

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 18 November 2014
Volume 99, No 6

Contents

Assembly Business	1
Executive Committee Business	
Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill: Royal Assent	1
Ministerial Statements	
Youth Training: Interim Review Report	1
Marshall Report: Independent Child Sexual Exploitation Inquiry	10
Oral Answers to Questions	
Regional Development	24
Social Development.....	31
Northern Ireland Assembly Commission	39
Executive Committee Business	
Pensions Bill: Second Stage	45
Assembly Business	55
Private Members' Business	
Commonwealth Youth Games 2021	56
'Appreciating Age': A Report from the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland	67
Adjournment	
Fish Kill: Sixmilewater.....	76

Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

They should be sent to:
The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
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)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Byrne, Joe (West Tyrone)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Cochrane, Mrs Judith (East Belfast)
Copeland, Michael (East Belfast)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)
Devenney, Maurice (Foyle)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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)
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)
Kinahan, Danny (South Antrim)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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)
McDonnell, Alasdair (South Belfast)
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 (South Antrim)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
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)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
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)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 18 November 2014

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr McKay: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Yesterday, the Health Minister deliberately deceived the House. He gave an assurance to Members that he would consider the case put forward by the Save the Dal group. At the same time, his officials moved in to start to shut down that hospital. He misled the House, and he should come to the House today and apologise for that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member will, of course, know that that is not a point of order. The Member will also know that the proper place to take that issue is to the Minister.

Executive Committee Business

Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I wish to inform the House that the Legal Aid and Coroners' Court Bill received Royal Assent on Monday 17 November 2014. It will be known as the Legal Aid and Coroners' Court Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Ministerial Statements

Youth Training: Interim Review Report

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Today, I am announcing my proposals for the future of youth training in Northern Ireland. I believe that these proposals have the potential to establish a new youth training system that will form a key part of our wider education and skills landscape. This marks the launch of the publication of the interim report on the review of youth training

and the launch of a public consultation on its proposals.

Building and rebalancing our economy are key strategic priorities for the Executive. Investing directly in people and providing opportunities for personal development and fulfilment, and, consequently, delivering the skills required for the economy, are key overriding responsibilities for my Department and me. We have an important role in preparing our young people for the world of work and sustained employment through improving levels of skills.

Complementary to that is the need to provide opportunities for education and training at all levels, and to ensure that both current and potential future employers have access to the skilled employees, particularly young people, that they require.

Last year, I launched major reviews of youth training and apprenticeships. I indicated then that I was committed to making these areas major priorities. The aim of the reviews was to ensure that both youth training and apprenticeships matched the needs of young people, employers and the wider economy.

In June, I published 'Securing our Success: the Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships'. The implementation of this strategy will establish apprenticeships as the key mechanism through which individuals can gain knowledge and skills while in work. Apprenticeships will commence at level 3, which is equivalent to A level, and will be available at all levels up to level 8, which is equivalent to a doctorate.

The proposed new system of youth training will primarily serve those young people who are leaving school at age 16 and will focus on professional and technical training at level 2.

In essence, this new system will fill the space that is currently occupied by a wide range of interventions and time-bound initiatives, providing consistency and certainty for young people, employers and providers. They include Skills for Work level 2 under Training for

Success, the current legacy programme-led apprenticeships, current level 2 ApprenticeshipsNI opportunities and some mainstream level 2 further education provision.

The new system will ensure that young people can progress to the apprenticeships of the future, provide a progression route into higher-level professional and technical training that is available through further education and facilitate transition for young people into sustained employment. However, immediate progression is not the only aspiration that I have for the new system. I believe that the changes that I am proposing will provide young people with a foundation to support their lifelong learning and provide the stepping stone that is needed to allow them to adapt and progress in the modern workplace.

The focus at level 2 was also informed by supply and demand for skills in our economy. My Department's skills strategy 'Success through Skills — Transforming Futures', demonstrates clearly that our economy will rely increasingly on higher-level skills, with a decreasing demand for low-level skills at entry level and level 1. For example, by 2020, the proportion of our workforce with lower-level skills is set to halve from the level that was recorded in 2005.

In order to prepare young people for the demands of the labour market, achievement at level 2 is critical, but there are challenges on the supply side in ensuring that young people reach this level. Last year, approximately two out of five young people left school without five GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics. This measure of achievement at level 2 is, in many cases, the minimum requirement for prospective employers and is a common entry requirement for the progression routes that are available at level 3 through both apprenticeships and further education.

Over the past year, the youth training review team carried out extensive work which led to the findings that are presented in the interim report. We engaged with experts in the OECD to identify examples of best practice and completed study visits to the Netherlands, Denmark and Scotland, the findings of which have been incorporated in case studies throughout the report. My team also carried out an extensive literature review and tested each proposal through engagement events and meetings with employers, young people and other key stakeholders. A call for submissions and an employer survey were also conducted and the review has been aided greatly by the

Committee for Employment and Learning and an expert panel.

Therefore, the development of the new system is based firmly on evidence of international best practice and the application and fit of this in the local context. It is a made-in-Northern Ireland solution that combines local innovation with world-class standards.

My team used the evidence that was gathered to critique and examine current youth training provision. One of the key challenges was the complexity of the current system, with a variety of different options available to young people seeking training at level 2. Greater clarity and indeed greater opportunities from progression routes was also a key concern that was highlighted by stakeholders.

A connected issue to progression was the curriculum offer at level 2. Employers expressed concerns about the rigour and relevancy of the professional and technical qualifications that are available at level 2 as well as the considerable number that are currently available. Some options at level 2 also require that literacy and numeracy skills be developed at level 1 only, which may inhibit a young person's access to higher-level training courses, lifelong learning and progression in the workplace.

The provision of work-based learning was also pinpointed as a current weakness, with local stakeholders highlighting that work-based learning needed to be integrated into the curriculum to better prepare young people for the world of work.

Finally, at an individual and system level, research indicated that young people required greater support to guide their choices through independent careers advice and guidance, supported by up-to-date labour market information. The greater monitoring of outcomes and destinations of participants could also help to improve the system.

The interim report draws on that rigorous analysis and articulates a vision for a new youth training system. My aspiration is that our new system will be recognised locally and internationally by employers, further and higher education providers, young people, parents and guardians for its quality, flexibility and transferability. The system will be centred on the career aspirations and needs of young people, and it will be a conduit to support their ongoing career development. Young people in training will be sought after by prospective employers, and the system will be respected by

young people, parents and guardians as an alternative progression route to the traditional academic pathway. By linking a new baccalaureate-style professional and technical award to the needs of employers and the wider economy, the youth training system will better match supply to demand and provide a seamless progression route for young people to a breadth of professional and technical occupations.

To achieve our vision, the report makes 26 proposals for the future of youth training in Northern Ireland. They can be grouped under four themes: the core components of the youth training system; supporting young people; delivery and employer engagement structures; and ensuring quality. The implementation of the proposals will provide a youth training system that incorporates structured work-based learning for all participants, including an employment-based pathway. It will provide a new professional and technical award at level 2, the curriculum content of which will be informed by employers in order better to match demand and supply. The system will provide flexible routes and support mechanisms to make training accessible to all young people, and it will facilitate progression into apprenticeships, further or higher education and directly or indirectly into sustained employment.

First, in a major departure from current provision, and for the first time in Northern Ireland, youth training will be available to all young people aged between 16 and 24 who require training at level 2, regardless of where they reside on their employment and learning journey. Importantly, that will include young people who have already entered the job market but do not have the comparable skills and training proposed under the new system. Therefore, youth training will be accessible to those starting a new job, those in existing roles and those not yet in employment. Through that approach, we will seek to ensure that the system is flexible enough for all young people to access training at level 2, regardless of their employment status. It will support young people regardless of where they reside in their training and employment journey. I want to ensure that all our young people are provided with the opportunity to compete in the workplace. No one should be left behind.

Secondly, the youth training system will provide a new baccalaureate-style professional and technical award at level 2, equating to a minimum of five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. By setting that standard for the curriculum at level 2, youth training will ensure that all those who achieve at

that level can progress into higher level options and that the achievements of those progressing from training are recognised and valued by employers. Research has shown that this is the foundation level for progressing in the workplace and facilitating a platform for lifelong learning.

In addition to that breadth of learning, structured work-based learning, whether through employment or a work placement, will be a mandatory element of youth training. The employed route will be similar to the current apprenticeship pathway, with a young person employed by a business or organisation and benefiting from a mix of on- and off-the-job training. Under the non-employed route, a young person will benefit from an extended work placement. Work-based learning will be the primary method for developing skills, including employability. For those not yet in employment, the system will facilitate short project-based work tasters to help to inform their choice of occupational area. Beyond the core curriculum, youth training will also provide opportunities to study additional qualifications relevant to the interests of the individual young person and the requirements of employers.

Young people not yet ready to start youth training will be supported to attain a minimum of a full level 1, which is defined as being equivalent to four GCSEs at grades D to G, including English and mathematics at grades D to F. That support should be delivered through a range of targeted interventions, including further education courses at level 1 and specialised projects funded through the European social fund. The new baccalaureate-style award for youth training will be designed to take a maximum of two years to complete. However, the system will be flexible to allow those who can complete sooner to achieve and progress into employment or further training, and to allow those with additional needs to receive more time.

Collectively, the proposals constitute the core components of the youth training system in Northern Ireland.

10.45 am

The report's second theme focuses on support measures to help young people to successfully complete their training. To inform young people's choices and promote progression, independent careers advice and guidance that is informed by the skills barometer will be provided to young people before starting training and upon completion.

Pastoral support will also be provided to address the range of complex issues that young people face and will help them to succeed in their chosen occupational area. Indeed, flexibility and support will be the cornerstone of provision, ensuring that the new system reflects the needs of young people and the barriers that they face as they transition from school to the world of work. To support young people in the workplace, participating employers will provide workplace mentors to develop their employability skills and achieve their learning outcomes. Financial support will also be provided to young people, whether through a training wage or allowance.

Support will be targeted towards those with additional requirements, such as young people with a disability or caring commitments, or those leaving care. My Department's forthcoming disability employment and skills strategy will have a key focus on young people, including those in training. Youth training will make use of innovative online technologies to engage young people, prepare them for the workplace and facilitate opportunities for international exchange. Through those support measures, we will hope to ensure that young people engage in training that is relevant to their interests and that they are supported to achieve and make a successful start to their careers.

While we can set standards for the curriculum and design support measures for young people, the youth training system will be effective only if employers are engaged in its design and delivery. Following the approach being implemented through the apprenticeships strategy, a strategic advisory forum will advise government on the youth training system. A common forum for apprenticeships and youth training can also help to ensure that the two systems are aligned. However, the forum's roles and responsibilities in youth training will be shaped around the particular needs of this system.

Sectoral partnerships will define the qualifications to be delivered, alongside the duration, structure and timing of work placements. Depending on the sector's skills needs, sectoral partnerships may be shared between apprenticeship or youth training provision, or they could be established to carry out this specific function for youth training. Along with those strategic and sector-led proposals, there will be a more targeted approach towards employer engagement to encourage work-based learning opportunities and to recruit young people for the youth training system. A central service will be

created to facilitate the sourcing and advertising of work-based learning opportunities for the youth training system.

