Chair stated that no one here is naive enough to believe that we can eradicate bullying through this legislation, but we will certainly give it the attention it deserves and ensure that there is a remaining focus on it. As I said, many schools have good practice and are leading the way on these issues, and others need a certain amount of catch-up.

I thank the Committee for all its hard work. I thank the Committee Clerk for all his hard work and that of his team. I also thank my officials, who have worked extensively and very hard to ensure that the Bill has managed to go through all the stages in time. The Committee and I, as Minister, were kept informed, and we dealt with this in a way that has ensured that, even though this is the last opportunity and the last day, given Members' comments today, we will see the successful conclusion of the Bill and it will become an Act.

The challenge for the next Minister is to bring forward the guidance, training and support for

schools before the Bill becomes an Act. I have confidence that, regardless of who the Minister will be or which party appoints the Minister, it will all be achievable.

I wish Members who are retiring well, including those who may be retiring but not through their own choice, as we face the election. I wish the Deputy Speaker well in his retirement. He has given many years to public service and deserves the opportunity to retire.

I want to end on a positive note. I thank Mr Lunn for his kind words, and I heard what Mrs Kelly said as well. I am sure that her intentions for me are good. While we have not passed a significant amount of legislation, we have passed significantly important legislation, which gives us a building block for policies and so on. I am of the view, rightly or wrongly, that you do not always require legislation to move a policy direction forward. We have opportunities for policies and those sorts of things, but, when we require legislation, it can be delivered and achieved. We can have confidence in ourselves to ensure that we can pass legislation through the House that does not have the capacity to damage minorities, citizens or people who are being represented. When we work together, we can achieve change. I wish everyone well for the future and thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill [NIA 71/11-16] do now pass.

Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill: Final Stage

Lord Morrow (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill [NIA 60/11-16] do now pass.

I welcome this further opportunity to speak about my Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Bill, which consists of 91 clauses and eight schedules and is significant and necessary legislation.

A new HMO definition and associated exceptions now provide clarification of what is or is not to be classed as an HMO. The provisions will enable better regulation of houses in multiple occupation and is designed

to better protect tenants by ensuring that landlords and managing agents meet important obligations on the quality and safety of HMO accommodation. Before I move on to highlight briefly the Bill's elements, I thank the Chair and members of the Social Development Committee, who have taken considerable care in scrutinising its provisions, which has helped to strengthen and improve the Bill. I tabled a number of amendments that were passed at previous stages, and I am grateful to Members for supporting them.

Houses in multiple occupation are the only housing option for many people, so it is vital that they are properly regulated. The higher risks of living in an HMO mean that they are subjected to a higher level of regulation than other rented housing.

I wish briefly to mention some of the main provisions of the Bill. First, it will introduce a mandatory licensing scheme that will ensure higher physical and management standards for HMO accommodation. That means that landlords will be required to obtain a licence before an HMO can be operated. To obtain a licence, planning permission will have to be in place, which will address the future risks of HMO over-provision.

The introduction of a statutory fit-and-proper-person test requirement is an important step that will ensure that people who are unsuitable to hold a licence and operate an HMO are identified at the earliest opportunity and prevented from doing so.

I fully recognise the importance of linking HMO regulation with other critical government functions, such as planning, building control and environmental health, which is the reason why this new scheme will transfer responsibility for regulating HMOs to councils. I am determined to maximise all opportunities to improve the quality of the private rented sector, and, as council environmental health departments already lead on all other aspects of regulation of the private rented sector, the future operation of this new regulatory scheme by councils will sit neatly with those functions. The new regulatory approach includes a new power to open statutory information-sharing gateways with a number of government and non-government organisations and bodies. Those gateways will provide for relevant information to be sent from appropriate sources to assist in the identification and regulation of HMOs.

The greater and more comprehensive enforcement powers in the Bill will ensure that

deviations from the licensing system are penalised in a timely and proportionate manner and give councils the power to take immediate actions against those who flout the law. The use of fixed penalty notices will avoid the need to proceed directly to court action for lesser offences, allowing councils to enforce speedily, appropriately and cost-effectively, with benefits for councils and occupiers.

I believe that my approach to the availability of information from the HMO register, which allows an extract to be provided following a genuine request for information, ensures that an appropriate balance is struck between the public interest and the safety and security of landlords and their families.

Members will be aware of the impending relocation of the University of Ulster campus at Jordanstown to Belfast, which is expected to lead to greater demand for HMO accommodation. It is therefore more important than ever to create safeguards so that HMOs are properly regulated. The new regulatory approach will ensure that landlords and managing agents renting out properties have a legal responsibility to the tenants to keep flats and houses safe and well maintained.

Guidance for landlords will include model tenancy agreements that specify and outline acceptable tenant behaviour and detail tenant activities or practices that a landlord would not consider tolerable. Landlords will be encouraged to ensure that tenants are aware of their responsibilities and any possible consequences should they breach the conditions. My Department will publish a code of practice and comprehensive guidance for the licensing scheme to help councils and landlords to meet the requirements of the regulations.

Numerous stakeholders were closely involved in the development of the Bill. I thank them all for their contributions. I believe that there is a need for this new Bill and the proposals that it provides, and I am confident that they will be well received by the relevant stakeholders. On that basis, I hope that all parties can give the Bill their full support. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to this point. It was evident throughout the previous stages of the Bill that it has been welcomed by the entire House. That reflects

the recognition that its provisions are seen as a good step forward to improve standards in HMOs and, ultimately, to protect and improve the health and safety of tenants in that type of accommodation. It is refreshing, as Chair of the Committee, to note the responsive approach taken by the Minister and his Department to suggestions made by the Committee and stakeholders to enhance the Bill. That shows what can be achieved in a relatively short period, even when a Bill is as long and complex as this one.

5.00 pm

Of course, we cannot expect changes overnight, and, as noted in the Committee's report, there are still matters to be worked out with stakeholders, particularly with councils, on how the Bill will be implemented. To that end, I am sure that the Committee for Communities will have a keen interest in any secondary legislation pertinent to the Bill, as well as the accompanying guidance produced by the new Department.

A Bill can make no difference unless it is properly enforced, and I welcome the Minister's commitment at Consideration Stage to ensure that councils are sufficiently resourced to ensure that that happens. As the Minister is aware, the Committee for Social Development took a keen interest in housing issues throughout the mandate. Proposals emanating from the review and role of the private rented sector and, particularly, the social housing reform programme, have the potential to reshape housing. Similarly, the report from the housing supply forum made recommendations that will have to be considered in detail but which should inform how we meet housing need across all tenures and, in so doing, contribute to economic growth. In short, housing will be a key issue for the new Department and the new Committee in the next mandate.

In closing as Chairperson, I thank my Committee colleagues for their contribution to the scrutiny of the Bill and to departmental and Committee officials who worked collaboratively to ensure that we reached this stage. I thank those stakeholders, particularly residents' organisations and housing rights experts, who gave evidence to the Committee and helped to shape our thinking. I say to the House, without hesitation, that the Committee for Social Development supports the Bill at Final Stage. I will now make a few remarks as an MLA.

On behalf of Sinn Féin, I thank the Minister and his Department for bringing this legislation

forward. As has been said, it is a lengthy and complex Bill, and there has been a great deal of deliberation on it. The Committee, my party colleagues Fra McCann, Phil Flanagan and myself were struck by the strength and passion of evidence given, particularly from residents of areas such as the Holylands, which have suffered a lot over the last few years from the non-regulation of the sector. The over-provision of HMOs in residential areas completely skewed the character of those areas and led to difficulties for residents that remain today. We welcome the Bill, as it considerably enhances the health and safety, well-being and overall management of HMOs; it will certainly bring much more accountability to landlords. Although many landlords have been very responsible, some have been much less so, and the Bill enables us to hold them to account. Hopefully, that will be done in a spirit of cooperation; we want to ensure that the sector is well regulated so that it provides much needed accommodation in a healthy environment.

On that note, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I thank the Minister and his Department. I want to make one final point to residents, many of whom may have thought that the Bill would be a vehicle for restricting the provision of HMOs in any given area. However, that is outside the scope of this legislation, and we look forward to planning how we would restrict the provision of HMOs in a residential area. While HMO accommodation will continue to play an important role, it cannot ruin residential areas, which can be completely undermined by the provision of too much of this type of accommodation.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Final Stage of the Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill. I do not intend to repeat what the Chair has so eloquently said about the Committee and our findings, and I intend to keep my comments brief, so I will just say that I agree with him on many points. I thank the Minister and the Department. The Committee raised various concerns during our deliberations on the Bill, and the Department and the Minister listened to those concerns and brought back amendments.

I agree with the Chair that it may not be perfection, but I believe that it will go some way in supporting people who live in HMOs.

I said before in the Chamber that HMOs are an important part of many of our communities. At one stage, they were very much city-focused, but, across the entirety of our country, we see more and more that HMOs are being used in many of our towns, cities and, indeed, villages.

We have an ever-changing demographic in Northern Ireland. It is a good thing that we have those changing demographics, but there are people, many of whom are vulnerable, who require to live in houses of multiple occupation. It is hoped that the Bill will go some way to protecting not only the tenants and landlords but the communities. I remember from our Committee witness sessions the communities in which a lot of the HMOs are based. I know that, in Belfast, they seem to be based within certain areas. It has caused problems within communities, so, I hope that the Bill will go some way to supporting that.

Again, I thank the Minister and the Committee, and I thank the Chair for his support during the Bill's progress and for chairing the meetings in a very fair and amicable way.

Mr Beggs: I too indicate my continuing support for this Bill on governing houses in multiple occupation. It is clear that there is a higher risk associated with them. I declare an interest in that my son, who is a student, is in a house that, I believe, will be coming under this legislation at some point in the future.

We think of houses in multiple occupation as largely being student accommodation, but it can be wider than that. It is important that there is this regulation to safeguard those who are living in such houses and to ensure that basic requirements are met in fire safety, access and electrical safety, because, when there are many resident tenants in a building, there is a danger that no one will take the lead role in looking after issues of danger. So, it is important that landlords have a role in that and that the design of the property is appropriate from the outset. So, I think that the legislation is needed, with licensing and the fit and proper person requirement for those who are providing housing for tenants. I agree with that concept.

The regulation should also help to improve things and drive up standards. One of the benefits that I have gained through the evidence to the Committee is the clarity that was given by some of the estate agents on the clear difference between a letting agent and a managing agent. Tenants whom I have worked with in my constituency — those who have been seeking help with their landlord — and I had not picked up the distinction between the two. We all thought that some were responsible for the management of a property when, in fact, they had merely let it out for the first month and had not been given any subsequent role by the landlord. The legislation clarifies that the responsibility falls, still, with the landlord or, alternatively, with a managing

agent, if someone is named as such. So, it becomes clearer who is responsible for bringing about improvements.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that had my apartments Bill of 2011 gone through the Assembly, we would have been further on in relation to what we are talking about and what the Minister has brought to the Assembly this evening?

Mr Beggs: You may well be right. I have come across difficulties with regard to apartment buildings and the management of them. It may have assisted. I am pleased that this legislation is at its Final Stage. It should help tenants in the future.

I think that the legislation has ended up with a degree of balance. It is important that details of who the landlord or the managing agent is are available to tenants, but concerns were expressed in the evidence that was given to us about how that information could be used and abused. Clearly, appropriate information would be given to tenants so that they would know who their landlord or managing agent was. I think that, with the information given to the Committee, we have reached a reasonable balance between trying to protect the rights of the tenant as well as the rights of the landlord who looks after such buildings.

I think it is important to look at some of the powers that are coming in with this. Fixed penalty notices were mentioned. Again, that is a mechanism that I think is badly needed to try to bring about improvements because, with very little cost to bureaucracy or without any court time, it is possible for remedies to occur, failures to be highlighted and hopefully, at that point, for them to be quickly remedied without recourse to any other more expensive processes. When you look at some of the guidance in it, you see that there is the potential for hearings. There is also provision to apply notices that specify works so that, when essential improvements are needed, there is a power to specify that, and, hopefully, again it will be improved quickly.

All in all, I think the legislation is timely. It is needed, and it is badly needed. There has been constructive engagement between the Committee, stakeholders who presented evidence to us and the Department to produce legislation that will bring about betterment in our community. I continue to support the Bill.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will start by wishing you well, especially as this is your last event in the Assembly. I believe I have got to know you well over a number of years. At different times, you have given me some good advice on how to behave within the Chamber. I wish you well for the future.

This has been like a love-in all day. I thank the Minister for bringing this legislation to the House. It is an important piece of legislation. I believe that, in my time here dealing with legislation of this type, this has probably been one of the better pieces that has gone through the Committee, especially because of the way that the Department so readily worked with the Committee to take on board many of its concerns and those of the people who came in front of the Committee to make theirs known.

One of the things I would like to say is that there have been, in the past, a number of attempts to try to bring in legislation that would bring some controls over the sector. They have not added up to much. I believe we may have a piece of legislation here that will go along that way. Like Alex, I was concerned that we did not get into the nitty-gritty of looking at where the number of houses of multiple occupation could be controlled in streets and areas. We have seen in our own communities where not only HMOs but the private rented sector has tipped the balance in removing the residential nature of communities.

I hope that the legislation goes a long way to help that and that whoever comes back in the next mandate can review it and add to what can be a strengthened Bill to help people in the future. Again, I wish people well.

Lord Morrow: I thank all the Members for their contributions. What has been clear, not just today but throughout the passage of the Bill, are the supportive, positive remarks for the introduction of this important piece of housing legislation. I just want to say that it appears and has come across very clearly that the House is in general support. Some Members are more enthusiastic than others; nevertheless it has all been supportive. I regret that Kieran McCarthy found that he was not just as enthusiastic, but he comes at it from another angle.

I want to say a wee bit more about his departure in a moment or two because I do not think that it would be right to let him go without saying something to him.

5.15 pm

In relation to this matter, I am pleased to introduce the new mandatory licensing scheme, which builds on good practice from other parts of the United Kingdom. Key stakeholders have been calling for the introduction of a statutory licensing scheme, and the Assembly is now delivering in that respect. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the Bill will enable better, more robust regulation of HMOs, with the necessary powers for councils to help improve the standard of all HMOs, improve living conditions and respond to concerns raised by residents living near them.

With the passing of the Bill, district councils will, thereafter, need some time to complete the preparations necessary to administer the new scheme. Therefore, the main provisions of the Bill will come into operation on a date appointed in an order made by the Department following liaison and agreement with councils. A stakeholder group has been set up to take forward the transfer of the HMO regulatory scheme to councils. I want to reassure Members that my Department will provide the support and funding required for councils to operate the HMO function effectively.

To conclude, I express my appreciation to the Committee for Social Development and to Members for their positive contribution to the progress of this Bill and for the high level of consensus that the Bill has enjoyed. I commend the Bill to the House.

Before I sit down, as this will be my last opportunity to speak in this mandate, I wish all those who are leaving the Assembly voluntarily, or those who might leave through enforcement or whatever their exit strategy is, well. I thank them for their assistance and cooperation during my short term as Minister for Social Development. I wish Mr McCarthy well in particular because I think that he goes out slightly aggrieved in relation to the HMO Bill, in that he came forward with proposals at an earlier date, and he felt that those should have been adopted. I say to him that maybe something better is in place, but those who are coming back will not forget you, Kieran, in this Assembly.

To you, Deputy Speaker, this place will not seem the same without you, but since nothing stays the same forever and change must come and you go along with that change, I genuinely wish you a long, full, happy, contented retirement. I understand that you take a great interest in driving your Morris Minor. May that Morris Minor go long distances, and may the

fuel keep low in cost to keep you travelling round. Enjoy your retirement.

I have to close on a sad note. It would be absolutely remiss of me if I did not come to the situation that we have just learned about today of the passing of Adrian Ismay, the prison officer who was, I call it, murdered. It is a sad reflection on society, and it is most unfortunate that, on the day that this Assembly shuts for its last call, we have to stand here and say it, but I want to extend my sincere and heartfelt sympathy to that family as they grieve tonight over the passing of someone who was so near and dear to them. My heart goes out to them today. I regret very much what has happened. It should not have happened, but I trust that those who carried it out will soon be brought before the courts of justice to answer for their dreadful deeds.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Thank you for your kind words. I am sorry, Lord Morrow, that you have to end on that note, but I am sure that the whole House concurs with you and sends its love and affection to that family so horribly hurt in that dreadful murder.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill [NIA 60/11-16] do now pass.

Mental Capacity Bill: Final Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That the Mental Capacity Bill [NIA 49/11-16] do now pass.

I have great pleasure today in moving the Final Stage of the Bill. Born out of the Bamford review, it is fair to say that the Bill had a rather long journey to the Chamber. Turning the vision that Professor Bamford and his colleagues had into detailed policy proposals and then a workable legal framework, with no template to work from, was never going to be easy or quick. Careful analysis of often complex concepts was crucial to a successful outcome, and balanced judgements had to be made, all under the watchful eye of those involved in the Bamford review and the many stakeholders whose contribution has shaped the Bill from day one. I do not think that it is an exaggeration to say that, without their efforts and dedication, the Assembly would not have

had the Bill to debate and scrutinise in this mandate. They can all take significant credit for the integrity of the Bill as introduced, which has now made it through to Final Stage with its core principles and underpinning reforms intact. It is only right, therefore, that I begin by placing on record my sincere thanks to them all. I imagine that I will not be alone in doing so today.

It is also important that I recognise the significant investment made by the Office of the Legislative Counsel in the preparation of the legislation. The complexity of the task was recognised by it from the beginning. The issues demanded innovative and flexible ways of working over an extended period. Without doubt, the robust and coherent legal framework underpinning the Bill is, in no small measure, attributable to the various counsel who worked on it. Their support and advice throughout has been greatly appreciated by my Department and the Department of Justice.

So, too, has the work of the Ad Hoc Committee, which has played such a pivotal role in getting the Bill to Final Stage. Under the stewardship of the Chairman, my friend and colleague Alastair Ross, its timely and focused scrutiny of such a large Bill within a compressed time frame means that we are now on the cusp of passing what is perhaps the most important social legislation to come before the Assembly in this mandate. Therefore, I want to take the opportunity to personally thank them, particularly the Chair and the Committee staff, for their efficient and diligent approach to the scrutiny of the Bill, as evidenced by the comprehensive report published at the end of the Committee Stage. That report highlighted a small number of issues that resulted in some policy amendments to the Bill at Consideration Stage. While I, on behalf of the Executive, may have counselled against some of them, it is more important today to highlight the key message from the report, which is the Committee and, indeed, stakeholders' support for the broad objectives of the Bill.

With the indulgence of Members and yourself, Deputy Speaker, I will briefly return to those objectives. After having spent, in this case, a long time during previous stages dealing with the minutiae of the Bill, it is important to remind ourselves of what we are trying to achieve. First and foremost, the Bill is about reducing the stigma that is still felt by many people suffering from mental disorder. It will introduce a new rights-based legal framework that applies equally to every adult where there is a need to intervene in their lives on health grounds. In other words, there will be no more separate rules for those with mental disorder. Instead,

there will be rules that recognise everyone's fundamental right to make decisions for themselves if they have the capacity to do so.

It is, of course, that fused approach that makes the Bill novel. Indeed, it is one of a kind, not only in the United Kingdom but further afield. Global firsts are not everyday occurrences, particularly for small jurisdictions like ours. We can and should be immensely proud that Northern Ireland is considered to be leading the way in such an important area of law, which we should also remember has the potential to touch upon everyone's lives. On top of that, the Bill will ensure that, when an intervention is made in someone's life, those responsible for making that decision do more to ensure that it is in the person's best interests. The additional safeguards provided for in the Bill go well beyond those in other jurisdictions. The greater emphasis on supporting people to make decisions for themselves also adds to the widely recognised progressive nature of the Bill.

Those are the headline reforms that constitute the core of the Bill developed by my Department, but I also want to remind Members that the Department of Justice has made a significant contribution to its provisions as well. Before I highlight some of the key justice measures, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge, in particular, the support shown for the Bill by Minister Ford, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for that. My colleague has responsibility for a number of civil and criminal justice matters dealt with by the Bill. In relation to civil justice matters, the Bill contains provision for High Court powers to make decisions on behalf of a person who lacks capacity to make that decision for himself or herself. It also contains clauses that provide for the appointment of a public guardian who will carry out important protective functions for those who are incapacitated. Those are important safeguards for vulnerable individuals.

The Bill also contains clauses that deal with a range of criminal justice interventions. The Bill provides powers for the Police Service of Northern Ireland to remove a vulnerable person to a place of safety so that appropriate medical attention can be obtained; powers for criminal courts to ensure that individuals receive healthcare disposals where that is the appropriate outcome; and powers to move prisoners from custody to hospital if inpatient care is required.

Those powers were devised to take account of two important considerations. First, respect for a person's ability to make decisions about whether he or she wishes to receive healthcare

treatment, an approach that supports and complements the ethos of the Bamford review. Secondly, those powers ensure that the criminal justice system continues to have robust mechanisms to safeguard public protection.

I do not need to remind Members that reaching the Final Stage of this Bill or any Bill is rarely the end of the matter. That is particularly true in this case. While it is quite right that we concentrate today on applauding the significant milestone reached, I want to be entirely up front with Members and say that, in many ways, the real work is only beginning.

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

There are numerous sets of regulations to be made and codes of practice to develop, which will require significant stakeholder and professional involvement, along with training and the delivery of awareness-raising programmes. Those are as vital as the legislation, if the experience of England and Wales is anything to go by, where, coincidentally, this is national mental capacity action day.

That is why planning for implementation is already under way. We do not want to fall into the trap of good Act but poor implementation, which was a key finding of the House of Lords post-legislative scrutiny report on the English Mental Capacity Act. I urge Members, therefore, to continue to support forthcoming efforts to turn the reforms in the Bill into reality for the many people in our society who more than deserve the new protections that it offers.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Ross (The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Joint Committee on the Mental Capacity Bill): Mr Deputy Speaker, can I also add to those who are wishing you a happy retirement, lest I forget at the end of my speech? I trust that you will enjoy the freedom that that brings.

It is important to note that both Ministers responsible are now in the Chamber: The Health Minister was here, and the Justice Minister has now entered. That shows the unique nature of the Bill in that it was brought forward by the two Departments. That could have brought additional complexity to an already complex task, but the Departments and officials worked pretty well together. That was certainly the experience of the Committee.

On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. As Members will be

aware, it has been in development for more than 10 years and emerged as one of the recommendations of the Bamford review, which concluded that there should be a single legislative framework to reform existing mental health legislation and to introduce capacity legislation to Northern Ireland for the first time.

This was a complex task, sometimes for simple minds. As the Minister said, Northern Ireland is the only place in the world to have undertaken this approach. The number of amendments made at Consideration Stage is evidence enough of the challenges associated with drafting such a wide-ranging and technically detailed Bill that cuts across the responsibilities of the two Departments.

The Bill has been significantly improved because of the amendments that the Ad Hoc Committee proposed and those that it persuaded the Department to bring forward. I thank the Minister for his cooperative approach and for taking on board the majority of the Committee's recommendations.

A number of amendments deserve mention because of their importance. The first issue relates to enduring power of attorney (EPA). As a result of the Committee's scrutiny, clause 110 was removed at Consideration Stage. That clause would have prevented further EPAs from being made once the legislation came into operation. As introduced, the Bill proposed that EPAs be replaced by a system of lasting power of attorney.

The Committee was concerned that that approach would significantly limit the options available to people who wished to plan for how decisions relating to their health, welfare and finances should be made when the time came when they were no longer able to make those decisions for themselves. We heard from stakeholders, including the Law Society, that there were serious drawbacks to a system that permitted only the making of lasting power of attorney and excluded the making of EPAs.

Experience from England and Wales has shown that making a lasting power of attorney is a lot more expensive than making an EPA, at around £700 compared with £100. That means, in effect, that a lasting power of attorney is simply not an affordable option for far too many people. The Committee took the view that the more sensible approach would be to allow the current EPA system to run alongside the new lasting power of attorney system created by the Bill. We believed that that would provide people with more flexibility and accessibility in planning for their future

needs. The Bill will now permit EPAs to be made. The Committee's view is that that has significantly strengthened the legislation and will help people to make preparations for how important decisions should be made when, unfortunately, they no longer have the capacity to make them.

5.30 pm

I turn now to Committee amendments, and the Assembly supported proposals to strengthen the additional safeguards relating to treatment with serious consequences, which are dealt with in Part 2. The Bill as introduced allowed for the nominated person to object to any proposed treatment with serious consequences. In the event of such an objection, the treatment could proceed only if the prevention of serious harm condition was met. This condition is that the failure to provide treatment could create a risk of serious harm to the individual in question or a risk of serious physical harm to other persons. However, if the individual who lacks capacity resisted the treatment with serious consequences, that would not trigger the prevention of serious harm condition. The Committee was of the view that this represented a discrepancy in the Bill. It therefore tabled amendments to require the prevention of harm condition to be met where a person resists treatment so that the same standard is required as when a nominated person objects to treatment. At Consideration Stage, the House supported these amendments, which provide an additional level of protection for the person who lacks capacity.

Another aspect of the Bill improved through Committee amendments relates to police powers to remove a person to a place of safety, which comes under Part 9. As introduced, the Bill permits the police to remove a person of any age to a hospital or police station in situations where the person is in need of immediate care or control and where failure to remove them would create a risk of serious harm to them or others. The Committee supported these powers but agreed with the view expressed by many stakeholders that the use of a police station as a place of safety for young people should be the exception rather than the norm. The Committee therefore tabled an amendment to allow the close monitoring of that situation. The amendment requires the PSNI to record specific statistics on the use of place-of-safety powers in relation to young people and on their ultimate disposal. We were concerned that, if separate statistics were not collected on young people, there would be a risk that such statistics could not be routinely or easily sourced. The amendment was

supported by the House and will allow the proper monitoring of how police powers of safety are used in relation to young people.

I will now turn to amendments made by the Department at the request of the Committee. The Committee was concerned about how the Department was approaching the matter of advance decisions. Clause 11 recognises effective advance decisions, but it does not codify them. In other words, the Bill does not set out the rules on what constitutes effective advance decisions or how people can go about making them. Instead, the Department left those issues to common law.

The Committee's view was that this reliance on common law had the potential to create confusion for people who wish to make an advance decision and for healthcare professionals. The Department's rationale for relying on common law was that there needed to be wider public debate and that key policy issues remained to be determined, such as whether the rules should be the same for all types of treatment. However, in response to the Committee's concern that an issue of such significance would be left to the courts to determine, the Department proposed an amendment to provide for a review-and-report clause.

The Bill now contains a requirement for the Department to review the law on advance decisions and produce a report to be laid before the Assembly within three years of the Act coming into operation. This amendment will provide reassurance to stakeholders who were concerned about how advance decisions were treated in the Bill, as it means that advance decisions remain a live policy issue in the Department and will be re-examined down the line.

Another set of amendments that deserves mention is that made to Part 10 as a result of the Committee's scrutiny of public protection orders. One of the criminal justice provisions in the Bill is that public protection orders are being introduced for people judged not culpable enough at the time of committing an offence to be deserving of a prison sentence; for people who are unfit to plead; and for people who are guilty by reason of insanity. The idea behind public protection orders is that, if these people pose a danger to the public, they cannot be released, even though they are not culpable for their actions. However, public protection orders can be used only if the detention conditions are met. In the Bill as introduced, the detention conditions required a risk of serious physical

harm to other persons if the offender was not detained.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists advised the Committee that the criteria for making a public protection order might not be met in the case of a person found to have committed a rape that did not result in serious physical harm to the victim, the implication being that the person might be given an absolute discharge. The Committee supported the view of the Royal College of Psychiatrists that the key issue was whether the harm was serious, irrespective of whether it was serious physical or serious psychological harm.

As a result of the Committee's focus on the issue, the Department made a range of amendments to the Bill so that reference to "psychological harm" is inserted where appropriate, provided that it is of a serious nature. In effect, this means that the detention conditions for a public protection order include the potential of the individual to create a risk of serious physical or psychological harm to other persons.

That has significantly strengthened the Bill and strikes a better balance between the rights of the person who lacks capacity and the rights of the public to be protected from those who pose a serious risk.

Another key amendment that came about through Committee discussion was on the use of restraining orders in cases where the individual is found unfit to plead. The law at present does not allow for a restraining order to be made in those circumstances, which the Committee believed was a loophole. The Department responded to that concern by bringing forward an amendment to allow the courts to sentence an individual to a restraining order where that individual has been found unfit to plead. Again, the Committee believes that that amendment improves the balance between the autonomy of the individual and the protection of the public.

The final aspect of the Bill that I want to draw attention to is the cost associated with implementation. The introduction of the Bill will require a substantial change to practice and culture across the health and social care and justice sectors. Major change that will necessitate staff training, additional staffing, an increased legal aid budget and the establishment and operation of a review tribunal and an Office of the Public Guardian comes with a significant financial cost. Departments have estimated that between £76 million and £84 million is required for year one

implementation costs and then between £68 million and £76 million for annual recurrent costs.

Mr McCarthy: Thank you for giving way. Whilst the Member makes an important point, he will recall that, when the late Professor Bamford's review was launched in the Stormont Hotel by the late Paul Goggins, the figure mentioned was £600 million. We must remember that we knew that there would be a cost to embarking on this important legislation, and we will just have to find the money from somewhere.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention in as far as I appreciate that cost has always been an issue. The argument of having "to find the money from somewhere" is not one that any Minister will find convincing. I look to the person beside him, who has come under increasing pressure over closing courts for a minor sum of money. The cry of "Well, he has to find the money from somewhere" is not one that washes with that Minister, and I doubt that it washes with other Ministers.

In fairness, we have to be realistic, and we have to be honest with the stakeholders who engaged with the Committee about the substantial price tag of the legislation. In fairness to the Committee and, indeed, the Departments, we have been open and honest about the significant cost and the difficulty that it will present. That is a decision that the next Executive will have to take collectively. It is a decision on whether or not this will be part of the Programme for Government to make sure that the Executive find the money for implementation. I suspect, speaking from a personal position, that there will be other priorities that may take precedence over the implementation of this Bill, but we will wait and see what happens in May.

Given the current financial climate, as I just said, and the likely climate over the next four to five years, the question that arises is whether we will be able to afford to implement this. When those issues were raised previously, the response from the Department was that it would not be proper to start to put resources against a Bill that had not yet passed into law. That may be the case using a strict interpretation of Departments' financial planning processes, but it would be unwise for the Assembly simply to ignore the issue until the Bill becomes an Act. We need at least to begin to think about how the legislation might be funded. As I just said, that, of course, will be a matter for the new mandate and a future Executive, and difficult choices, as always, will have to be made.

I want to conclude on a positive note. On behalf of the Ad Hoc Joint Committee, I am pleased to see the Bill reach its Final Stage after all the work that has been put into it on all sides. Mental health and mental capacity are not the easiest issues on which to legislate in a mature and constructive way, and I congratulate the Assembly on getting the Bill onto the statute book.

Along with Mr McCarthy, I recently spoke at a mental health summit, and I know that the Health Minister had spoken at it earlier in the day. Many of the delegates at that conference have helped us with the Bill and have put significant work and effort into shaping it, and we owe a debt of gratitude to them for their help and support over the last number of months. I also put on record my sincere gratitude to the Committee Clerk for all the work that she has done over the last number of months. Many members came onto the Committee somewhat reluctantly from the Health Committee and the Justice Committee, and, at times, there was difficulty in getting full engagement from members on some of the issues. More often than not, it required the Clerk to explain to us some of the implications of different parts of this hugely lengthy Bill. A lot of work was put in by her and her staff, and I wanted to put that on record.

I also thank my Deputy Chair, Patsy McGlone, who is not here at the moment, for his support over the last number of months and the members who made a contribution as well. The fact that we had members from both the Justice Committee and the Health Committee meant that we were looking at the Bill from different angles, and that could have helped in how we assessed the Bill. I make particular mention of Mr McCarthy, who, I know, is not seeking re-election. Mr McCarthy was a little bit boisterous earlier in the day, which is unlike him, but I am sure that he will be forgiven because it is his last day. I wish him a happy retirement, and I am sure that he will enjoy the freedom that that brings.

I leave it there. This is a significant Bill that has been passed. I hope that it will be implemented at some stage in the future, and I thank both Ministers and the officials for working so constructively with the Committee over the past number of months to shape the Bill into the form that it is in at Final Stage.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Níl ach cúpla focal le rá agam faoi Chéim Dheiridh an Bhille. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have a few

comments to make on the Bill reaching its Final Stage.

I welcome the fact that we have reached this stage, and I want to thank the people who helped us to this stage. That includes the Chair, who skilfully steered us through at times. He mentioned that there were difficult times, when it was hard to get a quorum. I also thank the Committee Clerk, who did an excellent job in providing us with all the information and explanation that we needed. She very patiently worked with us on that. I also thank the people who gave evidence. The evidence was comprehensive, and I make special mention of those who came back on several occasions to brief the Committee numerous times.

A huge amount of work has gone into the Bill. It is a very large piece of legislation, and, as we know, it is the first of its kind, in bringing together legislation on mental health and mental capacity. It is an achievement that we have reached this stage, and, with all the work that went on along the way and the amendments that were made, we have improved the Bill.

I would like to mention the British Psychological Society (BPS), which raised issues about the assessment of people's mental capacity. They had concerns and wanted to see psychologists specifically included in the definition of people who could make assessments. I felt that they made a strong case for that. We have ended up with the Minister agreeing to deal with that aspect in regulations and the code of practice. While the BPS is disappointed that it did not get that in the Bill, nevertheless it will be working on the development of the code of practice and the regulations. The hope is that they will reach a conclusion and definitions that they will all be satisfied with.

Sin a bhfuil le rá agam. That is all I have to say. The Deputy Speaker has gone now, but I had planned to say, "Thank you" to him, to Kieran and to all the other people who will not be staying but will be leaving the Assembly.

Mrs Dobson: Over recent weeks, amongst the rush of legislation being steamrolled through the Assembly, it could have been possible to overlook just how important and groundbreaking this Bill is. It will introduce a single statutory framework governing all situations where a decision needs to be made in relation to care, treatment or personal welfare. The Bill represents the biggest reform of law about decision-making in many years, and, certainly, it is the first time that the Assembly has so fundamentally reformed such a complex area of law.

When we, as legislators, set new mechanisms to assist people who lack capacity to make decisions for themselves, we obviously need to show great caution. Throughout my time on the Ad Hoc Committee, I was very conscious of that. That is why I am so grateful to all the mental health organisations that so generously fed into the scrutiny of the Bill. I know that all members of the Committee are grateful for that important feedback and contribution.

5.45 pm

The outcome of that engagement was very clear to see through the significant number of amendments that were made to the Bill over recent weeks. For once, Northern Ireland is taking the lead not only locally but, in the case of this Bill, internationally. So many years after it was first proposed under Bamford, we can be rightly proud of it.

Mr McCarthy: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I commend everyone involved in getting the Mental Capacity Bill to its Final Stage. As has been said, this is an immense achievement for the Northern Ireland Assembly and, indeed, the two Departments involved — Health and Justice. Indeed, I would say that this is an historic joint Bill. I welcome the very strong and important collaboration between the Department of Health and the Department of Justice in bringing forward the legislation.

The Bill is a key component of the implementation of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability. The legislation will provide a single statutory framework for decision-making and care for physical and mental health conditions. The integrated approach is particularly welcome and significant. The Bamford review recommended that a single Bill should cover mental health and mental capacity issues. The Bill has brought into one piece of legislation the usual provisions of mental health law and mental capacity law. This is the first time that that fusion approach has been considered anywhere in the world.

People in Northern Ireland, whether they have mental health difficulties and/or physical health problems, will now have equal rights in making decisions about their treatments. We now have a single piece of legislation for people who have a physical health problem and who lose capacity; people with a mental health problem who lose capacity; and people with physical and mental health problems who lose capacity. It will also cover people who are vulnerable, as well as those, including people in the criminal justice system, who lack capacity.

The new legislation will require that, if a person has capacity, they can then make their own decision about their treatment and that all possible support in making that decision will be provided. Northern Ireland will be the first region in the world to achieve such legislation, and we should be greatly proud of that achievement. It is hoped that other countries around the world will follow our lead.

If a person lacks capacity and has not put in place alternative decision-making arrangements, important safeguards should be in place for that person before the state can intervene. Decisions can then be made regarding a person's health, welfare and financial issues. A single vote will provide safeguards for all people who lack capacity at any point in their lives whether from a physical or mental health condition. That means there would no longer be any discrimination in legislation for those who lose capacity for reasons to do with a mental health difficulty. In saying that, we must be conscious that discrimination and stigma against those with mental health conditions are still problems. There is an ongoing challenge across government and wider society to address that anomaly.

This very important work involved very many people, as has been said. The work commenced at the start of this century with the vision of Professor David Bamford and his colleagues. In October 2002, the Department of Health initiated a major wide-ranging and independent review of the law, policy and provision affecting those people in Northern Ireland with mental health needs or a learning disability. Nowadays that review is referred to as the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability.

I pay tribute to the vision of Professor Bamford, who sadly passed away before his work was completed. His role as chair was taken over by his colleague Professor Roy McClelland. Professor McClelland subsequently chaired the board of experts appointed by the Health Minister to champion the Department's response to the Bamford proposals, and he is a member of the project board overseeing the development of the new mental capacity legislation. We thank Professor McClelland for his dedication and hard work in carrying on where Professor Bamford unfortunately left off.

I pay tribute to everyone — as has already been said in the Chamber, there were many — who worked hard and together to see this improvement for everyone with a mental health condition or a learning disability. Arguably, no

other piece of legislation has ever come to the Assembly with as much preparation and engagement with the experts, service users and, indeed, other key stakeholders. At one stage, it seemed that we in Northern Ireland would also revert to having two separate Bills, but I am delighted that we are adopting the much more innovative and potentially transformative approach instead.