I am also proposing the creation of dedicated industry consultants to work directly with sectors and employers, and I will consider incentives that are targeted at small businesses and at microbusinesses and that are aligned to the priorities of the Northern Ireland economy. By having mechanisms in place that can take the pulse of the local job market, we will be able to assess the extent to which the system is providing young people with the skills to allow them to be absorbed directly into the workplace, and, where necessary, to take timely corrective action. My Department will also actively target and work with local councils and the wider public sector to provide work experience opportunities and promote the system at a local level.

A final key aspect of engagement is to support the youth training system through clear branding and marketing for employers, young people, parents and guardians. Effective branding will promote engagement and improve the image of professional and technical training overall.

The final theme of the report sets out a range of measures to ensure that the highest standards of quality for training are maintained. To ensure a quality work-based learning experience for young people, a registration and approval system is proposed for participating employers. Work-based learning will also be underpinned by a clear contractual agreement between the young person, the host employer and the training provider.

For workplace mentors and tutors delivering the non-work-based elements of training, new requirements will be set for their industry experience and pedagogical skills. At a system level, a new quality model will ensure that only those providers who achieve prescribed quality standards will be funded to deliver youth training. The system will also be underpinned by robust data collection analysis and evaluation, and it will provide mechanisms for young people to provide qualitative feedback on their experience of training. The proposals will help to ensure that the system can be monitored and improved over time to serve the needs of young people, employers and our economy. From today, the proposals will be the subject of public consultation over the next 12 weeks.

Particular efforts are being made to gather the views of young people on our approach,

including their views on the future branding and marketing of the youth training system. Based on engagement with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, we will incorporate innovative best practice into our work with young people. This process will begin with a workshop involving young people to develop an animated version of the consultation, followed by focus groups with young people, which will start in December. We will also hold roadshow events to gather further the views of employers, training providers and other interested stakeholders.

In addition to the consultation, we will link the proposals to the ongoing implementation of the apprenticeship strategy to identify synergies between those two key mechanisms in our wider skills system.

Our proposals for youth training will deliver for young people and employers. For young people, they will provide a foundation of knowledge and expertise that will support their lifelong learning and provide a sustainable foothold in the world of work. The proposals will guarantee that the training the young people complete is right for them and sought after by employers, and they will support those who require additional help and guidance as they transition into and through the world of work. For employers, the new system will offer support to engage and reduce bureaucracy, and it will guarantee that the young people whom they support will be work ready and trained in skills that are relevant to their immediate and future needs.

The new system of youth training will deliver a foundation of knowledge and expertise, which will contribute to the skills required by the economy, improved social mobility and facilitate lifelong learning.

I commend the proposals to the Assembly.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I thank the Minister for his detailed statement, in which he referred to two points. The first was that, last year, approximately two out of five young people left school without five GCSEs at grades A to C, including English and maths. Secondly, through the programme, young people not yet ready to start youth training will be supported to attain a minimum of a full level 1 qualification, which is defined as the equivalent of four GCSEs at grades D to G. Does the Minister have to put this programme in place because of the failings of our education system? Does the Department for Employment and Learning have to provide that 14-to-16

education that our schools can no longer provide?

In meeting the needs of employers through the programme, will the Minister describe to the House the difference in attractiveness to an employer in taking a young person through this scheme as opposed to taking on a young apprentice? What will the Minister do to make parents respect and understand this major step change in education?

Dr Farry: I thank the Committee Chairperson for his welcome for the statement and his questions. I will take each of them in turn. First, with the interface with the education system, the Member rightly identified that approximately two out of five young people leave school without a level 2 qualification. I would not say that we are addressing the failings of the education system. We must always have a joined-up interface between the training offer provided by the state and the education system. This is provided in many countries around the world.

The Education Minister has aspirations to increase the level of attainment; indeed, that aspiration is in the Programme for Government targets. We have to be very clear that the education system does not always work for young people. It may not meet their particular needs, interests or aspirations. In particular, they are more interested in a vocational pathway as opposed to an academic pathway, and a vocational pathway can sometimes offer a better prospect of finding and sustaining employment. It is in that context that we are seeking to provide this intervention.

That said, there will be greater scope on the back of this for us to look at a revised 14-to-19 strategy between my Department and the Department of Education. While we are offering this training to young people from the age of 16, work can take place in the school system that will help to join up with the new system that we are proposing today. Some of that delivery can be facilitated through proper area planning, the entitlement framework and proper use of the further education system. This is not about schools necessarily becoming providers of vocational education for 14 upwards; it has to be about a coordinated approach using the best of the resources, facilities, teaching and lecturing opportunities that we have. I see this as an opportunity for my Department and for the education system as a whole rather than as necessarily a competition between the two.

While we do have a concern about the number of young people who are achieving their level-2 qualification, most young people who go through the school system will achieve a level 1. However, there is a challenge for those who are not yet ready to avail of the programme that we are offering today. That can be addressed through a combination of further education and programmes that may be run under the European social fund. We will wish to take a very hands-on approach to ensure that they are meeting needs and facilitating progression into the system. Much as we talk about progression from the youth training system into employment or other opportunities, this is also about ensuring that we facilitate progression into the system.

The difference between this and what is offered in an apprenticeship is that part of this system will offer an employed route. For now, we can term that a traineeship, although we are open-minded about branding and the terminology used. We want to hear the views of employers and young people in that regard. The traineeship will be similar to an apprenticeship and, in some respects, will replace our current level-2 apprenticeship NI offer. The Member will be aware that our new strategy for apprenticeships has now moved that model for apprenticeships up the skills ladder, starting at level 3. Nonetheless, we believe that it is important that we have the employed route available for young people at level 2. The duration will be shorter — a maximum, rather than a minimum, of two years — in the apprenticeship strategy. Hopefully, that will facilitate young people into doing an apprenticeship as the next stage of their progression.

Employers will find this of huge benefit, as, increasingly, they are telling us about the need to provide more skills that are relevant to the workplace. We have a huge demand for a much greater commitment to be made to vocational training at all levels, from level 2 upwards. This is the new level-2 offer in that regard. We are seeking to ensure that the provision that we make is more relevant to the needs of the economy. At present, it is often shaped around the needs of training providers who will try to get employers to take young people for the type of training that they provide. We are trying to invert that process to ensure that employers, particularly through the sectoral partnerships, are driving what goes into the curriculum as well as shaping demand in the system.

Finally, we need to ensure that there is proper parity of esteem with other pathways in the

system. This is not about creating a hierarchy; this is about creating choice. Alternative pathways will suit the different needs and aspirations of young people. It is important that parents and other influencers see it in that regard and support people making informed choices. Again, that will be a key aspect when we put in place the outcome of the current careers review.

Mr Buchanan: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement to the House. Minister, you talk about the high standard of training required, but how will you ensure that it is delivered? Have you any concerns about the recruitment of tutors with the up-to-date industry and occupational experience alongside the required teacher training?

Dr Farry: The Member is quite right to identify the issue of quality and of ensuring that those who provide training have the proper skills. That is why an entire section of the report, one of four, is devoted to quality. We will seek to develop that as best we can.

The other aspect of quality is the notion of how we support young people. That includes a mixture of pastoral care provided through the training providers and the mentoring that will be offered in the workplace. We fully recognise, and, indeed, concur, with the Member's comments about the importance of ensuring that quality is apparent at all levels. If we are not providing quality, we are short-changing employers, who will be depending on a good stream of young people, and also short-changing our young people to whom we have a duty of ensuring that we give the best foundation in life.

11.00 am

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister's statement and commend the good work that has been done to identify international best practice. What is the Minister's assessment on whether that area of work is compatible with the issues and concerns that have been raised by the Post 19 Lobby Group on the special educational needs sector, which you have been lobbied on?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her comments and question. A piece of work is being conducted in the Executive subcommittee on the implementation of the Bamford review on mental health and learning disability. Indeed, a meeting of that group is due to take place on Thursday. We have been doing a scoping

exercise to look at what is offered and to try to identify where gaps exist in provision.

The Member will also be aware that my Department is bringing forward a new disability employment strategy. That is due to be released for public consultation in January next year. There will be a very close synergy between that strategy and the proposals for a youth training system.

We recognise that people with disabilities will be going through the system. Indeed, we are openly encouraging that. We want to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to play a role in life and develop to their full potential. The Member will be aware that, already, we offer additional support for people with disabilities who are going through our training programmes. That commitment will remain and will be strengthened as we look to go forward with the new system.

Mr Ramsey: I warmly welcome the Minister's statement — he always brings very detailed statements to the House — and his recent comments on disabled young people. I am keen to hear what form pre-level-2 provision will take, given, referring back to the Chair's initial comments, that the requirement for entry to level 2 will be five GCSEs. How are you going to do that when the most vulnerable, such as those who leave care or prison, may not have any academic qualifications?

Dr Farry: The Member is quite right to highlight that issue, and I have tried to focus my comments in a balanced way between progression out of the system and progression into the system and recognise that we need to provide support, where appropriate, in that regard.

It is fair to say that we probably have many fewer people leaving school without a level-1 qualification than we give ourselves credit for at times. The issue is often about the numbers who are securing a level-2 qualification, which is regarded as being the standard for progressing in the world of work, but nearly 90% of young people achieve a level-1 qualification. The Member is quite right that there is still a gap for those who do not have that qualification.

That is addressed through aspects of Training for Success and the Pathway to Success strategy for NEETs and programmes supported under the European social fund. We will be looking to see how we can make best use of the resources that are available. Through a combination of the further education system

and the roll-out of the next phase of the European social fund, we will be looking to ensure that we resource projects in a holistic and strategic manner to ensure that we are facilitating the progression into the new programme. It is important that we capture every young person. This is intended to be open to all young people between the ages of 16 and 24. So, we have a duty to ensure we are capturing everyone.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the statement. The Employment and Learning Committee has done a lot of work on identifying the barriers to education, employment and training for our young people, and I am glad that the Minister has listened to that work and is addressing them by bringing forward proposals today for quality careers guidance, pastoral support and financial support in order to achieve parity of esteem for vocational education. How will the Department ensure that young people, their parents, schools and employers are fully aware of the youth training and apprenticeship pathways that are available to them?

Dr Farry: There are two particular interventions that we can highlight in that regard. One is the careers review itself, which, as the Member knows, was commissioned jointly with the Department of Education's review of careers, which built upon the inquiry that the Employment and Learning Committee conducted. That report, led by Brian Ambrose from Belfast City Airport, is now published. John O'Dowd and I are studying it and hope to set out the way forward over the coming weeks. Within that will be a very clear focus on ensuring that young people are given the full range of career options and on how we can best address key influencers to ensure a genuine parity of esteem between the different pathways.

We also have to be mindful that, often, people are not fully decided upon what is the most appropriate way forward at a young age, particularly those who leave school at 16. That is why we are putting such emphasis on the design of the programme for the technical baccalaureate-style award, which is designed very deliberately to have breadth and portability to allow young people the flexibility to progress in a whole range of pathways.

The second aspect that I will highlight is the proposal for a central service, which we have already announced in relation to the apprenticeship strategy. The central service will work for both apprenticeships and the youth training system and is designed to be a matching service for employers and young

people — almost a bringing together or brokerage. That does not exist in the current Northern Ireland landscape, and, hopefully, it will make a major difference.

Mr Ross: One of the advantages of being a small country is that we can be flexible. Indeed, when it comes to youth training, we saw that investor companies were able to work with universities and colleges on specially tailored courses to meet their needs. Earlier, I listened to the Minister say that the needs of employers will be paramount in this process to ensure that young people are trained in the areas that employers want, which will increase their opportunity to get employment once they have finished. How exactly will he ensure that that happens? What formal structures will be in place to ensure that employers work directly with those who deliver the training courses to ensure that young people are trained in the areas that businesses want them to be trained in?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. There are two particular interventions to highlight, and these will also be held in common with the apprenticeship strategy. The first is a strategic advisory forum, which, at a high level, will bring together employers and employer organisations, colleges, universities and other key stakeholders to monitor and signpost the implementation of the apprenticeship strategy and the youth training system, when we finalise that in the coming months. That will be supported by a range of sectoral partnerships. Depending on the sector that we are talking about, you may find that a sectoral partnership operates purely in apprenticeships, if a sector needs only people from level 3 or upwards.

Equally, we may have some sectoral partnerships based in areas where the main skill demands are at level 2, or, if a particular sector requires a range of skill levels, there may well be a hybrid covering apprenticeships and youth training. The sectoral partnerships will involve any specialist representative bodies in the sector, a cross-section of employers and people who have a much more hands-on role in curriculum development, higher education and further education (FE) and, for the youth training system, training providers, who will also be a key delivery partner alongside the FE colleges.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I think that, when the final document comes out, we will all have a duty and an obligation to put our shoulder behind the

wheel to ensure that we have a world-beating training and employment system for young people. The statement mentions people progressing into employment for further training sooner rather than later, but it also mentions those with additional needs. There is a 12-week consultation. Many groups work with people who are furthest away from achieving an apprenticeship. Can the Minister assure us that those groups will not be left out during the consultation period, that they will be spoken to and that what they have to say will be taken on board in forming the final document?

Dr Farry: I am very happy to give the Member that assurance. Throughout the process, we have been very hands-on with the engagement with our stakeholders. That also extends to trying to derive lessons from international best practice. That will continue through the process.

In my statement, I referred to some innovative approaches to engaging young people that we will seek to take forward over the next number of weeks. The expert panel that was formed was a strong cross-representation of different aspects of the current system and those who will have future delivery roles. That was very helpful in shaping our conclusions.

The Member talked about the importance of this for young people and the need to ensure proper progression. One of the reasons why we are seeking to act is that our levels of progression are simply not good enough. People go through our different level-2 training offerings and, once they do, proper progression pathways are not available for them. We almost hope that they will find their way into sustained employment, but that is not always the case. If we look at our youth unemployment figures, we see that, while they are coming down, they are nonetheless a source of concern. The levels of youth unemployment for people who have gone through our training system and who have often essentially been recycled through programmes are much in excess of the overall figure for youth unemployment, as high as that is. That points to the need for a major revamp of our youth training interventions at level 2.

When we are referring to youth unemployment, it is worth making a comparison with what is happening in other parts of the world. We know that other European countries have much lower levels of youth unemployment than we do. That indicates a very strong correlation between those societies that invest the most in vocational education and the production of much better results in the alignment of skills

with the needs of their economies. As a consequence, there are lower levels of youth unemployment.

Mr Allister: The Minister has given considerable detail about certain matters, but one area that I have heard no detail on is the costing for and funding of his proposals. Given the present financial climate, is it not important to know that? I am sure that matters have been costed. Will he advise the House on that? Given the educational dimension, does he expect some of the education budget to fund what he has in mind?

Dr Farry: The present level of funding for our level-2 offering approximates to just over £50 million. That includes about £25 million for Skills for Life at level 2 in Training for Success, about £8.5 million on level-2 apprenticeships and about £19 million on mainstream further education provision at level 2. We also have the ability to engage the European social fund. It goes without saying that the pressure on our budgets are enormous, but I have committed to making this a priority.

We are not in the business of salami-slicing across the Department's work programmes. Often at times of greatest pressure, you have to seek to innovate the most. We believe that we are seeking to innovate through this approach. As a consequence, I hope that financial, economic and societal benefits will arise from our interventions. We should see many more of our young people progressing into the world of work and sustaining employment. That will have a whole range of social benefits, as well as less money having to be spent on unemployment benefit and other welfare supports. We should see employers with a stronger ability to access the skills that they require. They should be able to grow better and, as a consequence, our economy will develop ever further. It is right that we continue to do this, notwithstanding issues on our budget.

I already mentioned the interface with the Department of Education. We want to see a revised 14-to-19 strategy to ensure that we can join things up as best we can. I am on record saying that I am concerned at the degree of protection that has been given to the Department of Education's budget relative to other aspects of our skills offering and at the potential for inequities in that regard. Some recognition was given to that in the draft Budget. At this stage, we are working through the implications of the Budget to ensure that we can fund the biggest strategic priorities for my Department and, consequently, our economy.

11.15 am

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. The Committee was keen that officials explore international best practice. Was that a useful exercise? What was gleaned from it?

Dr Farry: There is a plethora of examples of best practice around the world. So far, we have engaged in study visits to the Netherlands, Denmark and Scotland, as well as having discussions with officials and others in London. As I said to Mr McCann, we can, at a very high level, draw conclusions from the investment that societies make in their commitment to vocational education and training, and the levels of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, that pertain in those societies. The correlation is compelling, and you will see that in the report and the supporting evidence.

Beneath that, we had the opportunity to look at specific interventions that have been successful in other countries in how they structure their approach to youth training. Again, a number of case studies are set out in the interim report and consultation document. They involve areas such as employers' reports, pastoral care for young people, the design of curriculums and how employers can influence them. A lot of the report's content has been influenced by what is going on in other societies. We have not been looking to reinvent the wheel but simply to apply best practice to our local context.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister, particularly for his commitment for targeted support for young people leaving care. As a new Committee member, I recently met Include Youth and heard about the comparatively high drop-out rate of those young people from FE colleges. Will the Minister encourage the FE colleges to roll out the Buttle quality mark approach for care leavers in Training for Success to monitor and track their outcome in FE colleges?

Dr Farry: We are seeking to ensure that we attain better achievement and retention rates in the system. Obviously, the Member refers to what happens in the current provision and the attention that is given, which is, at times, of a high standard. We get strong feedback from young people on the programmes. Equally, we are conscious that the progression levels through our current systems are not sufficiently strong and that people are not availing themselves of the opportunities, and employers are consequently not availing themselves of the local skills base in the manner that they should.

We are making a very strong commitment on pastoral care and the mentoring of young people, because we acknowledge that young people will be entering these schemes with a range of barriers and particular needs that will have to be addressed. That is why pastoral care from the training providers in FE colleges and the workplace mentors are so important. We are not simply providing the technical skills for young people but giving them much wider support. With reference to what Mr Hilditch said, one of the key lessons that we learned from our international study visits was the importance of that type of pastoral care. Some of the training facilities almost gave the impression of being a type of school, with a full provision of extracurricular activities. Young people could have the advantage of availing themselves of that, which is more associated with a traditional school setting than with a traditional training-type provision. People who are entering from a care background are a key group for whom that approach would be most beneficial.

Marshall Report: Independent Child Sexual Exploitation Inquiry

Mr Wells (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Last year, my predecessor, on behalf of my Department and the Departments of Justice and Education, commissioned an independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland. The inquiry was led by Kathleen Marshall and is now complete. It was charged with the following matters: establishing the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland; examining how effective cross-sectoral child safeguarding and protection arrangements are in preventing and tackling child sexual exploitation; and considering how well we are safeguarding and protecting looked-after children. The inquiry was asked to make recommendations on future actions.

All three Ministers have now received the inquiry report. On behalf of my ministerial colleagues, I thank Kathleen Marshall and those who assisted her for their efforts. Throughout my statement, I will refer to child sexual exploitation as CSE for ease of reference.

All forms of child abuse, including CSE, are totally unacceptable. I want Northern Ireland to be a safer place for children and young people and the most hostile of environments for those who abuse or exploit our children and young people. I want to take Members through what Kathleen Marshall has found, her

recommendations and my initial response, and I want to emphasise that it is an initial response.

On the nature and extent of CSE in Northern Ireland, the inquiry concludes that it is not new and takes different forms in Northern Ireland, as it does throughout the United Kingdom, but there are particular Northern Ireland dimensions to it.

The forms that CSE takes here include: online exploitation; what is described as the party house scene; exploitation by older boyfriends; prostitution; trafficking, and forced marriage. The inquiry has not been able to establish actual numbers of young people being exploited, though it references official figures for prostitution, trafficking and forced marriage, all of which are in single figures.

The inquiry states that there is an increasing risk of peer-to-peer abuse, attributed by Kathleen Marshall to an increasing sexualised society, assisted by advances in technology and changing cultural norms in our society.

The inquiry concludes that while there is some level of organisation to CSE in Northern Ireland linked to groups who coalesce around young people, for instance, in party houses, it does not constitute organised crime as understood by the National Crime Agency.

Considerations about the organised nature of CSE took the inquiry to consider possible links with paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. The PSNI view is that organised paramilitary involvement in child sexual exploitation has not been established. However, the inquiry found the witness testimonies about potential paramilitary links with CSE to be powerful and persuasive. A number of individuals expressed an ardent plea that the inquiry should speak up about the paramilitary dimension to CSE.

Some described how CSE could be associated with organised drug dealing. More commonly, it was a case of individuals believed to be members of, or linked to, paramilitary groups who used the authority and fear that it engendered to exploit children and young people. Those individuals have access to alcohol, drugs, guns and violence. They were described as people to whom you cannot say no. They regard themselves as beyond the law.

The inquiry was told very clearly that paramilitary influence may cause and facilitate CSE. In communities, it can build up loyalty and fear. Girls may feel that they can gain status through cooperating with those powerful

individuals, and that may be tolerated by some families. Others fear threats to their families if they do not succumb to the abuse.

The inquiry also heard that some young men look to those powerful figures as role models and aspire to be like them. The inquiry was told of families that had endured generations of exploitation. The kind of power that such individuals exert means that they may be involved in all types of CSE. However, specific to them are the pubs and clubs operated in some areas where there may be lock-ins involving young girls who get the tap on the shoulder to stay behind. The report states that it was not possible for the inquiry team to identify the prevalence of paramilitary links, but perhaps that is not surprising, given that some stated that they feared for their lives if it became known that they had spoken to the inquiry.

The inquiry identifies a number of groups of young people who are potentially more at risk of CSE than others. The risk and vulnerability factors identified include: neglect, deprivation, domestic violence, drugs and alcohol, peer pressure, advances in technology, an increasingly sexualised society, cultural attitudes to women and going missing overnight. The inquiry concludes that available data can only provide a rough idea of the extent of CSE and it is likely to be a significant underestimate. The report states that the first step in tackling CSE is to recognise that it exists and suggests that more cases will be identified as awareness increases, and there is a recommendation linked to public awareness-raising.