The implementation of the Bill is now critical. Specialist training and raising public awareness will be essential. There is a much wider issue of ensuring that the Bill itself will be properly resourced. That is perhaps an issue for another day, and, at this stage, our priority must be to get the legislation onto the statute book. Nevertheless, that funding requirement remains for the Executive. They also have to consider how to address the wider mental health challenge for government and society. As we know, mental health conditions affect a considerable number of people in our society, with around one in four people facing such issues at some stage in their lives and around one in five being affected at any one time. Not least given the legacy of the Troubles, mental health conditions are more prevalent in Northern Ireland than in any of our neighbouring jurisdictions.

While there has been some rebalancing of mental health expenditure from acute inpatient services towards the delivery of services in the community, mental health services are still underfunded in comparison to services for physical illness and considerably underfunded by comparison to UK mental health services, and particular challenges lie in areas such as child and adolescent services and those for older people. We must not permit this aspect of our health service to remain the Cinderella service in relation to the funding of our health service.

Mental well-being has an impact across the social, health and economic spheres, including education, employment, social inclusion, physical health, recovery from mental and physical illness, self-harm and suicide risk, participation in public life and the criminal justice system. In welcoming the Final Stage of the Bill, we should close by recognising the wider challenges and the shared responsibilities across government and wider society to address those issues.

I leave the Assembly with a note of caution. Whoever is listening and whoever the new Health Minister may be, I regard health as the number one priority. If, in the future, I am not happy with health provision, whilst I will not be

here, I know all the chief executives of the trusts, I know all the important people in the Department and I have all their contact numbers. Believe you me, I will be prepared to contact them if Health has not delivered when required. I imagine that Members would expect me or anyone else to do the same.

Finally, I thank our Health Committee, its staff and our Ad Hoc Committee staff and members for working diligently and very hard to get this historic legislation passed before the end of the mandate. I thank Maeve McLaughlin, the Chair of our Committee. She has not said anything yet, but probably will before we leave. I thank her for her guidance and direction in being the Chair of the Health Committee.

I also thank Alastair Ross for his work in steering the Ad Hoc Committee, which I must say was very heavy work for some of us, but we got through it. I thank Alastair for being there to direct and guide us. Of course, he has already paid tribute to the Clerks who serviced our Committee. I also want to thank Alastair for his kind comments on my retirement. We will maybe meet somewhere along the line. If you are ever in Kircubbin, drop in and we will have a chat and see how things are going.

I also want to thank the Health Minister. Is he there? He is. He has the head down. I hope that he is listening to everything that I am saying. I want to thank him for his work in getting us to where we are today. There was a period when we thought that we were not going to make it.

I remember one occasion when — it was not the present Health Minister — another Health Minister almost blamed the Justice Minister for dragging his feet.

Mr Wells: Name him.

Mr McCarthy: It was not you. I did not let him away with it; he did not drag his feet, and nor did Simon Hamilton or Jim Wells. We are where we are today, and thank God for it.

It is unfortunate that the other Deputy Speaker has moved away. I will say a few words of thanks to him for his hard work over the years and for the length of time that I have known him. I wish him well in his retirement; I wish him good health. We are both going to a less stressful and more peaceful way of life. Like John, I am a Morris Minor enthusiast. John's car and mine are both in the garage at the moment. We will wait for the summertime, when they will both come out and no doubt will

have pride of place as we go along. That gives us plenty to think about on our retirement.

In conclusion, I thank everyone for their contribution to getting this historic legislation passed this evening.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, as you know, it is a tradition for me to speak on the last day of the Assembly. I was the last person in the Public Gallery when the Assembly collapsed in 1976. I was the last person to speak when the Assembly collapsed in 1986. I was the last person in the Building before it burned down in 1995 — *[Interruption.]* — and I was the last person to speak when the Assembly collapsed in 1999. Normally, when I do this, I am a harbinger of doom and gloom. Indeed, I made this point in the Assembly when it looked like we were doomed yet again, and the honourable Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Kennedy said, "Would the honourable Member reassure us that he wasn't the last passenger on the Titanic?". Normally, when I speak on the last day, it is seen as gloom and doom, but the Assembly has a new engine. We have been talking about Morris Minors; the Assembly has had a service, a new engine and has been filled up with fuel. It has a much brighter future than it has had in any previous end-of-mandate session.

Given my long history in the Chamber, I remember that I was here in 1985, which was 31 years ago, when the previous mental health and incapacity legislation — the equivalent legislation — went through. That was 30 years ago. A complete generation later, here we are, back with new legislation. I assure you that, even though I am a non-smoker, a non-drinker and a vegetarian, I will not be back here in another 30 years' time when the next revised legislation goes through. I assure everyone that this will certainly be my last opportunity to speak on this type of legislation.

Mr McCarthy is absolutely right. Kircubbin will regain a genius in the form of Mr McCarthy. He has certainly made his mark in the Assembly. However, his threat to hover around this Building and Castle Buildings like a ghost from the past worries me. When things go wrong, we can blame him; we will say, "He hasn't gone away, you know; he's watching us". I pay tribute to Mr McCarthy, who has been extremely diligent on this issue.

What irks me slightly about all this is that this is an excellent example of two Departments from very disparate political backgrounds, the voluntary sector and the legislature working together in unison to produce first-class

legislation. Will we see a single headline in 'The Irish News', the 'Belfast Telegraph' or the 'News Letter' tomorrow morning saying, "Assembly triumph: new legislation on mental health"? Will we see it in the first 16 pages? No, we will not. We will see it, if at all, tucked away in some obscure corner of the media. That is very unfortunate. Even today, we had the naysayers on the TV and radio demeaning the work of the Assembly. At times, they are absolutely right, and we deserve all we get. However, there are occasions when the Assembly performs extremely well. When I was Health Minister, I was extremely worried about the complexity and length of and the difficulties with this legislation.

I hope that Mr McCarthy was not indicating that I was the Minister who suggested that Mr Ford could possibly have delayed the implementation of the legislation. I remember a crisis session in Mr Ford's bunker in Castle Buildings one day when we were summoned in. It was looking like it would be extremely difficult to get the legislation through. I remember bringing in officials from my Department at the time and saying, "We simply have to get this through by the end of the mandate".

6.00 pm

This is perhaps not only one of the most complex and difficult but one of the most important pieces of legislation that the Assembly will ever deal with, and I am glad to say that people got their act together. I congratulate those who worked on the Ad Hoc Committee. I must say that, when I saw it being established — at that time, I was Deputy Chair of the Health Committee — I was dreading it, because I knew that it was inevitable that, as I was on the Justice Committee and the Health Committee, I was going to be on the Ad Hoc Committee. I saw it as being extremely hard, difficult and complex work. There were not 50 killed in the rush to join that Committee. It was a novel approach. Very little Assembly legislation goes through Ad Hoc Committees. You are bringing together two very disparate Departments. We had to delay the legislation to enable the Department of Justice to catch up. That was not its fault — before Mr Ford gets annoyed. At a late stage, we decided, uniquely in Northern Ireland, to have a unified mental health and incapacity Bill that would deal with free citizens and those who were being detained at Her Majesty's pleasure, so there had to be an element of delay to achieve that.

The Committee started late and had to work very hard. Of course, there were poor souls who were on all three Committees. That is

extremely hard work, but it paid off. Normally when legislation is running into difficulty, individual members who are not members of the various Committees are lobbied intentionally by concerned voluntary groups, the royal colleges and so on, who say, "We are worried and concerned about this legislation. Put pressure on your members on those Committees to get things speeded up or issues resolved". However, my inbox was practically empty during the processing of the Bill because people had confidence in the work being done by the Ad Hoc Committee and the two Ministers. I would package that and keep it, Mr Ford, because it is the only time that you are ever going to hear it as this is our last day. The two Ministers, the two Departments and the two Committees all worked well together. The result is that we have first-class legislation that benefits not only from the fact that we had the Ad Hoc Committee and two Ministers who were committed to the legislation but from our learning from the mistakes of GB. We are about eight years behind the rest of the United Kingdom. They have similar legislation, but we were able to examine the mistakes and shortcomings of that legislation and make amendments to our legislation to ensure that that did not happen here. It is first-class work by all concerned.

I am absolutely delighted that, tonight, we know for certain that the legislation will receive Royal Assent. It shows the Assembly at its best. To some extent, the fact that there will be so little in the way of headlines and accolades for what has been done also shows a lack of interest in the work of the Assembly. Of course, self-praise is no praise. However, I think that we need to blow our trumpets a bit more often when things are done right in the Assembly. The legislation will improve treatment for some of the most vulnerable in our society, those who up to now have largely been failed as regards resources and legislation as a result of the mistakes made by politicians in 1985. There was a deficiency in the legislation.

I will just sound one word of caution. Mr McCarthy raised the issue. The legislation is excellent and fit for purpose, but it will require the allocation of resources. It would be a pity if we built up expectations in our community that we have cracked it and got first-class legislation but then simply cannot find the money to resource adequately the quantum change in treatment for those with mental illness in Northern Ireland. That very difficult issue will have to be dealt with. My understanding is that mental health in Northern Ireland is funded at a level that is about 30% less than the rest of the United Kingdom. We often said that we would

address that situation when we got the Bamford report implemented. We were not aware that Northern Ireland's fiscal position could not be worse when it comes to providing extra resources to deal with this needy part of our community. That will be a difficulty, but at least we now go forward knowing that the basic template is right. I think, therefore, that we can justifiably say that we have taken steps forward in the treatment of those vulnerable members of the community. All those concerned, including Mr Ross, Mr McCarthy, the Ad Hoc Committee and the two Ministers, are to be congratulated.

Mr Hamilton: I will be brief in summing up the Final Stage debate on this important legislation. I thank Members from all sides who contributed this evening. Again, as I did in my opening remarks, I put on record my thanks to the Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee and, by extension, the entire Committee. As Mr Wells pointed out, it was a daunting task for many on the Committee. The Chair acknowledged how daunting and difficult the task was, and we saw some evidence of that at Consideration Stage, when we had to deal with roughly 500 amendments. In my time in the Assembly, I cannot recall — maybe others can — so many amendments being tabled to a Bill. I commend the Ad Hoc Committee, led by my friend and colleague Mr Ross, as Chair, for its work, the very thorough report that it produced and the impact that it had on the legislation.

Sometimes, the positive impact of our Assembly system is missed, as Mr Wells said, by many. Legislation goes off to Committees, and people think that it just disappears and nothing ever happens to it, but seldom does legislation that goes to a Committee not come out the better for it, and this Bill is a very good example of that. Whilst there were times that I, as Minister, Minister Ford or both of us disagreed with suggestions, in the spirit of compromise and trying to get good legislation on to the books, we agreed with the Committee and accepted some of the amendments that it proposed, and the Bill is better for it.

Mr Ford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, it is an opportune moment.

Mr Ford: I appreciate the Minister giving way. The procedures in this place indicate that no two Ministers can speak on a single piece of legislation, so I pay tribute to Simon Hamilton for the way in which he carried the legislation on behalf of the two Departments. Of course, he was ably supported because the Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee had been well trained in the

field of justice and was therefore capable of dealing with complex legislation. It was, as others said, an extremely positive example of good work being done, and I am extremely grateful for the work that was done between the two Departments, our officials and the Committee's officials.

I will digress, if I may, slightly. When, as a very young and enthusiastic trainee social worker, I found my supervisor on my first student placement to be a principal social worker called David Bamford, I little believed that, 40-something years later, one of the things that I would do on my last day as Minister in the Chamber would be to sit through the Final Stage of a Bill that puts into practice the work that he suggested. David not only supervised me but came to Jordanstown as a senior lecturer the following year, and he was known by my class as somebody who was very rooted in the practical realities, alongside serious intellectual rigour. We see that in the report that he produced and in the legislation. I also pay tribute to Professor Roy McClelland, who, with his background in psychiatry, has played a significant role for the Department of Justice in promoting safer custody. I am delighted that the work of those two men and their colleagues has been carried through by the Ad Hoc Committee and the two Departments, despite the naysayers — not Mr Wells, but a certain predecessor of his — into very solid and very positive legislation that we can all take pride in.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister of Justice for his intervention. I was just about to thank him for his contribution throughout the development of the legislation. We simply would not have what we have here without his input. As Mr Wells pointed out, it will be missed, I fear, by many that this is a global first. We do not do many things that are the first of their kind anywhere in the world. We simply would not be able to say that, had my Department, which I am very pleased to lead, and the Minister's Department not worked so closely together. We stand here and take whatever credit there is for that, but he and I know that there are a great many officials behind us in our Departments and in the Department of Finance and Personnel with whom we had to work on certain aspects of the Bill. In some cases, they have devoted many years of their time to this legislation, and I wish to place on record my thanks to them — the officials in my Department, the Department of Justice and the Department of Finance — for everything that they put in to make this world-first a reality. Many deserve praise for their work over the last six years.

The Bill predates several Ministers — even Minister Ford. That might sound like a long time — it is a long time for a Bill — but it is understandable that a Bill of this size and complexity took that time to move from the conceptual stage to consultations and through the legislative process. Any less time and effort spent on it would undoubtedly have had an impact on the quality of the final product, which has been roundly praised this evening. Given the shelf life of the legislation, quality is not something that the House should be prepared to compromise on, and I do not think that we have.

The time and effort expended on it also ensure, I believe, that the Bill will serve as a model for new mental capacity legislation in other jurisdictions, which I know have been watching its development very closely. Would it not be wonderful if, after the election, whoever is in my post or Minister Ford's post could say that officials and Ministers were coming from other parts of the world to Northern Ireland to see what we had achieved with the Bill?

In truth, it should be on everyone's radar. The Bill could apply to any of us at any point in our life. At the very least, we are all likely to know or even to care for someone to whom it will apply.

I am glad that Mr McCarthy made a contribution on his final day in the Assembly. It is fair to say — it is probably not often said about political opponents — that I will miss Mr McCarthy. I will not miss his interrogations of me, but I will miss him on a human level. I will miss him beating me in first preference votes in successive elections, as he tends to do. If I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank him for what he has done on the Health Committee, of which he has been an assiduous member. I cannot remember a time in the life of the Assembly when he was not on the Committee. I also thank him for his work on behalf of our constituents in Strangford, which we are both fond of and hold dear. Thank you, Kieran, for everything that you have done in public life.

He mentioned finances, as did others. Mr Wells and Mr Ross frequently raised the issue during the legislative stages in the House, and they were right to do so. There is no doubt — I think that I have been open from the outset — that it will be challenging, to put it mildly, to find all the resources required to implement everything in the Bill, certainly in short order. I do not think that that should have inhibited us from moving forward with the legislation. It is far better to have the legislation on the books and progressively implement it over time, as and

when resources permit, than to wait for resources to appear. In those circumstances, we would probably never pass any legislation, or lots of it would not pass. We were right to do what we did. However, I accept and acknowledge that there will be challenges in finding the resources.

We have come a long way as a society in our attitudes to mental health, although we still have a long way to go. Our attitude has changed for the better, and that is reflected in what we have done in putting the focus of expenditure in our health and social care budget on the issue of mental health.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for giving way. Mr McCarthy made a point towards the end of his contribution on funding for mental health issues. The Minister will be aware that the Justice Committee has, over the last year, looked at innovative approaches to justice issues, and one of the things that struck us was how many people who come into contact with the criminal justice system have underlying mental health issues. The Justice Committee has therefore asked the two Departments collaboratively to put into the Programme for Government funding for problem-solving courts and mental health courts and to look at treating some low-level offences with a healthcare rather than a criminal justice solution.

Perhaps, given that we are talking about a collaborative approach between Justice and Health today around the Mental Capacity Bill, it is a good opportunity to raise the issue that we want to see those Departments working collaboratively again in the next mandate around some of the funding on mental health courts and how we can actually help those individuals with underlying mental health issues and, at the same time, reduce the cost of putting some of those offenders into prison for short sentences.

I did not want to miss the opportunity to raise that issue, particularly as it was raised by the Minister and Mr McCarthy.

6.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: I think that the Member makes a good point. I do not think that many of the cases that he is talking about are cases that we should see as Health issues or Justice issues; they are society-wide issues and are everybody's responsibility and challenge to meet. I hope that the new Programme for Government gives us an opportunity to look very differently at some of those types of issues

where there is joint, or shared, responsibility for different aspects. I think that we should be focusing much more on producing better outcomes for the citizen in whatever circumstance that is and try to work as collaboratively as we can. There will always be difficulties, and I do not think that there is a perfect system for dealing with those sorts of issues. However, I think that we should be seeking, whether it is in Health and Justice, or Health and Education, or whatever, innovative ways of dealing with the problems we face as a society.

Before the Member intervened, I was touching on the issue of finance for mental health. Mr Wells talked about how we will probably not hear a terrible lot about this on the media. I was glad that he was able to make a contribution in the Final Stage debate, having had some ownership of the Bill at an earlier stage when he was Minister. He made the point that we probably will not hear a terrible lot in our media about this issue going through the House this evening and being a world first.

A recent BBC report — although I have to make it clear that it was a national report as opposed to a local one — reported positively on the fact that Northern Ireland was the only region in the United Kingdom to have actually increased expenditure on mental health in the last two financial years. I say that, knowing that we have to make substantial progress to close the gap compared with other parts of the UK. However, I think that the trajectory is positive, where we have been progressively increasing expenditure even in that very tight and difficult fiscal situation, the reality of which Mr Wells pointed out.

I think that we have been doing the right thing in making good decisions in terms of increasing expenditure on mental health. We owe a lot of that to Bamford, and the vision set out in the Bamford review. Post Bamford, we have increased annual expenditure on mental health in Northern Ireland by about £50 million. It was about £200 million around 2007-08, and, in the most recent financial year, it is around £250 million, and it will increase further in the future.

Within that, I think that the most significant switch is not that we are simply spending more money but are spending it more wisely and better, and there has been a switch away from the money being spent in a hospital or institutional setting to a community-based setting. Around 60% of the expenditure on mental health is now in a community setting, so, it is helping people in their own homes, in their communities and close to their families. I think

that that is something we should welcome and should continue to see grow in the future.

It is a day that many thought would not come — perhaps mostly those who were on the Ad Hoc Committee. It has come, thanks to the efforts of many people who I, and others, have referred to in the debate and who are inside and outside of government. Not least, as Minister Ford mentioned, there is the person who — to put it simply — came up with the idea in the first place, Professor David Bamford. We put on record our thanks for the contribution that he made, and for that of his successor, Professor Roy McClelland.

So, I think that it has been a useful debate. It has been a positive acknowledgement of the global first that we are seeing happen here this evening — a House passing a fused piece of legislation that Mr McCarthy talked about. Finally, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Mental Capacity Bill [NIA 49/11-16] do now pass.

Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That the Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA 68/11-16] do now pass.

I am pleased to move the Final Stage of the Bill, as I believe it is timely and important legislation. Regulation of the social work and social care workforce forms parts of the framework established by my Department to strengthen public protection and safeguards for service users in Northern Ireland. It makes a key contribution to providing independent assurance to the public that those responsible for the delivery of social care across Northern Ireland will be held to account for their conduct against agreed standards of conduct and professional practice.

The conduct model used by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council must be fit for purpose, efficient, cost-effective and command the confidence of service users, the wider public and the social care workforce. The Care Council's current conduct model was put in place in 2003 and, while it has ensured that

those who are unsuitable to provide care have been excluded from the workforce, the council has been restricted in the sanctions available for misconduct that does not merit removal from the register. The aim of the Bill is to modernise the Care Council's conduct model so that it reflects best practice models used by other workforce regulators, particularly those used by professional healthcare regulators here in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom.