A shared understanding about CSE and improved information collection and analysis are considered by the inquiry to be prerequisites to better identification, reporting and a more accurate assessment of the prevalence and nature of CSE. However, it is important to bear in mind that we already know that all forms of child abuse have a hidden dimension and are significantly under-reported and, as a result, there will always be a gap between actual prevalence and what is known to social services.

While we do not know the full extent of CSE in Northern Ireland, we can say that there are no findings in the inquiry that point to the type of organised exploitation seen in Rotherham or Rochdale; nor does it have the same ethnic-minority dimension. There is no evidence in the report to suggest cover-up, corruption or a lack of commitment on the part of agencies or individuals. Indeed, the report states that, in

Northern Ireland, senior managers expressed a commitment to taking CSE seriously. While that may be the case, there is no room for complacency, and the inquiry report counsels vigilance in the face of changes in social attitudes and in the cultural make up of Northern Ireland society.

I turn now to what the report says about preventing, tackling and supporting recovery from CSE. Statutory agencies — social services, the police, health, education and youth services — cannot tackle CSE on their own. They need the support of children, parents, communities and third-sector organisations. It is reassuring that all those who provided evidence to the inquiry indicated their willingness to take part. It is particularly reassuring that young people want to be empowered to resist CSE, and they can only do so by knowing more about the risks. Parents, who are the first line of defence against the exploitation of their children, want to be treated with respect and supported by agencies in their efforts to do so.

Concerns were raised in the report that there is too much emphasis on the behaviour of victims and calls to restrict their liberty rather than punishing and locking up perpetrators. Perpetrators must be held to account. The report highlights long-standing concerns about the low rates of securing prosecutions and convictions of those who prey upon children and young people for sexual purposes. Not enough is known about people who sexually exploit children and young people. This is a serious gap that has been identified in other reports. While there have been some specific groups of men identified in some reports regarding CSE, the National Crime Agency suggests that perpetrators are mostly solitary offenders and could be from any part of the community. Understanding offenders' profiles and predispositions, their motivation, mindset and how they operate are key to helping us better protect children and young people. Holding offenders to account is primarily the responsibility of the Justice Department, and I pledge to support Minister Ford in whatever actions he may decide to take forward in this regard.

The inquiry notes the importance of cooperation amongst agencies and the sharing of information. It states that, while there have been improvements, more can be done. It also states that it heard a view that there are too many partnership arrangements involving the same people and leading to duplication of efforts. Those are matters that, I accept, need further consideration.

11.30 am

On victim support, a range of general and bespoke services to support the recovery of victims is identified in the report. The inquiry identifies the need for services to support victims of CSE who come forward in adulthood, as well, of course, as younger victims.

The inquiry was asked to look specifically at safeguarding looked-after children, given the concerns about those who go missing from care, sometimes repeatedly, and the associated risks of CSE. The inquiry acknowledges that not all children who go missing experience child sexual abuse and that some who experience CSE may not have gone missing or stayed out late without permission. The inquiry also acknowledges that the debate about missing children and their vulnerability to CSE can be skewed by the fact that there is available data about children in the care system, whose activities are closely monitored and recorded.

The inquiry obtained figures from the police on reports of missing children over two 24-hour periods, one at the weekend and one midweek. The figures show that, over the weekend, more than twice as many people were reported to police as missing from family settings as from looked-after settings such as foster care. Going missing and the risk of CSE is not just a problem with looked-after children.

The inquiry acknowledges that many young people have good experience of residential care. It also heard that many looked-after children felt stigmatised by the media coverage of CSE in September 2013, and we should be mindful of that as we discuss the report and its findings. It is important that the messages about the threat of CSE to all our children and young people are not masked by an undue emphasis on those in residential care. In Northern Ireland, 7% of all looked-after children, which is about 200 in total, are in residential care. It is the explicit policy of my Department that as many looked-after children as possible should experience and benefit from a stable family placement with kinship or foster carers. The welfare of all looked-after children is a priority, but there is undoubtedly an issue with the care and control of young people who go missing repeatedly despite the best efforts of staff and foster carers.

On the use of physical restraint and secure care, the inquiry is firmly of the view that those must not be regarded as everyday responses to manage risk in children's homes, although there will be some situations in which their use is justified.

The inquiry sums up the challenge in finding a solution to young people going missing from care as follows:

"The challenge for society is to provide the kind of structure, safety and quality of care that these facilities provide without depriving people of their liberty and of the opportunity to develop into individuals who can cope with freedom. Children need a safe space, and it may be possible, with their help, to identify a model that feels safe without restricting their liberty."

That is already being considered by the Health and Social Care Board and the trusts.

Importantly, the inquiry challenges the view that children have an unqualified right to autonomy, which some have suggested disempowers staff to act with appropriate authority or to set clear standards and expectations for behaviour. The inquiry suggests that a holistic view on the spectrum of children's rights, including their right to direction and guidance, can assist in identifying ways that balance the care and control required to keep young people safe while respecting their rights and evolving capacities and independence.

The inquiry helpfully explores how the issues of CSE can be addressed within the human rights framework and challenges the misconception that children's rights are a barrier to taking action to help them. The inquiry asserts the obligation on Government to do their utmost to protect all children and young people up to the age of 18. As children become older and are able to exercise more practical autonomy, the task becomes more difficult. However, the duty to care for and protect remains, alongside the child's right to be cared for and protected. It is incumbent on all of us with responsibilities for the care and protection of young people to prioritise their right to be protected.

That includes parents, social services, police and the legal profession.

I will now turn to the inquiry report's recommendations. The report makes 17 recommendations, of which seven are for my Department, and two of those recommend actions to be progressed jointly with the Departments of Justice and Education. Two key recommendations are made for the Health and Social Care Board. There are other recommendations in the report for the Departments of Justice and Education and their agents, including schools, and for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). There are also

recommendations for the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA). Ministers Ford and O'Dowd will consider the recommendations that are relevant to their Departments and how they wish to respond. While there is a need for cross-sectoral collaboration in progressing any accepted recommendations, my ministerial colleagues and I will agree how that can be done.

The Minister of Justice asked me to advise Members that he notes that the agencies of the justice system participated in the review. The inquiry acknowledges that there have been improvements to the police and criminal justice system in recent years, but, again, more needs to be done. The Minister also acknowledges that it is the Department of Justice's role to ensure that, when children are sexually exploited, agencies work together to protect and support victims and bring the perpetrators to justice. He assures us that work has been and continues to be progressed, including through the victim and witness strategy that he published in 2013. Relevant work will also progress under the forthcoming stopping domestic and sexual violence and abuse strategy. I welcome Minister Ford's commitment to work supportively with me and other Ministers to protect children.

The Minister of Education has indicated that he welcomes that child protection arrangements appear to be well embedded in schools in Northern Ireland, and he accepts that schools are well placed to support the primary role of parents in teaching children and young people about healthy relationships and delivering keeping-safe messages. He therefore welcomes the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) assessment, which is referenced in the report, that many schools are doing so effectively.

Minister O'Dowd also recognises that we can always do better and that there is further work to be done to raise awareness in schools and communities of the risk factors and signs of child sexual exploitation. He also accepts that further guidance and information is required not only for schools but for parents and carers. The Department of Education has already engaged with schools to share information and advice on child sexual exploitation. Like the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Education has pledged to continue to work with my Department and other agencies to ensure that children and young people are all educated about the dangers of child sexual exploitation and how best to keep themselves safe.

To ensure a coordinated Health and Social Care (HSC) response to the Marshall report, I plan to establish an HSC CSE response team. That team will be required to consider all Kathleen Marshall's recommendations that are relevant to the health and social care sector, consider responses to them and advise me of those by the end of January 2015. I hope that indicates just how seriously we are taking it, as that is a very tight schedule indeed for the report to come back to me. The team will also consider where the HSC needs to work collaboratively with other Departments and agencies and will make recommendations to me on how that should be done.

The team will then be responsible for the implementation of the recommendations that have been accepted. An implementation plan, which will include timescales for the completion of each recommendation, will be agreed and published by March 2015. Again, Members should note the urgency with which my Department is treating the issue. That is only five months away. Thereafter, the response team will provide me with six-monthly updates until all activity associated with all the accepted recommendations is complete.

I am pleased to be able to say that a number of recommendations are already being progressed. Those include the development of a new children's safeguarding policy; the revision of a departmental circular that will provide guidance to front-line practitioners on the sharing of information about adults considered to pose a risk to children; and the introduction of a new definition of the term "adult at risk" in the context of a new adult safeguarding policy, which we are consulting on. We will progress the review of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, which we are already making plans for.

Subject to the support of other Ministers, I propose to ask the SBNI to build on the work that it has commenced on a public information campaign on CSE to target messages at children and young people, parents, carers, front-line staff, volunteers, and individuals and businesses in the wider community — all those identified in the Marshall report. It would also target those considered to be most vulnerable to the risk of CSE, as identified in the report. Taking account of Kathleen Marshall's recommendation for a public health campaign in response to CSE to be led by the Public Health Agency (PHA), the PHA will, as a member agency of the SBNI, play a lead role in the work.

That brings me to the next action, which is under way. Kathleen Marshall very clearly identified advances in technology as increasing the dangers and risks to young children. Helping children and young people to keep safe in an electronic world, and equipping their parents and those who work with them to keep them safe, is a major challenge for all of us and is a shared responsibility. I have written to my ministerial colleagues to seek their agreement to commission and fund the SBNI to develop an e-safety strategy and action plan for Northern Ireland.

The welfare and safety of all looked-after children is a priority for me, particularly the safety of those young people who go missing frequently from placements and who are at increased risk as a result. The Health and Social Care Board has been asked to consider proposals for alternative arrangements to secure the safety of those young people in community settings. I will now put a time frame on that work to ensure that arrangements are put in place as a matter of urgency. The intention is to create the safe places referred to by Kathleen Marshall in her report.

Whilst there is no specific recommendation for the HSC in connection with data collection, it is clear to me that our data collection systems for missing children could be further improved. As a result, I have directed the Health and Social Care Board to review the HSC data collection systems as they relate to children missing from care and identify how they can be improved. That work should build on the good work that has been taken forward by the police and social services through Operation Owl and the joint protocol in responding to children who go missing from care.

Staff capacity in responding to CSE is critical. I have made CSE a commissioning training priority for the HSC, and a CSE training strategy for all relevant staff has been drafted. Once agreed, that will be rolled out across HSC trusts with immediate effect.

We will continue to work closely with officials in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland in connection with child protection generally and child sexual exploitation specifically to ensure that we continue to learn from each other. That will include using the existing arrangements to cooperate on matters relating to child protection under the North/South Ministerial Council arrangements.

Members should note that one recommendation was made to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which is unusual. It seeks the commitment of

the House to strategic, long-term and sustained funding of services for prevention and early interventions. Members are aware that the Executive have signed up to the programme of early intervention for children and families through to 2017-18. The prevention of child abuse and exploitation will be greatly assisted by us acting and intervening earlier. Members will want to keep Kathleen Marshall's recommendation in mind when voting on future Budget Bills.

I want to leave you with some reflections, taken from Kathleen Marshall's concluding remarks in her report. First — I need to emphasise this — she counsels a balanced response to the reality of CSE in Northern Ireland. In her words, we need to:

"avoid a panic that leads to an unhealthy repression of and limitations on young people's lives and expectations of human relationships."

11.45 am

Those are wise words, and they should be heeded by us all. I also agree wholeheartedly with her when she says that we need greater awareness of CSE, that we need to tackle the issues that make children and young people vulnerable to it, and that we need to promote the confidence of children and young people, their parents and carers, and those who work with them in the wider community to enable each and all of us to respond effectively to CSE and the risk of it.

I am encouraged to note that Kathleen Marshall recognises that Northern Ireland has some strong staff tackling the challenges presented by CSE: our social workers, police, health workers, youth and community workers and those who provide services in the community. Let us commend them for the sterling work they do and have done, and help them through the challenges ahead.

This is a step on a journey. We know more today about CSE than we did yesterday. Next year and in years to come, we will know more than we do today. It is a journey that we will continue for many years and one that we need to make together.

Finally, if Members want to have full sight of the report, it can be downloaded from my Department's website. It can also be accessed on the DE and DOJ websites.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I reflect and wish that we were not dealing with this particular serious issue. Let me preface my comments by saying that, in everything that we say in the House and beyond it, we should be mindful that we are dealing with extremely vulnerable children and young people. We should be mindful of that context.

However, the Minister's statement was very detailed. In my view, it was also very weak in terms of accountability. I reflect that the inquiry was charged, as page 1 of the Minister's statement states, with:

"establishing the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation"

and

"examining how effective cross-sectoral child safeguarding and protection arrangements are in preventing and tackling child sexual exploitation".

Just what, in this report, does any of that? What in the report tackles the issue of accountability or failings in the system?

I reflect on page 2 of the statement, and I will ask a direct question about it. Page 2 of the Minister's statement concludes:

"The Inquiry concludes that available data can only give a 'rough idea'".

We were told that, in 2011, through a Barnardo's report. In fact, recommendation 3 in the Barnardo's report requested that the Health and Social Care Board develop:

"a targeted and fully resourced action plan",

with consideration of data collection. Almost four years on, it has been flagged up today that we need to look at issues like data collection.

I suggest to you, Minister, that what was required, and what the Chairperson and Sinn Féin advocated at that stage, was a fully independent, resourced inquiry with full statutory powers. I ask the Minister to reflect on whether that should and could be the most appropriate way forward. Does this report, Minister, in its weakness in terms of accountability —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Chairperson, you have had well over two minutes.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: — run the risk of failing the very children and young people that we set out to protect?

Mr Wells: First, if the honourable Member's party signed up to the National Crime Agency (NCA), that would do an awful lot to assist in preventing the cross-border movements of those who would abuse our children. That is one of the big prices that we, as a society, will pay if we do not get this area sorted out. We need that expertise and, at the moment, we cannot have it because of the intransigence of yourselves and the SDLP.

Secondly, there will be an opportunity tomorrow at the meeting of the Health Committee for a more detailed probing of the points she has raised. I accept that it is not reasonable to expect any Member to have read, understood and asked searching questions about a report of this depth. We could have gone for the model that she requested, but there is a matter of urgency regarding this and I hope that she understands, from the comments that I have made, that I am setting extremely tight deadlines for the Department to make certain that we get answers to those questions and that we are on a stronger basis.

She has quite rightly raised an issue about data. I do not believe that any form of inquiry would have taken this much further, because, by its very nature, you will not get many people coming forward and admitting that they have been involved in CSE. Many victims do not come forward until much later in life to tell the police or social services that they have been involved in this totally reprehensible situation. However, I believe that Kathleen Marshall's report sets out a series of steps which, if taken urgently, will help the situation.

The Member is aware that a second review is ongoing. There is a review dealing with the cases of 22 young people in care, many of whom are very vulnerable. That report should provide us with further information on the situation. Do we know how much of this is going on? No, we do not. All I can tell you is that it is not going on on the scale of that in northern England. What is going on is being treated extremely seriously; evidence of paramilitary involvement has been given to the inquiry; and we are going to do absolutely everything that we can to reduce the vulnerability of our children, particularly those in care, to this awful activity.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister and welcome his statement to the House today along with his plan to establish a health and social care child sexual exploitation response team. When I think of child sexual exploitation today, the first name that comes into my head is Máiría Cahill. If we are talking about accountability and transparency, we all have to have a collective responsibility. Will the Minister explain what members of the public told the inquiry about paramilitary involvement in child sexual exploitation?

Mr Wells: The report was based on a large number of interviews with individuals who had direct experience. Their testimony was, and they were ardent in their view that this should be revealed publicly in the report, that this was going on and that they wanted it to be exposed. They painted a worrying picture of what is happening in communities, particularly those where there was not support for the forces of law and order; where support for the PSNI, or the RUC as it was then, was weak. That view has been confirmed through discussions with some of our trusts.

It is important to say that some of those who spoke to Kathleen Marshall's team were very explicit about what they believe to have happened to them, and they feared for their lives because, had it become known that they had spoken to the inquiry, they felt that their lives would be at risk. I cannot see why anyone would deliberately make up that information. I believe that there is a fair degree of credence to those testimonies, and I suspect that we are still only touching the surface, as it were, because, for very good reasons, many may not be coming forward. The Barnardo's report in 2011 also referred to the involvement of organised groups and links to paramilitarism, so this is not particularly new. As the inquiry continued, the paramilitary dimension became a very serious one.

I know that the media will inevitably concentrate on this particular issue, but I think that it is important that the wider findings of the Marshall report are also adequately reported — what has happened and what is being done to avoid it occurring in the future. I do not want this report to be seen to be homing in on the one issue when there are so many others that have to be dealt with. We need public support at every level to ensure that we reduce dramatically the levels of CSE in Northern Ireland.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister and must say at the outset that I am flabbergasted, to be honest, that Ms McLaughlin simulated outrage

at these issues, given her party's approach to Máiría Cahill.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McKinney: I remind the party opposite that the SDLP is in good-faith negotiations on the NCA, and we are making good progress. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member will please resume his seat. My patience is exhausted with people shouting from a sedentary position. This is a serious statement. I remind Members that we are taking questions to the Minister and nothing more. I will observe from now on those who are abusing this Chamber.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I lean on the words of the Minister's statement? He said:

"The inquiry has not been able to establish actual numbers of young people being exploited"

and

"The report states it was not possible for the inquiry team to identify the prevalence of paramilitary links".

He went on to say:

"we do not know the full extent of CSE in Northern Ireland";

"Not enough is known about people who sexually exploit children and young people",

and

"perpetrators are mostly solitary offenders and could be from any part of the community."

It is vague and points to huge gaps in information. In that context, are the report and its recommendations not, ultimately, weakened?

Mr Wells: First, I am not sure that it is in the interests of Sinn Féin Members to be so defensive about the report of an independent inquiry by an internationally renowned expert. The words that I quoted are those of the inquiry report; they are not mine. The recent Máiría Cahill issue indicates to me that brave people

like her have been coming forward and giving information on what was going on, particularly in the paramilitary field. I think that we all note with concern the reaction of Members opposite to her testimony. I applaud her bravery and the articulate way in which she has raised this issue. It confirms much of what the Marshall report says.

I accept what Mr McKinney is saying about the fact that we do not have the cold, hard statistics that he and we all want. I hope that I have explained to some extent why it is difficult to obtain them. I also hope that he understands that one of the recommendations that I will implement is to attempt to improve that situation.

The fact that we do not have cold, hard statistics does not disprove the fact that this is going on in Northern Ireland. It is out there. It is out there on a worrying scale, though not on the scale evident in northern England. It is not happening in the same systematic way in which gangs are involved in organising it, as was the case amongst some ethnic groups in Rochdale and Rotherham. We are not clear on what the actual statistics are, but that does not mean that my Department and the other two Departments concerned should not do absolutely everything that we can to ensure that this awful scourge is removed from our society.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note poignantly one of the last paragraphs. He said:

"This is a step on a journey ... It is a journey that will continue for years to come and one that we need to make together"

I very much welcome that commitment.

The Minister's statement refers to the pubs and clubs culture and, very frighteningly, the tap on the shoulder received by some young girls and, indeed, boys. Can he assure the House that, if, during the inquiry, any specific case or evidence was uncovered, full information was provided to the PSNI and appropriate authorities to enable an investigation?

Mr Wells: There was a worrying reference to what is called the "party house scene", and I will explain what that means. It was frequently referred to by witnesses as a method to draw young people into CSE. Attendance at party houses was often initiated by the young person's boyfriend or girlfriend. Children were frequently enticed to attend party houses,

where they were provided with drugs and alcohol and, subsequently, exploited sexually.

The party houses may be known to young people or parties may be arranged via social media. Some were organised by groups of men who had no attachment to loyalist or republican paramilitaries. Others were organised in areas where those organisations were dominant. What tended to happen was that there were one or two "Mr Bigs", as I will call them — people known in the community as having direct links, formerly or currently, with paramilitary organisations — who were people to be scared of. People knew that the consequences of disobeying them could be very serious. The tap on the shoulder tended to be from one of those individuals who had a predisposition to sexual abuse. They tapped the shoulder of a young girl or boy, and it had terrible consequences.

12.00 noon

The difficulty is that young people were scared because of the fact that they would be exposed by giving evidence to the inquiry. When you have that situation, it is very difficult for them to give evidence to the police and social services against the perpetrators. Those men, and, to a lesser extent, women, are known to society. They are known in their communities. They are perhaps even known by their local MLAs. It is absolutely vital that, if we hear even the slightest rumour of that happening, we go to the police and make that evidence known to them and that we encourage the community to rise up, as Mairia Cahill did, and give that information. Only when that happens will we get ourselves to the situation where there will be no hiding place for Mr Big, who is a predator on young girls, and he will be fearful that the tap on the shoulder will be not him on a girl but the PSNI on his shoulder.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party welcomes this very important statement this morning. I thank the Minister for delivering it. There are two issues of great concern for me about how to empower children to avoid all such abuse. The Minister said in his statement:

"Girls may feel that they can gain status through cooperating with those powerful individuals".

He also stated:

"young people want to be empowered to resist CSE and can only do so by knowing more about the risks."

Will the Minister outline how he thinks such advice and empowerment can be passed on to young people, especially how it can be done other than through the school system?

Mr Wells: As I said in the statement, I hope that we will empower not only teachers but parents and youth organisations to take this more seriously. I appreciate the support that has already been given to these recommendations by the Department of Justice and the Department of Education. We need to get the message out there to all our young people that, if they have the slightest concern, they can come forward and that we will treat it seriously and with respect and that we will be able to identify those involved in that dreadful activity.

Tomorrow, at the Health Committee, of which he is a member, we will have an opportunity to explore more carefully what is being suggested. I accept that he would not have had time to see the recommendations in the report on this issue. After he gets a chance to study them overnight and to question me and officials tomorrow, he will understand that we are taking the matter seriously.