Through the Bill, I want to ensure that the Care Council continues to promote the highest standards and practice. That will be achieved through, first, modernising the Care Council's model of conduct by extending the range of sanctions available to it in the disposal of conduct cases, and, secondly, by extending the Care Council's powers to formally recognise the learning achievements of social workers.

As I explained to Members at the Second Stage in December last year, the existing conduct model is based on a determination of misconduct. The current range of sanctions allows the council to take action against registrants through admonishments, suspension from the register and, the most serious sanction of all, removal from the register. However, when compared with other healthcare regulators, such as the General Medical Council, the current range of sanctions available to the Care Council is limited. That essentially restricts the Care Council's ability to respond flexibly and proportionately to cases where there has been misconduct or concerns about an individual's practice. That is particularly so where there are issues regarding health or competence.

The Bill proposes the introduction of two additional sanctions to be available to the Care Council, including undertakings and conditions. Those wide-ranging sanctions will enable the Care Council to require remedial action to be taken to address any shortcomings or deficits in a registrant's performance and, in so doing, to improve the quality and safety of care provided by the individual in the future.

Registration with the Care Council requires that registrants maintain and keep their knowledge and skills up to date to be accountable for the quality and safety of their work with vulnerable people. The Bill seeks to extend the Care Council's powers to give formal recognition to the learning achievements of social workers, as at present, the legislation allows the council to award certificates to social workers only for the successful completion of formal professional training courses approved by the council. The

Bill will extend the Care Council's powers so that it can recognise learning achieved by social workers to improve their knowledge and skills through a wider range of approaches to learning and development, such as academic courses, research, in-service training, e-learning and distance learning programmes.

In summary, the Bill will modernise the model of conduct used by the Care Council so that it keeps in line with regulatory best practice and gives it the powers to recognise the learning achievements of social workers achieved through a broader range of learning methods. It is timely for those improvements to be implemented for the benefit of registrants, service users and the public and to ensure that the Care Council's regulatory practice reflects a modern approach to the regulation system of the social work and social care workforces in Northern Ireland.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill.

The objective of the Bill, as the Minister outlined, is to modernise the model of the code of conduct used by the Social Care Council to bring it into line with other health and social care regulators. A further feature of the Bill will be extending opportunities for the recognition of the continuous professional development activity of social workers post registration.

The evidence received on the Bill at Committee Stage was straightforward and very supportive of the clauses. The only issue that the Committee pursued related to clause 2, which provides powers to disclose information about a person's fitness to practise.

The Committee sought a written ministerial assurance that those powers are in line with a person's data protection rights under other pieces of legislation, and the Minister subsequently provided this written assurance. No amendments were proposed to any of the clauses, either by the Committee or by the Department. I am pleased to see the Bill reaching its Final Stage today and look forward to seeing its implementation in the future.

Mrs Dobson: I am also very happy that this Bill has reached its conclusion. It is a practical piece of legislation, and I am very pleased that the Social Care Council will now have greater powers to recognise the achievements of its

workers. The only further point that I will make today is one I have made several times before: I urge the Department, and the NISCC in particular, to work very closely and carefully with the sector to ensure that undue pressure is not placed on employees.

Mr McCarthy: I am pleased to support the Final Stage and to pass on my thanks and congratulations to all those involved in getting us to where we are this evening. It is simple and straightforward legislation, but it offers those in social work additional recognition of their professional standards, and gives greater reassurance to the public. I want to put on record my personal thanks to the carers who come into my home. They do a fantastic job.

It is, of course, right that we continue to praise the critical role that social workers play in supporting so many of our people, especially the most vulnerable, in a whole range of settings across our society. We should also recognise that social workers are being asked to take more and more varied roles and responsibilities, and, again, my experience is that they do so very willingly. It is fully appreciated.

In conclusion, this legislation recognises their critical and growing role and their existing professional standards. Through this type of regulation, they will be on a better, more level playing field when compared with their peers in other professions. The Alliance Party is happy to support the Final Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill.

Mr Hamilton: I thank Members for their contributions. I particularly thank the members of the Health Committee and the Chair for undertaking rigorous and careful scrutiny of the Bill and for the interest and support that it has consistently shown. This Bill will ensure that the Social Care Council's conduct model is modernised and reflects regulatory best practice so that those who deliver social services in Northern Ireland are subject to fair and proportionate sanctions in respect of deficits in performance, and that learning attained through a variety of approaches by social workers can be recognised. I am also convinced that the Bill will help to increase the confidence of those who rightly expect to receive only the highest standards of care, by ensuring that only those who are suitable and competent to work in social work and social care do so. I ask Members to support this Bill at its Final Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA 68/11-16] do now pass.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 72/11-16] do now pass.

I am pleased to move the Final Stage of this Bill in the Assembly today. When I reflect on its passage, I think it is fair to say that its scope and purpose have changed quite markedly since I introduced it in the Assembly on 30 November last year. Initially, the Bill focused on two main areas. Part 1 contained provisions dealing with nicotine products that will enable the Department to make regulations prohibiting the sale of nicotine products to under-18s; to create an offence for proxy purchasing — in other words, an adult purchasing a nicotine product on behalf of a minor; to develop regulations in relation to banning the sale of e-cigarettes from vending machines, and to raise the level of fines for sales of tobacco from vending machines to a level five fine, thus ensuring fines for all underage tobacco or e-cigarette sales offences are consistent.

Part 2 of the Bill sought to amend anomalies in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. The amendments were mainly technical in nature and sought to correct references to the various categories of people and bodies responsible for providing dental, ophthalmic and pharmaceutical services. It also amended provisions concerning charges for services provided to persons not ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland.

6.30 pm

I move now to the provisions that seek to prohibit the sale of nicotine products, including e-cigarettes, to those under 18. The sale and use of those products has grown considerably in popularity since the ban on smoking in public places was introduced in 2007. Limited research is available on the long-term health consequences of e-cigarettes, and, while they may have a role to play in harm reduction for existing smokers, I do not wish to see non-smokers, particularly children and young

people, becoming addicted to nicotine through these products.

A survey that was carried out in 2015 showed that around 13% of 11- to 18-year-olds in the UK reported that they had used an e-cigarette. That represents an increase of almost 3% from the previous year. Whilst e-cigarette manufacturers do not recommend their sale to under-18s, and some retailers impose their own age restrictions, the lack of regulatory oversight has increased the likelihood of e-cigarettes being purchased by children and young people I believe, therefore, that it is important that we protect our children, as Governments in England and Wales have chosen to do, by making e-cigarettes age-restricted products.

As the Bill progressed through its Committee scrutiny, amendments were proposed that sought to introduce a number of new provisions in the Bill and which acted as a stimulus for substantial debate. I will briefly touch on those issues. At the Bill's Consideration Stage, back in February, the Assembly agreed an amendment tabled by Sinn Féin Members to ban the use of tobacco or nicotine products in enclosed vehicles when children are present. Around 80% of second-hand smoke is invisible and odourless. That can inadvertently make people think that it is safe to smoke around others. However, evidence suggests that there are no safe levels of exposure to second-hand smoke. Research also shows that smoking in vehicles can place passengers at a greater risk of second-hand smoke exposure due to the confined internal environment. Children are more susceptible to the harmful effects of second-hand smoke than adults. That is partly because their immune system and lungs are less developed, and they breathe more rapidly and their smaller bodies can absorb more toxins.

At Further Consideration Stage, I tabled an amendment that sought to introduce a new clause. I also proposed some technical amendments, which, I believed, would strengthen the Bill and demonstrate my clear determination to tackle smoking and the dangers it poses for children. I am pleased to say that the Assembly was persuaded by the arguments setting out the merits of my new clause and my other amendments. As a result, I am convinced that we now have much tighter legislation, which will result in the more effective implementation of regulations aimed at protecting the future health of our children.

At Consideration Stage, the Assembly also agreed an amendment tabled by Sinn Féin Members that required the Department to

consult about a levy on sugar-sweetened drinks. It aimed to prescribe key issues that my Department should consult on, as well as which stakeholders should be consulted. I opposed the amendment and cited a number of reasons for my opposition. For example, I believe that we need to do more to educate people about sugar before moving to legislate. There is also a lack of evidence that shows the impact on health outcomes and not just on purchasing behaviour. My concern is that a levy on sugar-sweetened drinks might simply cause people to switch to other unhealthy foods, with the result that the problem is displaced but not solved. Finally, there are arguments that such a tax is regressive and that the tax does not, by itself, combat obesity but could potentially exacerbate food poverty.

On my last point, I note that, in Mexico, a 10% tax on sugar-sweetened was implemented on 1 January 2014. More than 30% of the Mexican population is obese, and the tax was introduced to combat the growing obesity problem, not to raise revenue. In 2015, Mexico's National Institute of Public Health and the University of North Carolina carried out research, which showed that they have not seen any changes in obesity as a result of the changes in purchasing behaviour. However, the largest impact was on lower-income households, which cut their purchases of sugar-sweetened drinks by an average of 9%. That appears to highlight the potentially regressive nature of the tax and is one of the reasons why I have expressed my concerns and continue to hold those concerns.

My position is that we need to seek to educate and inform people much better about sugar-sweetened drinks. That is why, at Further Consideration Stage, I tabled an amendment that sought to remove the duty to consult on a levy on sugar-sweetened drinks and to replace it with a duty to carry out a study on a sugar-sweetened drinks levy. I also tabled an amendment seeking to extend the period within which the study must be carried out to two years after enactment. That was to reflect the complexity of the issues and to give the Department more time to commission appropriate studies and advice and to consider them fully before reporting on a study. I am pleased to say that the Assembly was persuaded again by my arguments and accepted both amendments. As a result, I am convinced that we now have a more realistic time frame in which to undertake a study, which should, in turn, provide us with more comprehensive information about how we should best move forward on the issue of a sugar-sweetened drinks levy.

At Consideration Stage, the Assembly also agreed amendments that require the Department to promote and provide information on transplantation and to provide an annual report on transplantation. It has been said many times during our debates that, in Northern Ireland, we have a tried-and-tested voluntary registration system. I also believe that our record in Northern Ireland on promoting the organ donor register speaks for itself with regard to raising awareness. I again take the opportunity, as many did during debates on the Bill, to pay tribute to the transplantation team at Belfast City Hospital and to remember that the work that it has undertaken has seen live organ donation rates in Northern Ireland rise to a level that is now the very best in Europe and also stands amongst the best in the world.

I am also aware that we have consistently been urged by clinicians, medical experts and interest groups to increase our efforts to educate the public about organ donation and enhance the existing level of awareness on that important matter. As I fully understand the motivation behind the amendments that were tabled at Consideration Stage and that now appear as clauses 15 and 16, I decided to propose a number of technical amendments at Further Consideration Stage in an attempt to ensure that the language used in the clauses is clearer and more easily understood. One of the key challenges in increasing the rate of organ donation is to convert the relatively high number of potential donors on the register to actual donations with family approval above the current average of 60%.

I am, therefore, establishing a clinical advisory group to develop a communications policy with a wide ambit to implement a programme targeted at achieving that increase. I will make available the resource to deliver this programme. That will be in addition to the promotional activities encouraging people to join the register. I will place a copy of the terms of reference for the clinical advisory group in the Assembly Library before recess. My Department will brief the Health Committee on the communications policy that is produced by the group later this year, subject to the approval of whoever is Health Minister at that time. Again, I am pleased to say that the Assembly accepted the rationale behind my amendments and was prepared to accept them.

I am grateful to all those who engaged with my Department on the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill and offered their insights and suggested amendments at the various stages of the Bill's journey through the Assembly. I express my gratitude to members of the Health

Committee for their thorough scrutiny of the Bill and for the time that they took to examine the clauses and take evidence from witnesses. I am also grateful for their helpful contributions and support during the debates in the House. I am convinced that the provisions in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill will help to make a positive and lasting difference to the health of people throughout Northern Ireland across a broad range of areas. Therefore, I encourage all Members to support the Bill.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. As the Minister outlined, the Bill has been significantly altered, and I believe that it has been altered for the better with regard to its nature and operation.

The Bill started off with two main purposes: first, to allow the Department to make regulations on banning the sale of nicotine-containing products to minors; and, secondly, to amend existing provisions in areas such as dental services, pharmaceutical services and charges for services provided to persons not ordinarily resident. However, as the Minister outlined, the Bill widened somewhat as a result of its passage through the Assembly, with the inclusion of the provision on smoking in cars carrying minors, the promotion and reporting of organ transplantation and organ donation, and the study by the Department on a levy on sugar-sweetened drinks.

The evidence received by the Committee on the Bill as introduced was positive. There was firm support for banning the sale of nicotine-containing products to persons under 18 years of age. That support was carried through to the creation of an offence for proxy purchasing for nicotine-containing products. Very little comment was made on the clauses that amend provisions in areas such as dental and pharmaceutical services and charges for services provided to persons not ordinarily resident. However, stakeholders were content with the provisions as made.

There was significant comment on what was not included in the Bill: the banning of smoking in cars carrying minors. During Committee Stage, the Department provided the text of an amendment that would give it regulation-making powers to allow for the creation of offences for smoking in a smoke-free private vehicle and failing to prevent smoking in a smoke-free private vehicle where under-18s were present

and also for fixed penalty notices to be applied to that offence. The Committee welcomed the new policy and agreed to support the amendment, which was subsequently tabled by the Minister at Further Consideration Stage and supported by the House.

The Committee considered the provisions on transplantation and organ donation as part of its scrutiny of the Human Transplantation Bill. The majority of the Committee supported the duty to promote and report on transplantation and organ donation. I am pleased that the Bill has reached Final Stage today and look forward to its implementation.

I will make a number of comments now as an individual MLA. I welcome the inclusion of my party's three amendments, albeit that, to some extent, they amended themselves, particularly the ban on smoking in cars carrying under-18s. That, quite simply, is the right thing to do. The right approach to public health involves the early intervention and prevention that we hear and speak so much about. This is simply to protect children from the effects of second-hand smoke or from even taking up smoking. The stark fact remains that 2,300 people die every year in the North from tobacco-related illnesses. I welcome support for that amendment and hope that it goes some way to playing its part in the delivery of a robust tobacco strategy across the North and across the island.

Moving to the amendment on the sugar tax levy, I thank Members for their support. It needs to be stressed that this is not a panacea for all our ills, but it is, in our view, the right public health approach. There is a direct link between sugar consumption and ill health, whether that be diabetes, obesity, dental decay or, in many cases, cardiovascular disease. Our amendment, which has been further amended by the Minister, provides an evidence base of the impact and details how a levy on sugar sweetened drinks would be administered, and I welcome the fact that it has progressed to Final Stage.

I welcome the amendment on organ donation and human transplantation, and I acknowledge the work that Jo-Anne Dobson did to take her Bill to a certain point in the legislative process. I do not think that I need to rehearse the very stringent and robust evidence that we heard or the learning that we all underwent from her Bill. However, we have something going forward in law that is what the clinicians and charities asked us to do. It does what it says on the tin. We now have a responsibility to the Department of Health to promote and report on organ donation. That should not be the end of the

road for transplantation or organ donation, but, as we stand here today, it is the appropriate legislation.

Finally, as these are my last comments as Chair of the Health Committee, I want to pay particular tribute to the staff and Clerk of the Committee. All in the House will acknowledge that the portfolio is a wide and varied one, and I pay particular tribute to the staff who have done that work very diligently. I also pay tribute to the departmental officials who often had to bear my wrath and that of the Committee and did so in a very professional manner.

I also want to join in the love-in that has broken out in the Chamber today and thank the other Committee members. I pay tribute to the current Health Minister for his cooperation on a number of key issues, and, in particular, I pay tribute to Kieran McCarthy. During my baptism of fire in this brief in the last number of years, I thank him for his input and his valuable role. Suffice it to say, Kieran, that "Any other business" will never be the same again without you.

6.45 pm

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I will indeed.

Mr McCarthy: Exactly. I was going to remind the Member that she will probably remember me best for "Any other business". It was usually at the end of a busy agenda that I had planned in my head to raise something that had cropped up during the week. You were always very generous in allowing me to raise any other business. Thankfully, action was taken to remedy the problems as far as possible. I thank you for that. Thanks, Mr Speaker.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Member for his kind comments. Most certainly, Kieran, that is what you will be remembered for. I am not sure that I would go as far as to say that it was only things that had just occurred to you in the course of the meeting, but well played, nonetheless. You did your best with it, and, again, I wish you and your extended family every success for the future.

I thank Committee members for their cooperation on the legislation and, indeed, on the heavy legislative lift that the Committee has had in the last number of weeks and months. I will leave it at that. I welcome the fact that we have taken this to the Final Stage.

Mrs Dobson: I am pleased that the Bill has reached this stage. The Assembly has a relatively good record in adopting policies designed to assist people to give up smoking and to stop others taking up the habit in the first place. We need to remember just how damaging it is to a person's health. Every time a smoker has a cigarette, they inhale over 4,000 chemicals. For as long as it remains the greatest cause of preventable death and disease in Northern Ireland, the Assembly must continue to take a hands-on attitude to tackling smoking. Crucially, that includes preventing young people becoming addicted in the first place, and, therefore, I am pleased that today's Bill prohibits the sale of nicotine products to under-18s and from vending machines. Whilst e-cigarettes are leading to people coming off the traditional tobacco cigarette, insufficient research exists on their long-term health effects. The Assembly may need to revisit that in the next mandate.

The ban on smoking in cars carrying young people is another positive aspect of the Bill. Smoking causes harm not only to the individual but to those around them, particularly children, whose lungs are still developing. The toxic cocktail of chemicals that quickly builds up in cars should hopefully now occur even less.

I am hopeful that the human transplantation and organ donation aspect of the Bill will ensure that the passionate volunteers and charities who have promoted organ donation across Northern Ireland for many decades will no longer do so alone. I again urge that their involvement be central to any public awareness campaign to ensure that their considerable expertise and knowledge is utilised to the full.

Organ donation and transplantation affects so many families across Northern Ireland. Those of us in that organ donation family remain firmly committed to ensuring the promotion of and increase in life-saving transplants. The House is more than aware of the considerable public support for change that has been consistently identified. I again say that I do not wish this can to be kicked down the road, and, like my esteemed colleague Mr McCarthy, I, too, will be watching. I hope that the future Health Minister, whoever he or she may be, will ensure a consistent focus on increasing life-saving transplants and, indeed, will listen to the organ donation family, those who are closest to one of the most emotional issues that we can debate in the Chamber.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome the Bill and its passage today. The important

outworkings for us all will come when the ink is dry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Kieran McCarthy.

Mr McCarthy: Right, Mr Deputy Speaker, this is it. This is the last. What is contained in this is the last opportunity, so listen carefully. I cannot believe, after 18 years in this Assembly, that this is it, but I will go for it anyway. This has been the busiest day of my life in the Assembly. I have been up and down like a yo-yo. You will be glad to see the back of me.