I would also like the media to play their role in reporting this report and future developments to let society know that there should be no hiding place for individuals involved in this, particularly given the fact that Northern Ireland is supposed to have moved on and that, now, all the communities are supporting the legal authorities. They must feel safe and secure to come forward and give the information.

We have an awareness-raising campaign that we are discussing in our Department and with ministerial colleagues. I hope to be able to give further information on that. I hope that the Member accepts that the deadlines I have set in the recommendations are all very urgent; they are all within two, three or four months. This is not going to be put on the long finger. In answer to Ms McLaughlin's comment, had we gone for the type of inquiry that she demanded, it could have been years before we were in the position to implement the changes. My predecessor set the trend of having swift, quick targeted inquiries as a much better way of doing things. One inquiry has been going for nine years. That is going to do nothing to protect our children. This is an urgent situation in which technology is moving very quickly and it is difficult to keep up with it.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement. What does the report say about communities who do not report horrendous

child exploitation abuse, which we have all been made very aware of in recent days?

Mr Wells: I watched the Máiría Cahill interviews twice to make sure that I heard them right. She very bravely uncovered a totally different type of society from what I am used to. In that society, the reaction to child sexual abuse was not, "Let's get this out into the open and report it to the police"; it was, "No, let's cover it up, and let's try to discourage those who are the victims rather than exposing those who are the perpetrators".

I am told that, since 2005, all of Northern Ireland is signed up to policing and justice. We are serving on the Policing Board, we are serving on district policing partnerships (DPPs) in our local communities and we are serving on the Justice Committee. Therefore, there can be no excuse whatsoever for any community in Northern Ireland not coming forward with evidence if they know about it. I am certain that MLAs throughout the House have very close contacts with their grassroots communities. They are in them every day and have advice centres. I would not like to think that, in four or five years' time, we will look back and see that there was still a reluctance among public representatives to come forward and expose those people who were preying on their societies.

I remember the Donagh case. I know Donagh quite well, strangely enough, for other reasons. Donagh has a chapel, a pub, a school, and about 50 houses. Certain individuals were openly preying on children in that community, yet, because of a reluctance to come forward to the RUC at that time, nobody was prepared to come forward and report it to the authorities. They were not being asked to report it to the police. They could have reported it to the social services, but they did not do so. That is totally unacceptable in modern day Northern Ireland. I hope that every Member in the House signs up to complete openness when it comes to this issue, though I am not hearing it from some sides of the Chamber.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement, although I agree that there is a lot of vagueness throughout it and that it lacks substance. The statement says that senior managers and agencies are fully committed to dealing with this and that there was no corruption, cover up or lack of commitment. If there is no lack of commitment, why are there repeated cases of young people going missing? Why is there duplication of effort, where you have agencies

and partnership arrangements dealing with the same people. It seems to me that there is a misuse of resources and certainly a lack of commitment. How can the Minister ensure that resources are going to be used most effectively to deal with this very serious issue?

Mr Wells: As the honourable lady knows, in Rotherham, there was a series of reports brought forward alleging systematic abuse of children in that community. The reports were largely ignored, and there was no evidence of any firm action being taken. What this inquiry found, as far as Northern Ireland is concerned, is that, following the Barnardo's report, which was funded by my Department, steps were taken to try to deal with this very important issue. Indeed, the Department has poured quite a bit of funding into this particular field. The basic tenet of the report is that quite a lot has been done but that there is much more that needs to be done. The report cites excellent recent examples of collaborative work amongst agencies in Northern Ireland, including the Child Support Agency (CSA).

There is dedication and commitment on the part of the staff across social services, police, health and education. The report also states that Northern Ireland has very strong staff resources for dealing with this issue. That is very different to the rest of the United Kingdom. The report is saying that there are some solid grounds on which to build future policy. The report has exposed no lack of willingness among the staff involved. I find that very reassuring. There has been no attempt at foot-dragging, cover up or downplaying the situation.

What the report has done is to indicate ways in which we can improve. That is the benefit of having someone from outside to look at the situation. As individuals, we tend to find it difficult to see the wood for the trees. Bringing someone in gives it a fresh focus, and she has outlined real and positive changes that will be made. I am committed to those changes. I am committed to delivering them as quickly as possible. I am also looking for the Member's community to commit to helping me in that by outing those involved in child sexual exploitation in her community who have not been exposed to date. That is a role that she, in particular, can play in her constituency to make certain that there is no hiding place for the evil men exploiting children in west Belfast.

Mr Givan: Sinn Féin Members talking about corruption and cover-up by senior management figures in the health service will leave people incredulous when they consider what has gone on in the republican movement when it comes

to the exploitation of vulnerable children and young people. They are utterly bankrupt when it comes to talking about these issues, and they do a disservice to the statement by saying what they are saying in the Chamber.

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

Mr Givan: The report talks about the likelihood that the evidence about the abuse that has taken place has been significantly underestimated. Given the powerful and persuasive witness statements about paramilitary involvement, surely more needs to be done to get the truth from paramilitary organisations, past and present, about the prevalence of the abuse that has taken place. Will the Minister encourage those Members with influence to ensure that that happens?

Mr Wells: I think I have covered some of those issues. Although the Maíria Cahill story has come quite late in the process, the information that she provided has lifted the lid on the extent of the problem in some communities. I accept that, unless more Maíria Cahills come forward, it will be very difficult to put an exact figure on what has been going on. When we interview people as adults and ask how many of them have had the trauma of child sexual abuse, we find that the percentage is worryingly high. That indicates that we are missing a lot in communities.

The landscape has changed, and I am still waiting for a public commitment from all Members of the House that they will, on every occasion that it is reported to them, bring information to the authorities that shows that this is going on, be it the social services, the police or the Department of Education. I detect reluctance to do so, and unless we, as a society and as its public representatives, set an example to our community, is it any wonder that others remain scared to come forward to give that evidence? Act as a conduit. Act as a springboard. Act as a tunnel to bring information from your community to the authorities and then we will start to get a grasp of what is going on.

The lower number of prosecutions was referred to. The Justice Minister is committed to the report, and I am sure that he will consider that issue along with other elements of the report. Not only do we need all communities to come forward, report the issue and facilitate the authorities but we need to give victims and witnesses the confidence to go to court to give the evidence that will put these people behind

bars for as long as possible. That requires everyone — we are all in this together — to work together to ensure that we can wipe out the scourge of the exploitation of our most vulnerable children.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will start with a positive note and welcome the Minister's statement about the paediatric unit at Daisy Hill. There has been an announcement about a unit. I take it that you know about it, Minister. Maybe it came as a surprise to you as well.

This is a serious and complex subject and, unfortunately, the debate has degenerated into the usual SDLP scoring of cheap political points. Unfortunately, the Minister's comments have degenerated in that way, too. It is a subject that we should all be looking to eliminate in our constituencies. As he usually does, Mr Givan did his impression of Mr Angry without really adding anything to the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I really need a question from the Member, please.

Mr Brady: The Minister talked about the effectiveness of the report. Does he not think that an independent inquiry, with powers and teeth, that could compel witnesses to give evidence could ensure that the scourge is properly eliminated? The Minister talked at length about the timescale and all the rest, but surely an inquiry could be achieved within a reasonable timescale.

Mr Wells: First, I welcome the £15 million investment in Daisy Hill. I was very much aware of it. I just did not see how it was linked to this report, hence why I raised my eyebrows. As representatives for the area, we are both very happy with that decision by the Southern Trust this morning.

I wonder why Members opposite wanted this to be pushed off into the long grass. I wonder why they wanted that for a very long, difficult and torturous report that could have taken eight or nine years to come to fruition. I wonder why they were not happy about the previous Minister's decision to make it short, sharp and as quick as possible.

12.15 pm

What the Member is asking for would not actually have produced the extra information that he is looking for, because if it is difficult to get the victims of these terrible crimes to give evidence in a darkened room confidentially to

the team led by Kathleen Marshall, how on earth would we get them to come forward and give evidence at a full-blown public inquiry? How much would that have cost, and what would it have achieved? He knows that there is a second thematic inquiry taking place, where there will be further opportunities to look at this terrible scourge on our society.

I am happy and content that the former Minister did the right thing, as he did with pseudomonas, when he made it quick and to the point. He solved that pseudomonas problem very quickly, but did he get any credit for it? No, he did not, but it was a good move, and that has to be the way forward.

For the Member to indicate that he feels that there is a deficit in the report is to impugn the integrity of Kathleen Marshall and all of her expertise and experience in the field. She is to be applauded for lifting the lid on this issue and encouraging and cajoling us to do better. Our job, jointly, is to ensure that her recommendations are implemented quickly — and the thematic report as well — to make certain that there is no hiding place for people who are lurking in his community and in my community and are involved in this awful activity.

Mr McGimpsey: I welcome the report. It is an important piece of work and points the way forward. We will get an opportunity at tomorrow's Committee meeting to examine the report and its implications further. I have questions about membership, time frame, budget and so on.

This is a very important challenge. First, it is about protecting children and ensuring that abusers are identified and brought to justice. There are two key elements in that. The Minister of Justice has given his full support, and it appears that the Minister of Education has done similarly. This is something that the Health Department cannot do on its own: you need the support of other Ministers and other Departments. Have you considered forming a ministerial task force, along the lines of the ones we formed to combat suicide and protect life, to ensure that the Departments that are relevant — Education and Justice — are fully committed and are fully supportive and do not simply allow the Health Department to carry the can?

Mr Wells: First, I agree that we need to explore the report in depth at the Committee tomorrow. Frankly, even I have not had time to digest all of it, because it is so significant. Therefore, we need to give consideration to his suggestions.

My Department is forming a team to deliver on those recommendations that specifically refer to DHSSPS. Similarly, we may need to sit down with the other Departments to consider the best way forward. I assure him that both Ministers — Justice and Education — got prior sight of the report to give them an opportunity to assess it. We are still considering whether some of the recommendations are practical and what the best way is to take them forward, so we have not come to a fully considered decision on the report in its entirety. However, the Member made a very valid comment, and it would be very useful for him to explore it more fully tomorrow, because not only do we have me and departmental officials before the Committee, we also have the chair of the Safeguarding Board coming along.

I must mention the fact that, in the middle of this process, we produced the legislation that led to the foundation of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, which has a very important role in all of this. That gives an indication that the Assembly as a whole is committed to dealing with the issue and has a team of experts scrutinising it on a regular basis.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Members, I need your cooperation. We still have five Members left to speak. I am sure that all of you would wish to have this finished before we break for the Business Committee meeting. I ask Members, and the Minister, to be brief.

Mr Frew: I will be brief. There is no doubt, Minister, that the iron grip of fear that has been placed upon our communities by terrorist organisations and their political apologists has been a massive barrier in information going forward to authorities. Is there any evidence in the report to suggest that people were not only shipped out to places like County Louth and County Cavan in the Republic of Ireland, but also placed out of Belfast into places in my constituency, like Dunloy, Rasharkin or Ballycastle?

Mr Wells: In her report, Kathleen Marshall did not specifically name any paramilitary organisation or identify particular areas, although we know that it is often a problem in urban areas. That is not for one minute to suggest that it does not happen in rural areas. I have certainly come across it in my constituency, which, of course, is mostly rural.