I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. The Bill has evolved significantly over past weeks in several beneficial ways. We would, perhaps, have benefited more from structured consideration of the amendments that emerged through the Committee. Nonetheless, we have a positive result. In particular, I welcome the move towards banning smoking in vehicles with children. Like every Member who has spoken, I want to see the end of that, so that we put our children at no risk whatever.

I feel a lot of sympathy for my colleague Jo-Anne Dobson, who, despite valiant efforts on the organ donation issue, was not successful in getting her Bill through. However, I am sure that there will be another day. I had the pleasure of meeting her son Mark this afternoon in the Hall. He is a walking example of what organ donation can do. I hope, Jo-Anne, that, in the future, you will have more success.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: Yes.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his continued support and loyalty. I, for one, will miss him greatly. When I joined the Health Committee, Kieran, you were an inspiration and a support, and you remained steadfast and committed throughout. I also had the honour of working with you on the Agriculture Committee and on mental capacity. I will never look at Kircubbin again without thinking of you and all those references you made.

Mr McCarthy: Even today.

Mrs Dobson: Even today. You have been a true friend to me, and I thank you for that.

Mr McCarthy: Thank you, Jo-Anne, for your compliments. Even today, Kircubbin was on the agenda at the ARD Committee.

Much work lies ahead in implementing the legislation and delivering on its components. I look forward to seeing that work completed from outside and the wider public health and societal benefits that it will bring.

As this is my very last contribution to the Northern Ireland Assembly in the Chamber, I want to thank our Chair of the Health Committee, Maeve McLaughlin, who chaired our Committee very well, kept us on the right road and was liberal in her attitude towards what one could say. Thank you very much, Maeve, for your help along the way. Indeed, I thank every other MLA on the Committee for their help and cooperation, particularly in Committee deliberations. That includes our Committee staff, our Assembly Research and Information Service and everyone who contributed to making our Health Committee positive and getting us to where we are this evening.

I want to thank Maeve's predecessor as Chair of the Health Committee, Sue Ramsey, who, Members will remember, was very competent in the job and who, through ill health, was not able to carry on. I thank you both very much for your work on that Committee.

I thank Simon Hamilton as Minister for responding positively to my petition not so long ago on the needs of youngsters and adults with autism. Simon Hamilton came up with £2 million to put to that much-needed cause. Unfortunately, too many parents have kids nowadays with autism, but they were grateful for that assistance from Mr Hamilton.

Finally, I offer a genuine invitation to any Member when they visit the revamped Exploris aquarium in Portaferry. *[Laughter.]*

Cash was provided by our Executive and, indeed, Mark Durkan. As you enter my village of Kircubbin to get to Portaferry —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Deputy Speaker has been very generous today.

Mr McCarthy: — do stop and pay me a visit, but do not all come at once, for God's sake. *[Laughter.]* I want you to stop and bring me up to date with what is happening in this place. Everyone is very welcome, and perhaps they can have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee overlooking Strangford lough. You may remember that, this morning, I waved the bus pass. I am going to use that bus pass, along with my wife, hopefully. Beware, everybody, because I am going to visit Castleterg, Kilrea

— wherever you come from and wherever you come from. *[Laughter.]* I want to see maybe a cup of tea or coffee or something.

Go raibh maith agat and slán go fóill. Ta tae yez aw an sae lang the noo. Thank you, everybody, very much, and a sincere goodbye. *[Applause.]*

Mr Hamilton: I do not think I am going to top that, Deputy Speaker. I think many of us will now be a little concerned about being stalked by Mr McCarthy as he uses his Executive-granted free bus pass to travel around Northern Ireland. He will be very welcome in Comber at any time, as he knows.

I thank the Members who contributed for their very positive and encouraging remarks about this legislation. I think it is very clear from today's debate, as has been clear from all the debates as the Bill passed through the House in its various stages, that this is a piece of legislation that has captured the interest of Members and has generated some very useful and informed debate on a diverse range of important health topics. I am also pleased that the Bill largely enjoyed cross-party support as it progressed through its various stages.

In summary, the Bill will help to protect people's lives and health, especially the health and well-being of children, from the dangers of nicotine and tobacco products. It will afford us the opportunity to carry out a proper study on a levy on sugar-sweetened drinks, which could then allow us to move towards work on specific proposals thereafter. Finally, it will help to raise the public awareness of organ donation, with the intention that increased promotion will result in the outcomes required for an increase in donor rates. In this, my last contribution in the House on what the Chair, I think euphemistically, described as a wide and varied brief that is Health, I ask Members to support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 72/11-16] do now pass.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage

Miss M McIlveen (The Minister for Regional Development): I beg to move

That the Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Bill [NIA 78/11-16] do now pass.

I do not intend to address the content of the Bill to any great extent. This is a seven-clause Bill with a single aim, which is to ensure that citizens in Northern Ireland whose land has been subject to compulsory purchase are treated equally to their counterparts in England and Wales who enjoy enhanced compensation payments. The Bill will bring us into line with the more favourable position in England and Wales by reflecting the legislative changes introduced there with the abolition of farm loss payments and the introduction of two new payments: a basic loss payment and an occupier's loss payment.

7.00 pm

The Bill was introduced to the House on 22 February, and the accelerated passage and Second Stage debates took place on 1 March. I am grateful to the Members of the Assembly for the contributions they made to those debates. I would like to place on record my thanks to the Chairman and the members of the Committee for Regional Development and to all my Assembly colleagues for their cooperation and agreement to the Bill proceeding by way of the accelerated passage process. Without that cooperation, it would not be possible for the Bill to have reached all its Assembly stages within this mandate. The fact that no amendments were tabled at either Consideration Stage on 7 March or, indeed, at Further Consideration Stage on 14 March further indicates, I believe, that Members of the Assembly are content with the purpose of the Bill.

With that, I am happy to respond to any comments Members may wish to make during the debate.

Mr Clarke (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I do not really have much to add to what the Minister said. I know that a lot of people today have reflected on the contributions that have been made in the Assembly during this mandate, and I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister. I have spoken to many people who are going to lose land as a result of the A6, and whilst it is seen as progress for many, some

see it disadvantaging their farm practice. However, the people along the A6 whom I have spoken to welcome the fact that the Minister has moved to bring us into line with the rest of the UK by giving them the advantage of that additional 10%. The Minister talked today about providing a more favourable position, and I think that an additional 10% for those losing land is a favourable position. It is an opportunity that has been missed in the past and, on reflection, it is disappointing that we were not here sooner. I can only say, however, that, if it were not for this Minister in her term in office, the people along the A6 and, indeed, the A5 would continue to be disadvantaged. So I put on record my thanks to the current Minister. I wish her well in the forthcoming Assembly elections. I wish her the best, and I hope the she comes back to continue the work that she has been doing.

Mr Speaker, if you will allow me, I also want to pay tribute to you for the fairness that you have shown to many of us in the Chamber in your time. I wish you well in your retirement; indeed, I wish all those who are retiring at this time well. I also wish those standing for election well. These last few weeks have shown that work can be done in this place. There has been a huge amount of delivery, albeit it was late in the term. We have put our shoulders to the wheel and pushed, and we have got there. Given that the A6 comes through part of my constituency, this land acquisition legislation typifies for me what we can do to change the lives of some people. As I said, whilst they are giving up land, they will get an additional payment, and that should remove part of the burden on them.

I think that, when the will is there, we can work together for the betterment of everyone. This is not an orange or green issue. It is not about community background, where someone goes on a Sunday or their place of worship. It is about everyday things that are valuable to people.

I want to close by again thanking the Minister for bringing this forward and thanking Members for their patience in allowing accelerated passage so that we could get this in before the end of the mandate.

Mr Lynch: I also welcome the Bill and, like the Chair, commend the Minister for bringing this forward in such a short period. It is to be welcomed, given the Minister's recent announcements that the A5 and the A6 are to go ahead. It is only fair that those landowners who will be giving up their land and property are compensated on the same basis as in other jurisdictions.

As this is the last business of the Regional Development Committee, I want to put on record my party's thanks to the Chair and to the previous Chair, Jimmy Spratt, with whom we got on very well and worked well. The work of the Committee over the past five years has been positive and constructive, producing excellent reports. I will only name two of them: 'A Report on the Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the Economy'; and 'A Report on the Inquiry into the Better Use of Public and Community Sector Funds for the Delivery of Bus Transport'.

I am led to believe that three people are leaving the Committee: John Dallat, Stephen Moutray and, not least, David McNarry. He will certainly be missed. As Deputy Chair, I also want to put on record our thanks to the officials who have worked with and assisted us over that period.

To conclude, I want to acknowledge the role of —

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. I just cannot sit down tonight. I have to ask something. You mentioned the cycling. Is the Member up for another cycle along the Wild Atlantic Way, as we had when I was on the Regional Development Committee? Remember, you and I went ahead; the rest fell behind. They could not keep up with us. Would you be up for another one? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lynch: Certainly. Thanks for that contribution. I actually thought the Minister had concluded a couple of minutes ago. I remember cycling on the Atlantic Way. I am sorry that I am not able, for injury reasons, to cycle any more.

As I said, I want to acknowledge the role of the Committee staff and all those who have supported us over this mandate.

Finally, a Cheann Comhairle, I want to wish you well. I have known you for many years, even before coming to the House, and I have always said that you are gentleman and the right person for this role. Go raibh míle maith agat, and all the best for the future.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. Now back to the Minister. I hope I have not caught you unawares.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to Members who have contributed to the debate. As others have said, I believe that the Bill will ensure that land and property owners in Northern Ireland will be compensated

on a fairer basis and on the same basis as their counterparts in England and Wales. Land being taken is not easy under any circumstances, and it is particularly difficult for landowners. I want to recognise that. However, I hope that this goes, in some small way, towards helping those landowners as they move forward in the future.

I, again, thank the Chairman and the members of the Committee for Regional Development and all Assembly Members for their cooperation during the passage of the Bill.

I pay tribute to outgoing members of the Committee who have decided not to stand for election again, in particular my party colleague Stephen Moutray, my constituency colleague David McNarry, and John Dallat, for their contributions to the Committee. It would be remiss of me, given that he is here this evening, not to pay tribute — although he was not a member of the Regional Development Committee during my time — to my friend Kieran McCarthy. We served on Ards Borough Council together, and we have been friends throughout. He has been my colleague in the constituency for over 10 years. I will miss his contribution, but, of course, that is dependent upon whether I get back to this House myself. I will miss his friendship.

In conclusion, I commend the Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Bill to the House.

Mr Speaker: For a moment there, I thought that you were going to provoke Kieran into another contribution. *[Laughter.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Bill [NIA 78/11-16] do now pass. — [Miss M McIlveen (The Minister for Regional Development).]

Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

This statutory rule is being made under powers contained in the Energy (Northern Ireland)

Order 2003, which prescribes that this order must be laid in draft for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

The Northern Ireland renewables obligation, or NIRO as it is known, has been the main support mechanism for incentivising renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland since 2005. The NIRO has been instrumental in increasing renewables deployment in Northern Ireland from 3% of renewable electricity consumption in 2005 to just over 25% now. This significantly exceeds the Executive's ambitious Programme for Government target of having a fifth of our electricity generated from renewables by 2015. I take this opportunity to commend the renewables industry and infrastructure providers for helping us to reach that impressive figure.

I now move to the business at hand. In March last year, we issued a consultation on the proposed closure of the NIRO. That resulted in the partial closure of the NIRO to non-wind technologies in autumn 2015. On 30 September last year, I issued a further consultation on closure for onshore wind projects of all sizes from 1 April 2016. That followed similar announcements in Great Britain. The consultation proposed exceptions to closure in the form of grace periods for projects that were able to meet specific criteria.

Some 477 responses were received from a range of stakeholders, including members of the public, independent generators, developers, trade associations, energy suppliers, and non-governmental organisations. I thank everyone who took the time to respond. A large number of responses objected to the proposed closure, but around 20% were supportive. The majority of objections were from small-scale wind developers. The large-scale sector, whilst unhappy with the proposals, was keen for the legislation to be progressed in order to secure financial closure.

Following the closure of the consultation, and in acknowledgment of the concerns raised, I wrote again in November 2015 to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change seeking further flexibility on the closure of the NIRO to small-scale wind generators. Her response offered no further concessions on eligibility dates or criteria. She reaffirmed her position that, if Northern Ireland diverged from GB policy, she would seek to protect GB consumers by de-socialising the costs of Northern Ireland projects that do not meet the eligibility criteria set out in the consultation document. Indeed, provisions have been included in the Energy Bill to allow for that.

The provisions, if passed, will allow the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) to make regulations restricting the tradability of certain Northern Ireland renewables obligation certificates (NIROCs), meaning that GB suppliers cannot use them to meet their renewables obligation. That means that the market for such non-redeemable NIROCs would be limited to Northern Ireland. I understand that DECC intends to apply its provision in the Energy Bill only to NIROCs that do not meet the eligibility criteria set out in my consultation of 30 September 2015. In light of the DECC decision, the views expressed by the Committee and the responses to the consultation, I have decided to take a two-stage approach to closure to onshore wind, separating large- and small-scale onshore wind.

I have decided that the NIRO will close to new large-scale onshore wind-generating stations from 1 April 2016, in line with the 30 September consultation proposals. That means that projects that meet the approved development grace period eligibility criteria of being able to demonstrate that they have an accepted grid connection offer, relevant planning permission and evidence of land rights, as of 30 September 2015 for non-cluster connections and 30 October 2015 for cluster connections, will be able to accredit their stations up to 31 March 2017.

In addition, if those projects meet the eligibility criteria for the radar or grid delay grace period, they can seek accreditation up to 31 March 2018.

7.15 pm

A further nine-month investment freezing grace period will be available to projects that can demonstrate that they have been unable to secure financial investment during the period between DECC's announcement on 18 June 2015 and when the Northern Ireland legislation comes into operation. That grace period is being introduced in Great Britain, and I think it only right that projects here can have similar access. Projects that qualify for just the investment freeze grace period will have until 31 December 2017 to accredit under the NIRO. Projects that also benefit from the radar and grid delay grace period will have until 31 December 2018 to accredit.

I have decided to initiate a further consultation on the closure for small-scale projects. The NIRO will, therefore, remain open for the time being for small-scale projects until further consultation is completed. The consultation will

need to be set against the backdrop of the potential effect of the DECC provisions and the implications of restricted NIROCs in the market. It is my intention to issue the consultation as soon as possible.

The proposed closure order will provide the legislative certainty that large-scale onshore wind developers require to secure financial close. Hopefully, that will enable those projects to proceed to deployment, further enhancing our renewables contribution.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister.

When the Renewables Obligation Closure Order first came to the Committee on 30 June last year, it was a closure order for all technologies covered under the NIRO. The Committee was informed that the legislation had to be rushed through to provide certainty to investors in one particular energy-from-waste project. It was clear at that time that the Department had not fully considered the wider consequences of the proposed legislation and, in particular, the impact on consumers.

The original proposals, which deviated from GB proposals and allowed for the continuation of the NIRO for all onshore wind projects up to 2017, would, by the Department's admission, have added up to £16 a year to bills for domestic consumers and up to an average of £30,000 a year to bills for average large-scale electricity consumers. The Department was unable to provide the Committee with any figures for savings or benefits to consumers that could accrue from having the legislation in place or for the cost associated with the administration of the scheme. The Department had conducted no consultation on the impact of the proposals for onshore wind on businesses or domestic consumers here.

The Committee suggested dealing with the two separate issues by way of separate legislation. However, the Department stated that the legislation was about closing the NIRO to everyone rather than a piecemeal approach. For the record, we have three types of approach now — two anyway; potentially three. The following week, on 2 July, Committee members and I met the Minister and asked that he explore the possibility of separating the legislation to give certainty to those who needed it urgently and to give time to consider the costs and benefits of other options for consumers and developers in respect of

onshore wind. We were told emphatically that that would not be possible.

On 9 July, the Department came to the Committee again. At that stage, officials informed the Committee that the Department had taken legal advice that outlined the reasons why decoupling the legislation would not — in fact, could not — be feasible. It later transpired that the legal advice was in the form of what was referred to as an informal request for information. I do not know whether that was a packet of cigarettes, a packet of matches or what it was, but it was what we were supposed to rely on.

The Department also informed the Committee on 9 July that there had been a fundamental change on the issue of costs as:

"an unexpected and very significant policy change was announced by DECC",

which would mean that projects already in the system would be permitted to connect until March 2018. Under close Committee questioning, the Department had to concede that there was no basis for that statement as no evidence existed in any papers from DECC that that was the case. Eventually, on 8 September, the Department brought proposals to the Committee for the closure of the NIRO to all non-wind projects, thus allowing the certainty needed for those who required it urgently and allowing time for adequate consideration to be given to proposals for the closure of the NIRO to wind projects. That course of action had first been proposed by the Committee in June.

Had the Committee not intervened on 30 June, the Department would have been content to put in place legislation at a total estimated cost of up to £35 million per annum for the next 20 years for all electricity consumers. To put that in context, £35 million represents approximately five times the estimated savings per year to consumers here of having the North/South interconnector in place.

At its meeting last week on 8 March, the Committee heard oral evidence from departmental officials on the current policy proposals in the SL1 for the closure of renewables obligations to new large-scale onshore wind generation and additional large-scale generating facilities adding additional capacity from 1 April 2016. The Minister informed the Committee that the intention was to consult further on closure arrangements for new small-scale onshore wind. The SL1 was approved following a Division in the Committee. The statutory rule was considered by the

Committee only this afternoon, just one week after the policy proposal came to the Committee as an SL1. By way of a Division, the Committee agreed to recommend that the Renewables Obligation Closure Order (NI) 2016 be approved by the Assembly.

I will now speak briefly in my capacity as an MLA. I have been about the Assembly since 2003, and I genuinely have never seen such poor, badly informed, badly presented and unreliable evidence as we received on this one. It moved with the wind and with whatever interpretation anyone sought to bring to bear on it. It was by close scrutiny by all members of the Committee, acting as a Committee should act here, that we sought to bring some closure to the issue. We were told on 30 June that legislation had to be rushed. Here we are, after a nine-month kind of gestation period, bringing some of it lastminute.com to the Assembly.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for giving way. Tonight, we are asked to back a split decision in terms of the additional consultation. Does the Member agree that the conditions that the Minister has pointed to — the fact that there is potential for restricted NIROCs and question marks around grid connection confirmation — mean that this is not a consultation? The outcomes are extremely limited.

Mr McGlone: It is a consultation of sorts. I am not sure what the aim of it is other than to consult and kick the tin down the alleyway; nor am I sure that it delivers any form of certainty. The mandate is ending, and the Minister cannot give assurances to the industry as to what way a Minister, whether him or someone else, can deliver on this or how DECC — it is not entirely without culpability in this — might change its position in the intervening period. We just do not know.

We have been presented with alleged legal advice that altered on a whim and moved with the wind. On the issue of decoupling, you often wonder whether you should seek alternative legal advice elsewhere that has substance and meaning and is legal and reliable for us, as MLAs, to depend on.

Large scale, as we see now, is being dealt with separately in a "lastminute.com" approach. Small scale is being dealt with separately, we hope, following the consultation — we hope. However, there is no certainty whatsoever for small scale about what the outcomes might be, given also, to be fair, the shabby way that DECC has dealt with it. It has been kicked down the alleyway.

There is no security or certainty for small scale. For that reason, I and the SDLP cannot support this. We recognise the first part that deals with large scale. It does bring certainty to them. It is probably not the sort of certainty that they would want. However, for the investment potential and projections of their business, it gives them the closure that they require for their financiers and investors. It certainly does not provide that to small-scale developers. For that reason, we, in the SDLP, cannot support this SR legislation.

Mr Dunne: I think that we all recognise that there has been considerable debate and discussion on this issue in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. There is no doubt that our renewables sector has made significant progress over the last decade. The NIRO has been a key part of ensuring that our healthy levels of renewable energy production have been met. We are aware of the considerable interest in the closure of the NIRO over recent months.

Onshore wind is a very important part of Northern Ireland's energy mix and by far our leading renewable technology. I am pleased that the NIRO provides a 20-year commitment of support so that existing renewable generation will continue to be supported until 2037, which reflects the level of renewable electricity at 25%, a considerable success considering all the circumstances.

It is vital that, in managing a suitable and realistic end for the Northern Ireland renewables obligation, we get a balance between protecting the interests of Northern Ireland consumers, current and planned investments and the associated economic benefits, and contributing to the Executive's targets on renewable energy. The large-scale sector is keen to get certainty around closure and financial certainty to allow for future investment. The small-scale sector, which affects mainly farmers, SMEs and other renewable investors, has expressed concern about the loss of opportunities to develop projects in the planning and development stage; I think that we all recognise that.

The consultation process on the proposed closure of small-scale wind generation is under way. The Minister will do what he can to make small-scale adjustments that are in line with the rest of the UK. Local consumers will continue to benefit from the socialisation of costs across the UK due to the favourable obligation levels that we enjoy compared with our GB counterparts. The Minister and the Department have been faced with a real dilemma on the

way forward, with DECC changing its position following the general election. There is no doubt that this created uncertainty across the sector. I believe that this proposed way forward is a realistic way of ensuring that we deliver for our energy consumers and those in the renewables sector.

Finally, I thank everyone for the experience that I have had in my first term in the Assembly. It has certainly been an experience. Some Members are not standing again, including you, Mr Speaker. You have been a fair Speaker. I also pay tribute to our outgoing party leader, Peter Robinson, to Gregory Campbell and to my colleague Stephen Moutray. Best wishes to all for the future. God willing, we will see most of you back in the not-too-distant future.

7.30 pm

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As this is also my last opportunity to speak in the Assembly, I pay tribute to you for the role that you have played as Speaker over the last number of years.

In the spirit of generosity that is in the institution tonight amongst most Members, I will not dwell on the Department's role and performance in all this. I think our Chair expressed the concerns and frustrations that the Committee had in dealing with it, and I sincerely hope that, along with the handling of the RHI scheme, serious lessons are learnt in the Department on how to handle such schemes and on its relationship with the Committee.

The genesis of this situation, as with the RHI scheme, was a very abrupt change of position in London with no reference to or consultation with, I believe, this institution. I am not sure whether there were any consultations with other devolved institutions. Amber Rudd was told that she had to reduce the subsidy budget from £9.1 billion to £7.5 billion, and suddenly the switch was turned off from these schemes. That was exacerbated by a decision by the electricity companies to place a moratorium on connections to the grids.

All that and the ending of the renewable energy scheme, on top of the closure of the renewable heat incentive scheme, have left a huge degree of uncertainty in the renewable industry. Despite the fact that the Executive are ahead of their targets for renewable energy, I think it has placed a question mark over the industry in the future and will in turn place a question mark over targets to be met in the future.

I heard what the Minister had to say about that at the Committee meeting today. One of the biggest impacts of the handling of this scheme and the previous renewable energy scheme has been the creation of a huge degree of uncertainty within the industry. I would like to see the Minister address that, particularly in the context of the large-scale industry.

As the Chair outlined, we were told all along that one closure had to be put in place to ensure that the grace period would apply to those schemes and that those involved would be able to see out their business. Is there certainty, now that the Department has gone with a two-phased approach, that DECC will accept that position and that the large-scale industry will get the certainty on the grace period it requires?

The small-scale part of the wind industry is genuinely nervous about a consultation. We want a proper and genuine consultation with the small-scale industry not only to see how it can be assisted over this period but to see what lies in the future for it.

The third point on the renewables industry is that, while both schemes will be brought to a close in the near future, there is, as I said, a great degree of nervousness, uncertainty and worry about investments that have been made, about skills that have been acquired for the schemes going forward and about what it all means for the future of the industry. The Minister, I think, and I am sure most members of the Committee, would feel that the industry has been very successful as it has developed. We live in a part of the world where there is great potential for renewables and where there is already too heavy a reliance on fossil fuels in the production of energy. Surely such an industry has to be supported.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate the expertise that the Member has gathered on the Committee over the last number of months since he came back. I welcome that. As with everything, all incentivisation comes at a cost. One thing I am not hearing from the opposite Benches tonight is a balance. Whilst I am not against incentivisation — I am certainly happy about the closure for large scale because we need to bank the 650MW of energy for security of supply — whatever happens for small scale in the future will have to be balanced by the cost to the bill payers, especially our industries and the bills they pay. It will have to be balanced to make sure it is affordable.

That is something that the Minister strove to do over the last number of months. He has been left in a very difficult position by Amber Rudd and the decision by the Conservatives to end the schemes early. It has been a massive and very difficult issue, and we have been able to deal with it tonight.

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member that there is a need to make sure that any schemes that go forward from now are sustainable. People within the industry argue that the heat initiative scheme was not sustainable and that it has left the Executive with a substantial cost to come out of the Budget annually for the next 20 years.

We need to make sure.

The larger-scale industries are confident that, in a number of years, they will be self-sustaining. That allows a new Executive in a new mandate with a new Programme for Government to have a fresh look at the targets that they need to set and initiatives that they will take to support the industry in meeting those targets. I do not have any difficulty with that when it comes to getting the balance right, but the industry needs to be supported and sustained. We need to meet those targets, and we are in a good place to do that.

I know that the Minister said in Committee this morning that he was meeting representatives of small-scale wind industries today. It would be helpful if he could update the House this evening on how that meeting went, because, as I say, there is genuine nervousness out there that the consultation will not be as genuine as it should be. We want to make sure that people have the opportunity to state their case clearly and to see whether some satisfaction can be provided for them. Going forward, it is the end of this mandate, and we are into a new mandate. The Executive need to return to this. We need to ensure that the industry does not shut down, because it would be much harder to get it started again. Strong signals of our intent for the future need to be sent now.

Mr Agnew: When the Minister spoke with the Committee this morning, he talked about our having reached the limits of affordability in our support for the renewable industry. Of course, affordability is a choice. The Executive collectively have a choice between spending all the block grant on renewables, which I do not think anyone would call for or support, and, at the other extreme, giving no further support to renewables, which I certainly cannot support. Unfortunately, that seems to be the vision that

the Minister is presenting to us now and, earlier, to the Committee. Between the two extremes, however, there are many options.

We talk about affordability, and Mr Frew rightly made the point about the need to strike a balance between supporting renewables and keeping energy prices at a sustainable level for business and domestic consumers. That is the right approach to take. However, we have to ask what the cost is of not supporting renewables. What is the cost of giving no incentivisation to a sector that, in Northern Ireland, across all forms of renewables, supports in the region of 10,000 jobs? What is the cost of no support? We have heard little about that from the Minister or in the debate so far. We must explore some of the alternatives. I accept that the decisions being made by DECC and Amber Rudd are ridiculous decisions. They are short-sighted and are based on almost a prejudice rather than on any sound evidence of what is good for the economy or, indeed, good for the UK in meeting our responsibilities under the Climate Change Act 2008. However, we have to take responsibility in Northern Ireland: energy is devolved. While we have to respond to decisions made by DECC, we cannot simply throw our hands up and say, "Well, they have decided they are going to cease supporting wind. Therefore, we must do the same". It makes the warm words of support for renewables from this Minister, his predecessor and, indeed, the wider Executive look empty.

The UK initially fully funded the renewable heat incentive, until we messed that one up, and, for renewable electricity, Great Britain carried the vast bulk of the cost of support. We said, "We support renewables. How important they are"; indeed, the Minister even told the Committee today that we must end our reliance on fossil fuels. Where is the commitment to end the reliance on fossil fuels when we are told, "Well, if you want to support the renewables industry you must pay for it. You must carry the cost immediately"? We are told, "It is unaffordable, and it's not something that we are going to choose". I repeat: it is a choice.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I think I am hearing him suggest that he would support a Northern Ireland ROC scheme. First, the apparatus is not there to actually sustain that, but, if it was, does the Member realise that it would cost Northern Ireland bill payers maybe £770 million over the next 20 years, which would all come from our businesses and bill payers?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. What I sought from the Minister in Committee today and what I seek now is at least an exploration of the options, and I have not even heard a commitment. Maybe, in his winding speech, we will get that commitment. There are options. There is contract for difference (CFD), and, certainly, when I speak to the industry, it is not saying that, if Northern Ireland were included in CFD, projects would be unaffordable here and they would not bid in. That is not what I hear: the industry is saying that it wants CFD in Northern Ireland and wants to bid for projects through that scheme.

I suppose that, for the smaller renewables sector, we have a stay of execution proposed here today for small-scale wind. We could look at whether that is sustainable in the medium-to-long term rather than in the short term, which seems to be what is being indicated. Could we have some form of small feed-in tariff (FIT) scheme? We cannot get access to the GB small FIT scheme, but can we explore something similar? The whole argument about the approach being taken today is that small-scale generation will not add significant costs to bills if we support it. Is that an option? Is there an all-Ireland approach, given that we are in a single electricity market with the Republic of Ireland? Is there some form of all-Ireland subsidy that could be negotiated? While that would take some time, it would, at least, offer the opportunity of a way forward.

I am not saying that we should continue with what we have been doing and just pay for all of it ourselves; I am saying that I accept that what is being presented today might be the least worst option in terms of the position that DECC has put us in, but, at least, let us now say that we cannot rely on DECC — its vision is unsustainable in every sense. We need our own direction for Northern Ireland. Energy policy is devolved. We will take responsibility for it, and we will find a way forward for the renewables industry to thrive here.

There is real opportunity in renewables, and I do not want to see it being wasted. It has come so far, but the approach seems to be that we have done enough and that is good enough. We have a target. We set a target for 40% renewable electricity by 2020, and we should be absolutely proud of how far we have come. Stopping here would be a mistake.

I know that the Minister is under a legal obligation in terms of the gas industry, despite saying that we need to end our reliance on fossil fuels. I know that he is under an obligation to promote the gas industry. To this

day, the gas industry, despite being a mature industry, has never been subsidy-free. It receives subsidies when it wants to expand the grid infrastructure, including the £32.5 million direct government subsidy for the Gas to the West project. The boiler replacement scheme is another subsidy, and, indeed, the Ballylumford gas power station received a subsidy through consumer bills that put 1% on bills. Gas has never been subsidy-free. We always hear about the cost of renewables, but nobody talks about the cost of gas to bill payers or through direct subsidy. I will not even start on nuclear; the subsidies there are phenomenal.

The renewables sector is unique. Representatives of the solar and wind industries came to the Committee and said, "We are plotting a path to a subsidy-free future for renewables". Both industries have used 2021 as a target. We have been gradually reducing the subsidy for renewable energy in stages for those technologies as they mature. Even they are setting an end point. Stopping when we can see the horizon seems to me short-sighted.

7.45 pm

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Sure.

Mr Frew: The Member's point on short-sightedness is good, but he misses the elephant in the room with regard to what we pay in subsidies. Even though that is mighty, it is the actual cost of energy, not the subsidy, that could be the problem that needs to be tackled. I agree with what he said about looking at all the options. Another option is to not necessarily subsidise generation but to look at how we can subsidise the use of the energy generated by containing energy so that we can use it at more effective times. I am certainly not saying that we should throw millions at that, but it is another option that we should look at in the whole scheme of things.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is good to have this conversation. We used to have these discussions in Committee, but, unfortunately, he was moved from the Committee. I cannot think why that could have been. He makes a good point: demand-side management, energy storage — there are so many pieces to the picture. However, renewables are definitely one part. Indeed, we talk about the cost of energy, but I come back to the cost of not supporting

renewables: what will the cost be if we continue to rely on fossil fuels? As supply goes down and demand goes up, we know that the price goes only one way. We need to end our reliance on fossil fuels, but, Mr Speaker, I probably need to end this speech, which was supposed to be a short one.

We need a way forward beyond what we decide today. As I said, this may be the best that we will get in the circumstances, but what we need is what comes next. That is what I want the Department, the Minister, in his limited time left in position, and the new Minister, whoever comes into office, to focus on. It is unacceptable that we stop here.

This has been quite a negative speech for my final contribution of the Assembly term. I hope that it is more of a "See you later" than a farewell, but the electorate will decide that. I came in as such a positive young man five years ago: look at what you have done to me. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: You need a bit of renewal.

Mr Agnew: I need a bit of renewal myself, as Mr McGlone points out. I remain an optimist. I believe that there are solutions to the problems that we are discussing today. I have not heard them from the Minister or the Department in recent weeks and months, but I believe that a new Assembly and Executive can and should find those solutions.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leatsa, a Cheann Comhairle, as an dóigh ar chaith tú le cúrsaí anseo. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt duit agus gach beannacht a ghuidhe duit as an dóigh chothrom a raibh tú ag déileáil le gach duine.

I wish you well, Mr Speaker, as you move on. Some of us may not be back on 12 May, but I believe that you will be here to chair the first meeting of the new mandate. I thank you for your fairness and the courtesies that you have shown. You had a bit of a reputation, Mr Speaker, for being tough on the Sinn Féin Benches. I have survived, at least until tonight, so I will be on my best behaviour.

I have two quick points. First, you can be sure, Mr Agnew, that support for renewables will continue in the new mandate, whether I am here or not. The big parties — in fact, all parties — are, I think, united in their belief that there needs to be continued support. Let us approach the consultation seriously and look at

the options ahead, including, since it is an all-island electricity market, the all-island refit. From my conversations with colleagues, everyone is up for ensuring that we continue to hit the ambitious renewables targets that we have set ourselves.

Secondly, I mentioned to the Minister today that the NIE and SONI moratorium had held up a lot of connections to the grid. Some are intimately connected to job creation and investment, including the Dale Farm solar energy plant in Cookstown. It would be useful if the Minister used his good offices to talk to NIE to see whether, even in the midst of a consultation, there is a way in which we could help some of the key projects that are stuck in the logjam but could have a real impact on jobs and investment. I do not know whether the Minister has had a chance to do that today, but I hope that he will come back on that.

I finish by thanking the Committee, its staff and the Clerks for all the help that they have given us. The Chair has shown exemplary leadership. Today, there was a little incident at home, but I believe that Mrs McGlone is as tough as her son and that everything is well there. There is no avoiding the fact that, over the last nine months, the discussion on the issue has been really disappointing, in that the Chair was not treated with courtesy and respect and was not given the information that he asked for over many months. While we will disagree on the vote later, we have a clear approach, and I hope that that continues.

Finally, I thank the Minister. Not all of the cards fell his way in recent months. Not only were there terrible job losses across the North but the goalposts were moved by the Department of Energy and Climate Change in London, and we are paying the price for that. I hope that we will pick up the pieces, move forward confidently, continue our support for renewables and, as we enter consultation with the small-scale providers, come up with a scheme that satisfies them and their customers.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Mr Speaker, in case I forget, I wish you every success. I believe that you will be back here on 9 May, but we will certainly miss you on the election trail in South Antrim. I wish you personally every success.

I came into the Chamber on 28 June. I was honoured to replace Danny Kinahan and delighted to be given the challenge of sitting on the ETI Committee. I take this opportunity to thank the Chairman for the welcome and support that he gave me as a new member who probably did not appreciate the work and the

scrutiny role of the Committee; indeed, I extend those thanks to all members of the Committee.

At my very first Committee meeting on, I think, 29 June, the issue of renewables and the NIRO was brought up. In a way, I feel sorry for the Minister. He has always been very friendly to me, and he has probably been let down by Amber Rudd moving the goalposts in Westminster and by the communication of different information. In June, the Minister made commitments based on the relevant information. However, what we have now is a renewables shambles. I believe that DETI officials make up the rules on their way over here: "What will we tell these boys today?". We hear differing stories and differing information. When we question them, we do not get a straight answer. I come from the world of business, and, if I were to transfer some of these experiences to my former family business, I would be bankrupt in three months. It would not be tolerated in the private sector. Decisions need to be made and honoured.

We have failed the renewables sector. A matter of weeks ago, we failed them on renewable heat incentives. We failed them when we gave commitments. In November, we failed them when we gave an understanding — I will not put it more strongly than that, although some might say that we "suggested" it — that the scheme would stay open to 31 March. We are failing them again tonight with the closure of the scheme to large-scale projects. There is to be some type of phoney consultation on small-scale inshore wind projects. It will be interesting to learn what we will consult about.

I am sure that the officials will make it up as they go along, because they have been making it up since June.

I am sorry that I was an optimist. I am not an expert in renewables. Some people understand it, such as my colleague Paul. He has left the Committee, but I used to enjoy asking Paul, "What's this all about?", but he has moved on. Maybe I do not understand it fully yet, but I know this: we have failed. The Northern Ireland Executive have failed and will dress it up with all the achievements and targets that they have hit, but we have failed. For almost eight or nine months, I have sat in a Committee, and it has been like 'Jackanory'. I share Members' frustration. I missed the Chairman tonight, but I am sure that he aired his frustration, which I share. I want to be here, to be optimistic, to deliver and to offer vision for the local economy. I believe that the Minister does as well, but we have failed, no matter how we dress it up.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Certainly, I will, for the final time.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I almost regret standing, a Cheann Comhairle, but I could not stop myself. Would you say that the decision of Concentrix to build new premises on the Lagan at Maysfield is a failure? Would you say that Allstate's decision to build new premises on the Lagan is a failure? Would you say that the innovation lab of Google and PWC's headquarters on the Lagan are a failure? Has there been any ray of light over the last few months? Of course, all those projects have been supported by the Executive.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I thank the Member, my colleague on the Committee, for his intervention. You are quite right: strategically, we have failed, but the Ulster businessman has delivered, as you highlighted. The Ulster businessman has continued to deliver.

I will finish now. It has been an experience. I wish the renewables sector every success. I hope, genuinely, that whoever is here in the next mandate — I may or may not be here — will not abandon the sector. At this minute in time, there is a lot of frustration, and there is a lot of support, which is needed, to continue our investment in renewables and to move away, as others have said, from fossil fuels and dependence upon them.

Mr Speaker, I have wished you every success. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to make what may be my final contribution in this mandate.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much.

Mr Bell: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. This is the last time that I will address the House in this mandate. I wish you every success in the future. I thank you for your role as Speaker and wish you God's richest blessings in whatever you do in the future.

I thank all those who contributed to today's debate. Some have generated heat, and some have generated light, but it has been an interesting debate as we made our way through what is a very complex process. I thank all those who have made renewable energy in Northern Ireland such an astounding success. That has been delivered by people in business, industry, households and workplaces who have a vision for what Northern Ireland renewables can be and who have delivered against that

vision. I am very proud to stand here at the end of the mandate to declare that the official Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency figures show that a quarter of our electricity consumption is from renewable electricity.