Many people believe that it is less of a problem in rural areas, but, as I said about the Donagh situation, it does occur in villages and hamlets that are controlled by powerful families with

paramilitary links. It was not possible for the inquiry team to accurately identify the prevalence of the paramilitary influence. Some told that it was endemic and widespread, but it seems clear that there are many communities where it does not exist. However, for those who have experienced it, it is an oppressive shadow over lives.

Again, we have heard the evidence of Máiría Cahill about the shipping out of perpetrators to other areas, which has a remarkable similarity to Catholic Church and clerical sex abuse, where the priest or the clergyman was simply moved down to the next parish. It almost seemed that paramilitary groups were doing exactly the same. If someone was causing embarrassment to the leader or local brigade commander or whatever, he was simply shifted down to another county or across the border. There can never be justification for that, but, certainly, in a situation where everyone in this Chamber is signed up to policing and justice, it would be appalling if we were to discover that that was still going on. We need names, we need information and we need historical information to be brought forward to the authorities now. If anybody in this Chamber has information, they owe it to children to bring it forward immediately.

Lord Morrow: I want to ask the Minister about what he said in page 4, paragraph 4 of his statement. Is there any danger, Minister, that this report will err on the side of the children's liberty to the detriment of staff who wish to act in the child's best interests at all times?

Mr Wells: The report does deal with this issue at length. There is a very fine balance to be struck between the need to protect the child and the need to give the child a sense of being a citizen and to take part in all of the normal social and recreational activities that anyone would want to participate in. You cannot have a situation where children and young people are locked in permanently at nights and weekends simply because of a general perceived risk of CSE.

Equally, the report is quite novel in saying that we cannot always assume that the child's best interest is to have total liberty. Therefore, it is a very interesting suggestion that we look at this to see what is in the best interests of the child.

I have heard, through my constituency work, some horrendous examples of children being called out of residential care and being sent to parties dominated by middle-aged men, where all sorts of activities that are totally unacceptable are going on. We have to give

priority to the right to protect the child. That is primary, but part of this report is sending out a signal that we need to examine this issue. It is not in the interests of the human rights of a child to give him or her the right to be sexually abused. That is not a right at all. Therefore, it is a fine balance that is being looked at, and I hope that we can come up with a definition that can be usable and which will protect children more generally.

Mr Lyttle: I had the duty to accompany a participant in the inquiry, and I have seen the evils of online sexual exploitation at first hand. I pay tribute to that participant and, indeed, to the work of the independent inquiry.

The Marshall report identifies online exploitation as a serious danger and risk to young people in our community. In February 2013, the Assembly called on OFMDFM to bring forward a cross-departmental internet safety strategy and action plan, and the Minister has said that he has written to his ministerial colleagues to seek their agreement to commission and fund the development of an e-safety strategy and action plan for Northern Ireland.

When did the Minister write to his ministerial colleagues, what is the delay in the implementation of that strategy and what is his deadline for that recommendation?

Mr Wells: First, may I say that I could not agree more with the Member on the issue. How did I protect my children from all sorts of undesirable activities online? I simply ensured that the computer was kept somewhere where there could be some form of supervision. That is utterly meaningless today, when children from five onwards have access to the most horrific content online through their mobile phones and tablets. The days of parental control are over, and it is getting more and more difficult.

The safety strategy has been prepared in the last few weeks, and we are dealing with that as a matter of great urgency. I emphasise to the Member and others that the Department of Health cannot deal with the issue alone: it is a problem that affects Northern Ireland's society in general and has to be dealt with by the entire Northern Ireland Executive.

We give our children all the freedom of the fox in the chicken run. We expose them to things that were absolutely unimaginable to most people during their childhood. Fortunately, my children have escaped the worst of it, but I shudder to think what my grandchildren will be exposed to. Over 60% of boys under 13 have

been exposed to hard-core pornography. What impact is that having on future relationships? What impact is that having on their relationships with girls and, hopefully eventually, their wife or partner? What is going on is truly dreadful. Internet access by teenagers as a percentage is way into the high 90s, and they can be exposed to the most dreadful, sadistic, horrible pornographic material. I see this as an absolute priority, and I want buy-in from the whole Assembly on it.

There is a difficulty with the issue. We saw the 'Spotlight' programme the other night. Where was the website based that was exploiting children in Northern Ireland? Israel. That is part of the problem. Much of it is being marketed outside Northern Ireland. We really need to get a grip on what is a terribly difficult situation.

Mr Poots: Child sexual abuse and exploitation is always wrong, whether it is by a state, a Church or paramilitaries. The women in Sinn Féin should be ashamed of how they are seeking to cover up for those who have engaged in child sexual exploitation and abuse. They are failing and have failed young republican children very badly.

There was a large focus on children's care homes. However, the reality is that child sexual exploitation takes place in far greater numbers outside that scenario. Can we have some thoughts about how we can ensure that we better protect young vulnerable people who are in a home environment, as opposed to a children's home, from child sexual exploitation and make them more aware of the risks and dangers they might face?

Mr Wells: The specific remit of the Marshall report was looked-after children, which includes children in foster care, children in residential care and children in homes and placements. There is also the thematic report, which will identify a specific number of cases — we think that it is 22. We hope that the more general education and awareness programme that we are initiating will help parents, who are obviously the first line of defence against this awful activity, to provide protection for their children. However, sadly, in many cases, the abuse has been carried out by a parent. I find that particularly horrific, given that I am a parent and a grandparent: I just cannot fathom how people could do that. However, it is widespread. We are trying to put as much effort as we can into the public awareness campaign.

The Executive and the Assembly as a whole must take the issue seriously. We cannot do it alone and nor can DOJ or the Department of Education. The report takes the novel step of making a recommendation for the Assembly rather than individual Departments and calls on the Assembly to take the issue extremely seriously and provide, through the Budget, the money required to invest in the future safeguarding of our children. If we do not do that, we will build up a backlog of the most horrendously difficult situations that we will have to deal with when those young people become adults. As a result of sexual exploitation, they could end up in care and could themselves end up as exploiters, as is often the case. Therefore, we must try to deal with this case immediately.

Finally, let me say that many Members opposite have been given the opportunity to pledge their total support for openness on this issue, and not one of them has taken it. I find it very worrying that that opportunity has been missed, time after time after time. Are they committed to dealing with this scourge on society, or will they look after their paramilitary friends in towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland?

12.30 pm

Mr Allister: May I express disappointment that we have only the Health Minister here today? In so far as I have been able to read the report, it is clear that some of the most significant recommendations lie with the Department of Justice. I wonder whether the Justice Minister will ever come to the House on the issue. I assume that Minister Wells cannot answer for the Education Minister or the Justice Minister, but, in answering for himself, can he tell us precisely the recommendations in the report that touch on his area of responsibility that he is not accepting?

Mr Wells: I need to make it clear that the protocols of the House set out that one Minister has to take the lead in any statement. Therefore, it would not have been possible for two other Ministers to have given their input on the report. However, I can assure him that, prior to this, I have received strong support from both Ministers.

It is not a question of rejecting any recommendations; we have to sit down and talk to the other Ministers because there is some overlap. As a Department, we have to examine carefully all the recommendations, some of which we have publicly committed ourselves to today and some of which require further

consideration. I guarantee him that, when we come to that conclusion, the House will be made aware, probably through a written statement, of what exactly we are doing. This issue is far too important for anyone to have doubts about my commitment or that of any of the three Departments. We owe it to thousands of our children and young people to make certain that we as an Assembly do everything we can to eliminate this scourge. If devolution is to mean anything in Northern Ireland, it must lead to better protection for our children. If we cannot do that, we should not be here. It is essential, and I am totally committed to doing this, as he will well know.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): That concludes questions on the statement. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2-00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Infrastructure Investment Projects

1. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in the context of the Northern Ireland investment fund, to outline any infrastructure investment projects that his Department has identified as qualifying for European Investment Bank funds. (AQO 7057/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): The Northern Ireland investment fund is targeted at areas where significant infrastructure investment is usually taken forward by the private sector but where government has a particular interest since the investment helps to deliver on specific Executive objectives. Those areas include: social and affordable housing; energy production; energy and renewable energy; telecommunications; and urban regeneration. As such, my Department's functions and related projects do not fall within the scope of the fund.

With regard to the specific use of European Investment Bank (EIB) funds, Her Majesty's Treasury's public expenditure guidelines restrict the ability of Northern Ireland Departments and their non-departmental public bodies to borrow from external sources. In that respect, even government loans to public corporations will score against departmental capital budgets. Therefore, the scope to directly involve the European Investment Bank in funding projects across my Department is more limited. I met representatives from the European Investment Bank earlier this year to discuss its potential involvement in a number of projects, in particular, the funding of the A6. European Investment Bank funding being provided through councils was considered, and we met the councils to consider the proposal. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to reach a successful outcome on the proposal. I will, however, continue to explore all feasible options for the funding of capital projects by my Department.

My Department has been very successful to date, as the Member will know, in accessing European funding for a number of roads and

transport projects, and I will continue to explore opportunities for further EU funding.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he will agree that, until UKIP liberates us all from the cost of £54 million a day just to be Europeans, we should retrieve our own money from the EIB. Can the Minister categorically say whether he has put forward any schemes, other than those he referred to, that would qualify? I take exception to him saying that his Department does not qualify. I believe that there are areas where he should find out more about that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can the Member finish his question, please?

Mr McNarry: Well, I was in the middle of it. To conclude my question, Deputy Speaker: what are the lending terms for EIB money? Are they attractive enough to ease the savagery that he says was imposed on him by the Finance Minister?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Some further clarification about and understanding of the European Investment Bank and how it operates is required. I tried to outline that. Her Majesty's Treasury's public expenditure guidelines restrict very much the ability of Northern Ireland Departments and their non-departmental public bodies to borrow from external sources. Therefore, it is for private initiatives or something that we would carry forward, as we attempted to do even through using councils as a potential avenue of funding. That has not been possible, but we will continue to try to do that.

If I was very mischievous, I would welcome the interest from a member of UKIP in accessing European funds. I hope that you have told Nigel, because Rochester is this Thursday.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. An dtig liom fiafraí den Aire ar chomhlíonaigh an Roinn s'aige an riachtanas ó Oifig an Chéad-Aire agus an LeasChéad-Aire maoiniú Eorpach de fiche faoin gcéad a bhaint amach? Has the Minister's Department achieved the OFMDFM requirement of 20% European funding?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her question. Indeed, I am very happy to confirm that, of the Executive Departments, DRD is easily the best and has had the most success in drawing down EU money, and I have established a dedicated funding team to ensure

that we remain top of that particular league. Therefore, we will continue to draw down as much European funding as we can. I can tell you that, for the Budget 2011-15, and for the period to date, £57,174,839 has been drawn down as a result of our efforts through the European sustainable competitiveness programme, INTERREG IVa, INTERREG IVb and TEN-T. Therefore, we are very much on top of this game and looking at all opportunities whereby we can benefit from EU funding.