I think that the Chair might have missed out some of the positive points in his speech, but one that should have been included is that almost 17,000 stations have been accredited since 2005. That has led us to exceed our Programme for Government target of 20% renewable electricity by 2015. I happen to be on the Executive. The five parties collectively came to the agreement after discussions. What the Executive agreed to go forward with after listening to all the parties' contributions was that we should hit a 20% target. Having so successfully exceeded that, I want to thank everybody out there who made that possible. We do get a good deal from the Northern Ireland renewables obligation.

8.00 pm

I would like to thank Patsy McGlone, the Chair of the Committee. I have paid tribute previously in the House, maybe not on tonight's performance but certainly on others, where he and the Committee have enabled legislation to go through the House in a way that has been constructive, efficient and in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. If the House or devolved government is to mean anything, it is that we have to deliver more to the people who give us the privilege to come here. Thanks to the Chair and Committee.

I will look to some of the issues that have been raised. I believe that the proposed order will provide the legislative certainty that large-scale onshore wind developers require in order for them to have financial closure. I appreciate the comments that Mr Cochrane-Watson made in relation to the changing position from the Department of Energy and Climate Change. Let me be absolutely clear that, where changes are made by Westminster, I will always examine those changes and, if the facts change, my position will change if there is a better position for all the people of Northern Ireland. As Minister, I do not get the privilege of being only for one sectoral group or from one position. As Minister, I have to act in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland; what I refer to as the paramount interest of all the people of Northern Ireland. When DECC changed its position, as Mr Cochrane-Watson outlined — as did Mr Gordon Dunne — I am proud to say that I also changed mine. My position will always change when the facts

change. When the facts change to afford me to deliver something that is better than what was there before for all the people of Northern Ireland, I think that it is only responsible that I would follow in that vein.

I have had a number of meetings. Mr Murphy referred to them in a very constructive contribution. I have, again, spoken to small scale. Others can dismiss the consultation as they see fit. As my father-in-law, Terry, would say, "You are entitled to your opinion no matter how wrong you are". It is a genuine consultation. It is a genuine attempt by this Minister to see what we can do for small scale. That is why I have chosen the route that I have gone down: I believe that it is in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland.

As Mr Dunne, in a very constructive contribution, outlined, we will seek to look to where adjustments can be made that are commensurate with the GB status, because I have to protect the Northern Ireland bill payer. I have to look towards our manufacturing industry and business. Commensurate with what we can do within the parameters of GB, where there are adjustments and I can be helpful, I will seek to make those adjustments. When we go to consultation, it is a genuine, honest consultation to try to take forward what we can do, albeit within the limits that I have laid out, for small scale. It is for a new Minister and Department to take forward that consultation.

I will say the finest word of thanks to those who have been advising me. Members are not privy to the dedicated hours of advice that I received from my officials. That goes from the permanent secretary down to every man and woman who advised me in DETI. We are privileged to have them. They have worked above and beyond the call of duty. They have gone out with me on early mornings to London to be with DECC and have been with me late into the evenings. At every stage, I have been privileged to see a group of officials act at every time in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland to scrutinise what are some very difficult positions, highly complex legalities and to try to ascertain — they have ascertained — through a very complex set of circumstances a path for Northern Ireland that I believe represents the best interests of Northern Ireland. I put on record, as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, my thanks for their intelligence, forensic insights and the objectivity of their advice. When we deliver on this process, I believe they can take considerable credit not only for the success of Northern Ireland exceeding the target that we

all set out but for the success of Northern Ireland in doing the best and in the paramount interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

I will turn to some of the comments that were made. There has been a difficult process. I think that DECC has made that process difficult. I also think that changing positions, having to deal with verbal consultations and then written consultations has been a very cumbersome and very burdensome process for everybody involved. We have sought at every stage, where we could get the certainty people were asking for and required, to provide that certainty.

Many people will look towards the process and the difficulties that there are. I challenge them to look at the target that was set, to look at the excess of the target that we have made and to look with all of us who, God willing, are seeking to be returned to the House, to the future to see what we can do.

I believe in the renewables industry. I believe that we have certain natural gifts in Northern Ireland, including wind, that we can develop, but we have to do it within a context that is affordable for the householder and for business. To anybody who says, "There is an unlimited pot. You can do what you want with it. Put whatever burden you want on business. You can put up the £50.00 on a household bill for every bill payer in Northern Ireland", I say that you cannot. You must be responsible. Everything must be set in context. I believe that this is the most responsible way forward.

We leave a position where targets in renewable heat and renewables have been exceeded. We leave a Northern Ireland with some 5.9% unemployment, which is well below the average of the European Union and below that in Ireland. We leave a Northern Ireland today that is attracting more foreign direct investment than any other part of the United Kingdom, and we leave a Northern Ireland that has 80% of that foreign direct investment coming in and subsequently reinvesting. We leave a Northern Ireland that, on the basis of our costs, is the most competitive in the UK, with 84% average and some 48% or 49% of the costs of London. We leave a Northern Ireland where companies like Allstate have come, which was referred to by Mr Ó Muilleoir. It employs thousands of our people in Northern Ireland, and it will say on the record, "We came, Jonathan, for your costs, but we stayed for your people because the men and women of Northern Ireland are some of the most loyal people, and there is such a small attrition rate that they are highly attractive and highly sought after".

I agree with Mr Cochrane-Watson that it is the working people of Northern Ireland — I might differ and say that it is the working men and the working women — who have made Northern Ireland such a huge success and who can take credit for the fact that we have a very competitive rate of unemployment, more foreign direct investment and a record number of jobs achieved by a highly successful Northern Ireland and for the fact that we go in with the prospect of offering business for the future, from 1 April 2018, the most competitive rate of corporation tax in western Europe.

Mr Speaker, I have thanked you, and I seek your indulgence to thank one other Member whom I have been privileged to know from my Strangford constituency. That is Kieran McCarthy, who will also be retiring from the House. In all the years I have known Kieran — I have known him for well over a decade — I have found him to be a gentleman of the highest Christian principles and integrity. He has been one of the hardest workers that I have been privileged to meet. He has been genuine in everything that he has sought to do. We have disagreed on many occasions, but I respect the fact that we have always disagreed on points of principle and differences in politics, and that his aim has always been to deliver, not just for our constituents in Strangford but for all the people of Northern Ireland. I wish Kieran God's richest blessings into the future. When people say to me, "There are no Christian gentlemen in politics," I tend to answer with two words: Kieran McCarthy.

On the day that is in it, I also say that, although I have recorded many of the successes, it has been a tragic day for Northern Ireland. Tonight, a father has been taken from his children. That is a person who put on the uniform of the Prison Service and served everybody in Northern Ireland without fear or favour. We must remember that, when people put on those uniforms, they serve all of us, and we are deeply indebted to their bravery and their heroism. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, and also with the Justice Minister and everybody in our justice system and Police Service who seek to bring the murdering cowards responsible to the courts in Northern Ireland.

I believe that the proposed order will provide the legislative certainty that large-scale onshore wind developers require to secure that financial close, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

8.15 pm

Licensing Bill: Final Stage

Mrs Cochrane: I beg to move

That the Licensing Bill [NIA 69/11-16] do now pass.

At the outset, as a representative for East Belfast —

Mr Speaker: Could you please speak into the microphone because we are having problems hearing you here?

Mrs Cochrane: I would like to express my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of the prison officer who, we heard, tragically died today. As we complete this Assembly term, it is clear that there is still so much to be done to stamp out dissident republicanism. I know that my colleague the Justice Minister will say more about that after this item of business.

The legislation regulating the sale and consumption of intoxicating liquor is in the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. There has been very little change to that legislation over the past 19 years. However, the hospitality industry has seen considerable change in consumer behaviour and demand. Furthermore, the redevelopment of our major sports stadia to become state-of-the-art facilities was not anticipated when the Licensing Order 1996 was introduced.

A significant sum of public money has been invested in upgrading those stadia. They have been, or are being, developed in such a way that means they are versatile in their use and will be fully equipped to host sporting, education, business, tourism and leisure events. As the law stands, however, an application for a liquor licence cannot be made for such premises.

This Licensing Bill will create a new type of liquor licence specifically for our three major outdoor stadia. The sale of alcohol must be ancillary to the normal business carried out on the premises, and that means that an outdoor stadium would not be able to sell or have the consumption of alcohol when it is not in use for an event, sporting or otherwise.

As an additional safeguard, a court is going to be given the power to attach any conditions it considers appropriate to the licence. That would, for example, allow the court to respond to any concerns about the sale of alcohol at certain types of events, particularly those aimed at a young audience. This court could use that power when granting or renewing such a licence or at any time during the life of the licence.

That safeguard was made explicitly clear by Mr Allister's amendment at Further Consideration Stage, which calls for a court to consider specific conditions for under-18 events. Such a condition should aim to protect young people but, at the same time, allow for flexibility based on the specific design of the stadium and how it is being run operationally. When the Schools' Cup final is being held at Kingspan, for example, the sales points under the stands are not in use, but the corporate areas can still operate. I see this as being the type of good practice that a court might endorse on a condition on a licence. I know that the PSNI, which is a statutory consultee for a licensing application, already carries out good work in the planning of stadium events, and I hope that this constructive relationship will continue so that alcohol can be sold in a controlled but family-friendly manner.

Back in October, when I had my first meeting with secretariat staff on introducing this legislation, I think that I was told that I was bonkers and that there was no chance of progressing a private Member's Bill in that time. Those of you who know me will know that, if I am given a challenge, I will find a way to overcome it. Even the person who built the ramp that I tripped over at new year, which resulted in my breaking my arm in two places, did not manage to stop me from getting the legislation through. I was clear in my mind how I wanted to amend the 1996 Order, so my consultation was very focused and clearly defined. Indeed, the Bill before us today has changed only very slightly from its initial draft. Given that I drafted the Bill myself, I think that it is not bad going to have required only a few technical amendments to tidy it up. Given the volume of Executive legislation in the final few months of the mandate, the Bill Office was quite happy that that was the case. I thank that office for its assistance when I needed advice regarding timings, groupings and some wording.

I believe that, against the odds, the Licensing Bill has reached Final Stage today due to my cooperative working with the current and former Minister for Social Development, the sporting

bodies, residents, the PSNI and others with an interest in licensing. I put on record a special thanks to the social policy unit team in the Department for Social Development, which has had to put up with my thinking through every eventuality of each clause or potential condition on a stadium licence and for it always being just a phone call away for me to bounce ideas off. My thanks also go to the Chair of the Committee for Social Development, the Committee and the Committee staff. They had a very heavy workload but made sure that they made the time to engage with me and to complete the report. I formally presented to the Committee three times, once after no sleep and wearing the same clothes as the previous day after pulling an all-nighter here, but these things happen when you give yourself tight timescales and are working single-handedly to achieve something. I have learned the lesson that I am now 40 and no longer able to do the things that I did when I was 20, because it took me about a week to recover.

I also take this opportunity to thank my staff members, Matthew McKibbin and Meadhbh Keating Fitzpatrick. They not only met my demands for licensing facts at any time of the day or night but ensured that I did not drop the ball on all the other issues that I was working on in my constituency.

If I may, Mr Speaker, I want to mention one other thing that gave me some added focus as the Bill progressed. Many of you will know that, just as I was launching my consultation, I got the news that Dad was seriously ill. I spent most of the autumn months in the Ulster and Mater Hospitals, often taking calls between visiting hours and drafting parts of the Bill in the relatives' room whilst waiting to hear whether Dad was safely out of surgery. As I progressed through the various stages of the Bill, he too has progressed, and I am delighted that he and my mum are here tonight. I hope that the Bill passes its Final Stage and that, when it receives Royal Assent, he will have finished his chemo and that, next season, he will be able to enjoy a pint with me at a sporting fixture in one of our major stadia. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I ask Members to support the Final Stage of the Licensing Bill.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms P Bradley: I am delighted to support Mrs Cochrane and the Licensing Bill. I have known Judith since I arrived here in 2011, and I know her to be extremely studious. She dots every i and crosses every t. When she brought her Bill forward to us in Committee, I knew that it would be absolutely no different. This is the first time

that I have spoken on the Bill because, on the occasions that it was in the Chamber, my colleagues spoke because I had other things on. I am delighted to be able to speak on it at Final Stage.

I have to say, Judith, that you worked extremely hard to get this through Committee under extreme time pressures and in extreme family circumstances, which we certainly understand. When you came to us, you went into full detail, listened to all the consultees and took everything on board from the PSNI, the sports clubs, the residents — to absolutely every witness who gave evidence to us in Committee. Through all of that, you always came up with a solution, where possible, and you need to be commended for that. You have worked extremely hard on the Bill, and it is most definitely required. We would, of course, have liked it to be a little broader, but, sadly, that was not to be. I will not even go into the licensing laws in Northern Ireland; I will save that for another day, hopefully when some of us are back here in May. I welcome the Bill today. I know the hard work that has been put into it, and I absolutely commend you for that.

On a personal note, I will miss you greatly. You have been a great friend to me since I arrived here in 2011. We sat on the Assembly Commission together, along with the Speaker, and you have always been there to defend what you believed was right. Not a lot of people see what happens in our Commission meetings, which is probably just as well at times.

[Laughter.] You were a strong force on that as well, so I want to say thank you for that and for being there for me when I needed you. I wish you every success in whatever endeavours you have ahead of you.

Just in passing, I also want to thank you, Mr Speaker. I know that I thanked you umpteen times last week during International Women's Week for the wonderful work that you did. However, as a Commission member, I want to thank you for being so fair and for listening to us at times when I am sure that you felt like pulling your hair out, but you were extremely fair. You have been a very fair Speaker, and it has been a pleasure to work under you as well.

In finishing, I want to pick up on Judith's first point and pass my condolences on to that family. As someone who wore the uniform of the RUC for 10 years, I remember full well just how hard it was during the Troubles for my family, not only my children but my parents. I remember the times when I was under threat and all the times when it was just so difficult to live a normal life. I know that it will be

discussed later, but I just wanted to put on record that I am thinking of them. I hope that we are not going back to those days again. We have a wonderful country here, we are going forward, and so many Members do not want us to go back.

Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Speaker. Thank you, Judith, and all the very best.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much.

Mrs D Kelly: I also congratulate Mrs Cochrane at Final Stage of the Licensing Bill. We had hoped to amend other licensing laws to drag them into the 21st century, but, no doubt, a future Assembly will look at them, given the loss to the coffers and their impact on the tourism trade.

It is fair to say that the Social Development Committee and, indeed, the House cooperated all along the way with Mrs Cochrane to ensure that the Bill would be concluded before the end of the mandate. It is an example of using common sense and a bit of a collaboration to provide what I hope is in the best interests of the people, particularly the service users of the stadia.

I, too, will use this opportunity to commend you, Mr Speaker, for your service. I wish you and your family every health and happiness in your retirement. Indeed, to all Members of the Assembly who have chosen not to stand again, I wish you well, particularly my good friends Alban Maginness and John Dallat, who will be sorely missed as contributors not only in the Chamber but to our Assembly parliamentary meetings.

I also wish Trevor, the Director General, well. He and I have travelled many roads together, from Craigavon council to the Policing Board to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I wish him well in whatever he chooses to do in the future. I also hope that he relays my thanks to all the staff throughout the Building for all their efforts to make our jobs easier, because politics is a very tough game, and it helps when people are courteous, respectful, and you can rely on them to play their part in enabling you to fulfil your responsibilities as a Member of the Assembly.

8.30 pm

So, Mr Speaker, thank you very much indeed, and, Mrs Cochrane, I certainly wish you well in your future.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a non-playing member of Larne Rugby Football Club, although I am not sure that there are any plans to build a regional stadium there — *[Laughter.]* — so I do not think that this legislation will apply to it.

Like others, I pay tribute to Judith Cochrane for the work that she has carried out in taking forward a private Member's Bill. I am aware of the considerable work involved, so how she managed to condense it into such a short period amazes me, so well done for that.

There are clearly gaps in our licensing laws in Northern Ireland. In 2012, there was a consultation by the Department for Social Development, and, in 2014, there was an announcement that the law would be changed, but that did not happen. What we see here is a private Member spotting that there is a need for change and driving it herself, so well done for that. Of course, other aspects remain to be changed. We are now in a different environment from that of 20 years ago, when the original rules were written in the 1996 Order. Other work requires to be done, and that will fall to the next Assembly.

We have a burgeoning tourism and hospitality industry, and at least this private Member's Bill will facilitate those who come to Northern Ireland to enjoy our major sports venues: what we now have at Ravenhill or Kingspan Stadium, the new Windsor Park that is emerging, and, potentially, the new Casement Park, when planning issues are eventually addressed and development occurs.

It is clear that the customer, the spectator of sport today, has demands different from those of spectators in the past. People expect a comfortable environment, hospitality and a customer experience: food, perhaps a glass of wine or a pint of beer. This legislation fills that void, because there was not legislation specifically covering outdoor stadia. In 2004, when the new Odyssey Arena was built — it is now the SSE Arena — specific legislation was brought in to deal with indoor arenas. This private Member's Bill does something similar for the emerging outdoor stadia. We have to thank Judith Cochrane for driving that forward and for getting this Bill, after considerable effort, to Final Stage. We have listened to evidence at Committee from a range of sources and have come up with a proportionate and balanced Bill. I wish to indicate my continued support, and the support of the Ulster Unionist Party, for it.

I wish Judith well in her future career. I also offer my best wishes to the Speaker and to the

Deputy Speaker, John Dallat, who are now standing down as Assembly Members. I wish you both well in your retirement.

Mr Ross: I, too, want to add my name to the list of those who have already congratulated the Member on the passage of her Bill. As others have said, we have had a rush of legislation through the Chamber in the last number of weeks. Sadly, sometimes people outside the House and, increasingly, in the House, judge the merits of this place on how many Bills we pass. I do not think that that is necessarily how we should judge our output. We should judge our output on the quality of the Bills and whether we are actually solving problems.

I remember the meeting of the all-party group on rugby at Kingspan Stadium after the summer break. There had been a court case that summer as well, the outcome of which had unintended consequences for our regional stadia, particularly the Kingspan Stadium, because of its different licensing arrangements and fewer regulations around it than UEFA would impose on Windsor Park. I remember that, at that meeting, saying that we need assistance from the Assembly on the licensing laws. At the time, I suggested, as chair of the all-party group, that we should write to the Minister to see what we could get done, but it was a very tight timescale.

At that meeting, Mrs Cochrane confidently declared, "Oh no, I can solve this; I will bring a private Member's Bill forward." I am not one to ever question Mrs Cochrane's ability — I am quite sure that you would do so at your peril — but even the most optimistic people at the meeting questioned whether she would be able to get it through in the very tight timescale. The fact that we are here at Final Stage, as the penultimate act of this mandate, shows the determination and ability of Mrs Cochrane to get the Bill through. Indeed, it also shows her ability to work with other individuals to make sure that it happened. She did that with some of the residents around Ravenhill whom, I know, were at times quite concerned about what the Bill would mean — she should be commended for the consultation that she carried out — and with officials in DSD to make sure that they assisted her in making the Bill a reality. Fans of Ulster Rugby and other sports for which the Bill will have implications will certainly be very grateful.

I certainly welcome the fact that, from an all-party group on rugby perspective, she has been standing up for the Ulstermen. I am, however, disappointed that she is standing down from the Assembly. I genuinely mean that. She has

brought a very sensible contribution to an Assembly that sometimes lacks sensible voices. She has made a really positive contribution in her term of office here, and I am disappointed that she is standing down. I am quite sure that many of us will still have informal meetings at the Kingspan Stadium before games on Friday evenings, but I am disappointed that she is standing down, and I wish her every success in whatever she chooses to do afterwards.

I will certainly support the Final Stage of the Bill.

Mr McCallister: Like colleagues, I welcome the Final Stage of the Licensing Bill. Following on from Mr Ross, it is a shame that Mrs Cochrane is standing down because we could desperately do with her back here to continue the reform of our licensing laws, although that is looking like quite a big job for anybody to take on.

When Mrs Cochrane first mentioned the crazy idea, to me, that she was going to do this, I tried to remind her that the mandate ended in March of the coming year. She identified a problem that needed to be sorted, drafted the legislation, worked with the Committee, worked with the Minister and the Department, and met all the obligations here and any obstacle that was thrown in the way, with mere things like needing to set Standing Orders aside for the day. She did whatever needed to be done and nothing seemed to be too much trouble or too difficult for her to overcome.

It was very much to her credit that she was able to work and find a solution to an issue that, as we go forward, will allow us to look at different things. Mr Beggs talked about the Kingspan Stadium, Windsor Park and possibly Casement. If we are serious in years to come about developing a product that says that we are in a place that means that we should be able to host the Rugby World Cup, all the other obstacles in our licensing laws should be dealt with. I really commend Mrs Cochrane for doing that.

I have to say also that she did so at a difficult personal time when her dad was so ill. I am delighted that he and Judith's family are here, because that is important. Sometimes, one of the downsides of being in politics is that social media exposes all our lives to some really quite harsh and unkind things. I certainly am delighted that things have improved in that regard, not only with getting the Bill passed but with your father's health improving. That is something that we are all thankful and delighted for.

This is an important piece of legislation. It shows what the Assembly and individual Members can achieve when there is the will and drive of a Back-Bencher to solve a problem and work with others to do that and to overcome those obstacles. That is why it is important.

Like Mr Ross, I am sad that Judith Cochrane will be leaving the Assembly, and I certainly wish her every blessing and every good wish in whatever she decides to do.

I am sure that those informal meetings may well continue over a pint at an Ulster Rugby game, although, I am sure, not with DUP members [*Laughter.*] They will be drinking Coca-Cola. I am sure those meetings will continue.

Given the skills and talents that Mrs Cochrane possesses, I am sure that she has a very encouraging career ahead of her. The best days are very much ahead. I wish her and her family well and wish her every success and good wish. I offer her huge congratulations. I know the work it takes to get a private Member's Bill passed. She said to me a few months ago that I was not getting my private Member's Bill passed, so she does not know everything.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Judith Cochrane — I am sure you have been waiting for this moment — to conclude the Final Stage.

Mrs Cochrane: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank all the Members for their engagement tonight. If they could all write me a job reference, that would be really helpful. If all that is true, I should be very employable. I also thank everybody else who has engaged with me during the stages of my Licensing Bill. It has been a challenge, but it is one that I believe has been worthwhile and has delivered a positive outcome. Whilst I would like it to have gone further as well and to have dealt with a number of other licensing issues, time was not on my side, so it had to remain very focused on our stadia, especially with the bid for the 2023 Rugby World Cup coming up.

This is the last time I will speak in the House. I do so with mixed emotions. I trust that you, Mr Speaker, will allow me a little latitude as I make some closing remarks. First, I thank you for your leadership. It has been a pleasure to work with you from my days on the Finance Committee with you at the start of my term and more recently on the Assembly Commission. You have done so much to encourage women in politics, and my decision to step down is not

a reflection of that valuable work. I wish you well in your retirement. I know that we celebrate our birthdays a couple of days apart. On our next milestone birthdays in another 10 years, who knows where we will be?

I also want to mention my colleagues Kieran and Anna. I hope they are looking forward to a well-earned rest. I know that I am certainly looking forward to spending some more time with my family, including my girls — Emma Rose and Jessica. Who knows? I might even manage to deliver on the goal of having a clean, tidy house, although I cannot imagine that Jonny will let me take over the role of cooking again just yet.

When I was elected to the Assembly back in 2011, I came here with the hope that I could make a difference, that my work ethic would not change and that I would get things done. I hope that the people of East Belfast have been satisfied with my work record; it has certainly been a privilege to serve them. I was brought up to be a doer and to get on with people and to realise that, although many of us have differing views on issues, as individuals we can still work together to get things done. I have built strong working relationships with people from every party represented in the Chamber tonight; indeed, I would say that I have made firm friends. I believe that it is through those relationships that I have been able to garner support for the progression of my Bill against the odds. I hope that the new Assembly will see more doers who are willing to work with others and whose focus is on finding solutions and making a difference. That is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve. Remember that the world is changed by your example, not your opinion.

In closing, I thank the House for its consideration of the Bill from the preliminary stages until today, where there seems to be unanimous support. I hope that my work on the issue has brought to the fore the key limitations of the 1996 Order and how it can often be seen to hold us back in tourism and other events. It is incumbent on the next Assembly to move forward with a full review of liquor licensing that is fit for a modern Northern Ireland. [*Applause.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Licensing Bill [NIA 69/11-16] do now pass.

8.45 pm

Ministerial Statement

Death in Service of Prison Officer Adrian Ismay

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Mr Speaker, I start by thanking you for agreeing to allow me to make the statement at short notice. It is with the deepest sorrow that I speak to Members today following the death of serving prison officer, Adrian Ismay. I know that I speak for everyone in the Assembly when I say that our thoughts and prayers are with his wife, his daughters and the wider family circle, as well as his colleagues and friends.

Adrian's death has come as a great shock to all of us. He was a husband, father and grandfather, and it is in his family home that the pain of the loss will be felt most. He was also hugely respected by his friends and colleagues in the Northern Ireland Prison Service, where he gave over 28 years' service. In addition to his dedicated work as a prison officer, Adrian was actively involved in the community as a trainer in search and rescue and first aid. A remarkable example of his dedication to the Prison Service was shown when he attended a passing-out ceremony for new recruits last Friday, just one week after he had been attacked.

That courage could not be more different from the cowardice of those responsible for planting a bomb under his van in the darkness of night. Whilst the police and other agencies are working to establish the exact cause of Adrian's death, his bravery is in stark contrast to those who carried out this appalling attack. Those behind this callous attack once again showed an utter disregard for human life, not only for the life of someone who served the community but for the lives of his family and others living in the area. I know that I speak for all Members when I condemn the actions of those responsible for this heinous attack and say that I fully support the police in their investigation.

Those involved in carrying out this misguided attack and those who planned it should see the futility of their actions. They go against the democratic principles that the vast majority of people in this society support. I know that the police are looking for every piece of evidence to bring the perpetrators to justice, and I ask anyone with information to contact the police.

Adrian Ismay served the entire community. Whoever was behind this has nothing to offer anyone in Northern Ireland. Today, the Assembly and the justice family stand side by side, united in our sympathy for Adrian's family and in solidarity against those who want to drag this community back.

Mr Speaker: I say this for guidance, because we have a significant list. Obviously, Members can ask a question of the Minister on the statement. If, in fact, they want to express their own wishes and it is not a question, that might facilitate me to bring more Members into the discussion. However, people are entitled to ask a question of the Minister if they so wish.

Mr Ross (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): This is not the way in which any of us would have wanted to end the Assembly mandate. The targeting of Adrian Ismay at the beginning of this month demonstrates that, despite the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland over the past decade, there are still those in our society who will target a husband and father simply because of the uniform that he wears to work. There is nothing noble or brave about skulking around in the shadows and bringing death and destruction to communities that just want to get on with their lives. The only thing that those responsible for targeting Mr Ismay will achieve is to unite the law-abiding community in its determination and resolve to stand up to terrorism and work for a brighter future, rather than one full of the darkness of the past. My thoughts this evening are with the Ismay family and Adrian's colleagues across the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Reports came out of Maghaberry prison this afternoon that dissident republicans were celebrating and smoking cigars at the news that broke this morning. Not only will that appal most normal people, but it reflects the fact that prison officers work in extremely difficult circumstances, both in the prison and outside it. Can the Minister assure us that he will continue to work with the Prison Service and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to ensure that there is adequate protection for those who wear a uniform to protect the law-abiding citizens of Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I indicated to the House at Question Time this week that the director general of the Prison Service had asked for a security assessment of the threat against prison officers. I have no doubt that that will be completed as speedily as can be and that the Prison Service,

in conjunction with the Police Service, will do all that it can to protect Prison Service staff.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, Like the Chair, I think that it is sad that this is the last piece of business for this Assembly. Last week, in a matter of the day, most of us expressed the hope that Adrian Ismay would make a full recovery and extended good wishes to him. Indeed, yesterday, the Minister, in his contribution on the Floor, told us that he had made a full recovery and that, while certainly not back at his work, he was able to attend a passing-out ceremony at Hydebank.

Tonight, it is right and proper that we send our condolences to his family, his circle of friends and his colleagues. It is also appropriate that we send a very clear message to those who carry out these types of incidents, now including an attack in which a person has died, that they have no mandate and little or no support. Does the Minister agree that the best way to send that message is to remain united and firm in our approach to opposing those people?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree that we need united condemnation from the Assembly and a united community response to those who seek to divide us and drag us back.

Mr McKinney: This death is a huge blow to all of us who have stood against those with such murderous intent. My thoughts and the thoughts of all in the SDLP are with Adrian's family and friends at this difficult time. Today, we are reminded once again that, despite our differences, we are one society and one people, united and indivisible in the face of terror. We stand as democrats against such terror. They will not succeed.

I simply ask the Minister to directly convey to Adrian's family and friends our thoughts this evening.

Mr Ford: I expect to see the family during the day tomorrow. I will convey the wishes that are being expressed around the House, which I have no doubt will continue unanimously, when I meet the family.

Mr Kennedy: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I join the Minister and the entire House in expressing profound sadness at the death earlier today of prison officer Mr Adrian Ismay. I express sympathy to his wife, his family and his colleagues on his tragic and untimely death.

It is more than a little ironic that the final plenary of the mandate has been overshadowed by

events outside the House today. Regardless of the House, the lives of the Ismay family have been changed utterly and for ever. Those responsible for the planting of the under-vehicle device 11 days ago bear a very heavy responsibility for the death of Mr Ismay.

I am mindful that this is an occasion to express our heartfelt sympathy to his wife and family and not to engage in political discourse. However, will the Minister join me in expressing utter contempt for the reported celebrations by dissident republican prisoners in Maghaberry prison following news of the death of prison officer Ismay? Will he agree with me that such actions are entirely despicable?

Mr Ford: I am aware of reports in the media about supposed celebrations in Roe House in Maghaberry. I am not aware of the veracity of those allegations, but I entirely agree with Mr Kennedy that, if there is any truth in them, it is utterly despicable behaviour.

Mr Dickson: I, too, join the Minister in condemning the acts of last week and expressing sympathy to the Ismay family. Does he agree that the vile and pathetic excuses for humanity who carried out this atrocity and, sadly, others have nothing to offer our society and that the Assembly should be seen as standing firm tonight against those individuals?

Mr Ford: I agree entirely with that. I have said before and repeat tonight that it appears that some people are more wedded to some form of struggle than to any possible outcome. They must be condemned from every quarter. The united response in the House is being replicated amongst the vast, overwhelming majority of our people not just in Northern Ireland but across the border and across the water, judging from the responses that I saw this morning. That is the response that we need, and we need that carried through into the practical action of assistance to the police and acknowledgement of the difficult task that the police officers and prison officers of this society carry out.

Mr Douglas: I am a DUP Member for East Belfast, and this man was a neighbour of mine in many ways and lived a few streets away. We are all deeply saddened by the death of prison officer Adrian Ismay and wish to express our sincere and heartfelt condolences to his family. Let us not mince our words: will the Minister support me when I say that this attack on prison officer Ismay was a deplorable and senseless act of terror?

Yesterday in the Senate Chamber, we marked European victims of terrorism remembrance day by hearing from three victims of terror from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain — three victims whose lives had been shattered by bombs and bullets. One of the three speakers at the event was Austin Stack, whose father, Brian, was shot and fatally wounded in Dublin in 1983 by terrorists while serving as chief prison officer in Portlaoise jail. It was a powerful and moving speech, but the grief and loss were still evident all these years later. Yesterday, I was thinking, "That was in the past. I hope to God that we have put those days behind us". Yet we hear today of this tragic death and of another family facing uncertainty. Does the Minister agree that all of us in the Chamber need to redouble our efforts, through what we say and do, to marginalise and eradicate those who want to bring us back to the past?

Mr Ford: Of course I agree with the sentiments that Mr Douglas expresses. He referred to the murder of Mr Stack some years ago in the Republic. Notably, in recent years, when I have attended the Northern Ireland Prison Service memorial service on the Friday before Remembrance Sunday, there has been a representation of uniformed officers of the Irish Prison Service, wearing poppies with shamrocks to show their solidarity on a cross-border basis. That is the message that needs to go out: unity within Northern Ireland and unity across the island against all those who would seek to divide us. That must be followed by a determination to overcome the divisions that exist and that certain people continue to play on.

Mr A Maginness: There is, indeed, a dark shadow over the Assembly as we prepare for the elections. The attack on Adrian Ismay was not just an attack on a prison officer; it was an attack on the Assembly, it was an attack on the political process and it was an attack on non-violence and peaceful politics. The only response that we as an Assembly can give is to come together in solidarity to support Mr Ismay's family in their terrible and tragic loss. I ask the Minister to convey that to the family.

Mr Ford: I will do so.

Mr Allen: I join Members in expressing my deepest and heartfelt sympathies for Mr Ismay's family, which I ask the Minister to convey to the family. Does the Minister feel that it is appropriate or necessary to make representations to the British Government for additional resources to help the PSNI to

apprehend the despicable individuals behind this cowardly attack and to counter any further attacks by these individuals, who have nothing to offer our society?

Mr Ford: I indicate to Mr Allen, as to others, that the issue of appropriate resources for the justice system — in particular, for the work of the Police Service — is kept continually under review, and I have no doubt that it will feature in discussions that I will have with the Secretary of State in the immediate future.

Mr Craig: It is with deep sadness that I rise to speak on one of the last things to be discussed in the House: the death of Adrian Ismay.

Let us not beat about the bush: he was murdered by terrorists in Northern Ireland. We hoped that that had been buried in the past, in the history of not only Northern Ireland but Ireland as a whole.

9.00 pm

Unfortunately, I speak as one who has a little understanding of what that family is going through. The same knock came to my family's door, and it is horrendous. I feel for that family, and my thoughts and prayers are with the family circle at this time. What that family is going through is almost unbearable and unthinkable.

It is a reminder to all of us in the House that we signed up for a peaceful alternative for Northern Ireland and that we need to redouble our efforts to secure that peaceful future. We need to support those in our police force who, unfortunately, have to deal with this daily. It is concerning to hear that six other attempts were thwarted before, unfortunately, these evil people succeeded in this case. Minister, my question to you is this: can you assure the House that you will give the Chief Constable all the resources necessary to try to thwart those who, unfortunately, want to drag us back to the past?

Mr Ford: Members will appreciate that I cannot promise to give "all the resources necessary", in Mr Craig's phraseology, to the Chief Constable. We are bound by various restrictions. In response to Mr Allen, I said that I will look at the issue of resources and appropriate support for the Police Service in discussions with the Secretary of State in the coming weeks.

Mr Craig also made a very significant point, and it is one that we should remember: this was not

just an attack on democracy, on the peace process in Northern Ireland and on an individual prison officer and his colleagues; it will also have raised major concerns with those who suffered in the past. We should, perhaps, also remember them tonight as we remember the Ismay family.

Mr Lyttle: I also extend my deepest sympathy to the family of Adrian Ismay. I think of my family at this time, and my heart breaks for Adrian's family. They will be in my most sincere thoughts and prayers. Does the Minister agree that the bravery and courage of Adrian and his colleagues stand in stark contrast to the cowardice of the terrorists behind this heinous attack? May I seek an assurance that he will work to do all that he can to provide Adrian's family and colleagues with all possible support as they stand against violence and for peace and democracy for everyone in our community?

Mr Ford: Support for Prison Service staff and their families in general is being addressed by the director general. I am also well aware of the direct support provided by representatives of the Prison Service Central Benevolent Fund to the Ismay family over the 11 days since the incident occurred, and particularly today. That support needs to be followed through in a response from the community that, first, provides to the Police Service practical information that can help to catch the perpetrators, and, secondly, tells those who wear the uniform of a prison officer or a police officer that they do so on behalf of everyone and are respected for the work that they do by all in society, except the tiny number who carry out deeds like this.

Mr Poots: Like everybody else, we are shocked and saddened by this turn of events. Our heartfelt sympathies go out to the Ismay family. The Prison Service is, pretty much, a family. Prison officers go into a prison, carry out their duties and stick by one another. Mr Ivor Dunne was at the Committee not very long ago — within the last six weeks — highlighting how dangerous the situation was for prison officers. Sadly, Mr Dunne's words have come to pass. I have a question for the Minister. When will the Department, the director general and the head of the Prison Service start listening to the people in the Prison Service? I think that ignoring the views being expressed by those people is highly dangerous. We need to listen to the intelligence coming from them and to pay attention and respond to them, not pay lip-service to these situations.

Mr Ford: I do not believe that anybody in the leadership of the Prison Service is merely paying lip-service to the concerns that have been expressed. I have already indicated that an updated security assessment has been sought from the director general. Measures have been provided to ensure protection for prison officers and their homes. However, the sad reality is that, in circumstances where a small number of people are seeking to carry out attacks on police and prison officers, whether on or off duty, unless people are entirely vigilant all the time and the community provides the information that is required, we cannot be certain that we will not see similar incidents in the future.

The important thing is that we see a united response carried through into full support for the Police Service in its difficult task of protecting the community in general. At the same time, we should recognise the good work being done by prison staff in the difficult task of changing the culture of prisons for the vast majority of prisoners, while still dealing with the small numbers who pose significant threats, including those posed by their colleagues outside.

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

Adjourned at 9.07 pm.

Suggested amendments or corrections that arrive no later than two weeks after the publication of each report will be considered by the Editor of Debates.

They should be sent to:

✉ **Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**

☎ **028 9052 1135**

✉ **simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk**

Hansard reports can be made available in a range of alternative formats, including large print, Braille etc. For more information, please contact:

✉ **Hansard Admin Unit, Room 251, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**

☎ **028 9052 1463**

✉ **hansard@niassembly.gov.uk**

The Official Report (Hansard) is licensed under the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence, which can be accessed here: [Open Data Licence](#)

[To receive an alert each time an updated plenary report is published, you can follow @NIAHansard on Twitter](#)