Mr Ramsey: Does the Minister agree that the lack of transport infrastructure across Northern Ireland is the key element in the levels of social and economic deprivation that we have and that it is imperative that we have funding from external sources to deal with this matter urgently?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, I accept the point he is making, which, presumably, is that better connectivity throughout Northern Ireland is surely a key benefit to economic progress. That is what I have sought to do, not only around the Executive table, as I bid for necessary funds from conventional sources, but in utilising the opportunities before us from Europe. We have had some success with that. The Member will know that, under TEN-T, we had success in the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay phase 1; the dualling of the A8 Coleman's Corner to Ballyrickard roundabout; and the installation of rapid charge points for electric vehicles and supporting IT systems. We have put forward other schemes such as the Belfast intermodal transport hub and York Street interchange and at some stage, I also hope, the new Waterside station in Londonderry.

Belfast to Derry/Londonderry Railway

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his rationale for not informing the Committee for Regional Development or the Assembly of the reasons why the current tendering process relating to the upgrade of the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry railway line can no longer proceed. (AQO 7058/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would say at the outset that I do not accept the premise of the question. I made myself available to the Assembly on 3 November when I made my statement, and I went before the Regional Development Committee on 12 November to speak about the matter in detail. I also sought to speak with the

Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee in advance of my statement, but circumstances did not permit me to speak to the Chair. However, I did speak to the Deputy Chair and Committee Clerk.

As I made clear in my statement to the Assembly on 3 November, I can advise that the current tendering process relating to the signalling element of the upgrade of the Belfast to Londonderry railway line will proceed, subject to the necessary approvals being obtained and an updated economic appraisal.

The Member was in attendance at the Regional Development Committee meeting last Wednesday when I explained the current situation on the project in detail. I remain fully committed to the completion of the work and to the improvement of the rail service between Northern Ireland's two largest cities.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Minister knows fine well that, for months, the elected representatives were treated like mushrooms and kept in the dark about the postponement of the contract. Will he give us some good news today? I take it that he is giving us a promise that the contract will go ahead at the third attempt. Does he have any other good news about the north-west that he might tell the Assembly?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I do not consider him, or anybody else in the Chamber, to be a mushroom. I have treated everyone with the utmost respect, and I am sure that the Member will concede that.

All of those issues have been explored in some detail, not only following the questions to my statement in the House on 3 November but at the Regional Development Committee. I say again today that I am committed fully to the completion of that work. We are working through the various stages. We await the outcome of the economic appraisal with DFP but will continue to make progress as speedily as we possibly can.

The Member asked whether I have any other good news for the north-west. I indicated in my earlier reply to his colleague Mr Ramsey the potential for EU funding at Londonderry's Waterside rail station. I am very hopeful that we can move forward on that. My officials have engaged extensively with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and officials in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland to explore the potential for the project to be funded

through INTERREG Va. That cooperational programme document is being formalised by the Commission, and the first call for suitable applications is planned to be in spring 2015. We will pursue that as well.

Mr G Robinson: What contact has the Minister had with landowners affected by the delay in the phase 2 signal programme, particularly down at Bellarena?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He has a continuing interest in the Bellarena part of the project and is aware of the land issue involved there. We are seeking to resolve that, and, of course, I expect that Translink will continue to consult landowners and all interested parties in the area.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answers to date. I accept that the Minister came to brief me initially and to the Committee last week, but what was the timeline of learning of the procurement difficulties?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. I outlined in some detail the timeline of how things evolved last week. We were alerted to the situation at the end of June. That was confirmed to us in late July by the Translink board, and, in early August, I commissioned the special report, the progress assessment review (PAR), which was undertaken with considerable speed in September. Its recommendations were made available to me by the end of September, and I had to conclude on those and chart a way forward with Translink. That took us to the end of October, and we were then in a position to inform the House, which I did in my statement of 3 November.

Mr Cree: Has the Minister had any indications that the Department of Finance and Personnel will process the revised business case without further delay — in fact, expeditiously?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary. We have not yet had final confirmation from DFP, but I believe that this is an important Programme for Government project. With passenger journeys on the Londonderry to Belfast line increasing by over one third in the last two years — up to 1.6 million following phase 1 — I very much that hope that DFP will recognise the value of the project despite the increase in phase 2 costs. We can, of course, re-look at the business case

to ensure that all relevant social and economic benefits have been set out in sufficient detail and that the established growth in passenger numbers has been clearly taken into account.

2.15 pm

Mr I McCrea: Question 4. Sorry, question 3.

Street Lights: Repairs

3. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of how many street lights will not be repaired by the end of this financial year. (AQO 7059/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am happy to go straight to question 4, but the Member's interest seems to be in question 3.

My Department is facing significant resource budget constraints, so I have had to take a number of difficult decisions, including the suspension of works orders to external contractors that were responsible for the repair of approximately three quarters of the street lights that go out. To deal with the health and safety implications, I have set priorities for dealing with street lighting faults. Priority will be given to those faults that present an electrical hazard to members of the public, and contractors will still be employed to deal with such faults.

My Department's operations and maintenance staff, who can provide around 25% of the overall resource required to fix street lighting faults, will endeavour to repair as many lights as possible, prioritising large groups of lights that are out and then individual lights that have failed.

At this stage, it is very difficult to predict how many street lights will not be repaired by the end of this financial year. As of 14 November 2014, almost 15,000 of our total of 280,000 street lights were out across Northern Ireland. In the period since 8 August 2014, when I had to suspend the use of external contractors for routine street lighting repairs, my operations and maintenance staff have fixed over 5,000 faulty street lights across Northern Ireland.

I must point out that street lighting repairs have not ceased. All fault reports are being recorded and will be dealt with as soon as resources permit. That is not the level of service that my Department would like to provide, but I have had to take some difficult decisions following the outcomes of the June and October

monitoring rounds. I simply cannot spend money that I do not have.

Mr I McCrea: In a sense, I understand the difficulties that the Minister faces, but he will be aware that street lighting is an emotional issue, and it is certainly so for the elderly and most vulnerable people in our society, especially around their property. Has the Minister given any consideration to looking at other aspects of his overall budget to see whether he can lessen the burden of that work? I am not necessarily saying that he should cut other areas, but if it were more balanced, it would certainly be easier to deal with and more acceptable to communities.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. This has not been an easy decision for me, or one that has been lightly taken. We have forensically scrutinised all aspects of our budget for this year, and, unfortunately, such are the impacts that that was one of the realistic measures available to me for external contractors. I draw a parallel with the Member's colleague in charge of health, who at this stage appears to have cancelled external works, operations and the like provided by external carers and companies for health operations. I think that there are parallels. These are not easy decisions to take, and we will continue to work through them as quickly and efficiently as we possibly can.

Mr Maskey: Like the Member who spoke previously, I entirely understand the difficult decisions that had to be made by the Minister. To what extent will public safety determine the nature of the street lighting programme and where repairs might be carried out?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for at least having sympathy for me. *[Laughter.]* Obviously, there are statutory duties involved here, under article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order, to maintain roads etc. My Department has received legal advice on the issue. We will continue to inspect roads, footways and street lighting columns, and defects will be recorded as normal.

It is clear that defects may not be repaired as quickly as normal, and all repairs will be prioritised on the basis of safety. My Department will continue to actively investigate and defend public liability claims, with every case turning on its own facts. Ultimately, it will be for the courts to decide whether the reduced standards comply with my Department's statutory duty.

Mr Byrne: The Minister will be aware that there is some concern that, sometimes, DRD people take bulbs from lights that are working to areas where they are not working. It is almost a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. He will be further aware that a parish priest in Drumquin, Father Mullan, was very concerned that six lights were out for over two weeks. He felt that, given security and public safety issues, they should have been repaired quicker.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am not aware of DRD officials swapping lights, either working or not working, particularly outside places of worship, where "lighten my darkness, we beseech thee" would be a common enough prayer. On a serious note, the issue he refers to at that church property has been resolved through maintenance work. If the Member has specific issues or cases that he wants to draw to my attention, I will certainly investigate those.

A6: Update

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the separate sections of the A6 project. (AQO 7060/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: There are currently proposals to dual two sections of the A6: Randalstown to Castledawson and Londonderry to Dungiven. Funding has been provided to advance the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway project to a shovel-ready position in 2014-15 so that it would be ready to commence construction at short notice should the necessary funding become available.

The A6 Londonderry to Dungiven dualling scheme, which includes a bypass at Dungiven, is well advanced in its development. It has been through public inquiry, and the inspector has produced a report containing a number of recommendations. Those include a request to consider an alternative route in the vicinity of Dungiven. That work is continuing, and, when I am satisfied that all issues have been appropriately reviewed, a number of which are complex, I will issue a departmental statement.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his detailed response. It seems that there is some light at the end of the tunnel in relation to the Dungiven bypass. It has been delayed for many, many years, and people are reaching the end of the patience that they have exercised. Will the Minister give even a guesstimate of a date for the bypass?

Mr Kennedy: The Member will understand that I am not a fan of guesstimates. There is widespread political support for the A6. Obviously that is one reason why we have, in part, allowed sections to be built to move forward as finance becomes available. We will look at that. Of course, we find ourselves in challenging financial times, and that is another reason why I am loath to begin to put a date on it. I assure the Member and the House that there is no reluctance on my part to carry forward the scheme at the earliest available opportunity.

Mr Clarke: I accept the Minister's answer on the A6. However, there are safety problems in relation to the Moneynick section, and, maybe because money has not been available, we are not at an advanced stage. Have you or your Department any plans to do any other work to cut down the number of accidents on that stretch of the road?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Safety remains the priority for the Department in the planning of all schemes, but, more importantly, in all situations where they are not yet in place. That remains of paramount interest and concern to us. We have been looking steadily at the improvements to the A6 through this major scheme. It can be separated into sections and, again, if money becomes available, we will certainly consider that in a positive way. In the meantime, we continue to maintain the route to the best of our ability.

Mr Kinahan: May I follow that question? I am sure that the Minister is expecting me to show interest in Randalstown and Castledawson. Will he confirm the latest cost estimates of the scheme if it is delivered in phases?

Mr Kennedy: The planning of the Londonderry to Dungiven dual carriageway allows it to be constructed in up to three parts: the Dungiven bypass itself, which is the Derrychrier Road to the Crebarkey Road; the Caw roundabout to the Maydown roundabout; and the Maydown roundabout to the Derrychrier Road. The A6 Randalstown to Castledawson stretch will cost, we estimate, somewhere between £120 million and £140 million for the 14 kilometre dual carriageway. The A6 Londonderry to Dungiven scheme cost estimates for the three sections are as follows: for the Dungiven bypass, between £55 million and £65 million; between the Caw roundabout and the Maydown roundabout, between £45 million and £50 million; and the 25-kilometre section between

the Maydown roundabout and the Derrychrier Road, between £290 million and £305 million.

A5 Western Transport Corridor

5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress of the A5 western transport corridor. (AQO 7061/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following on from the successful legal challenge in 2013 to the A5 western transport corridor, four draft reports have been developed to assess impacts on the integrity of all potentially affected European-designated environmentally sensitive sites — nine in total — in the vicinity of the A5 western transport corridor scheme. A public consultation exercise on three of those reports commenced on 30 April and concluded on 13 June 2014. The subject of the fourth report, the Tully Bog special area of conservation, is impacted by air-quality aspects and, therefore, required further updated traffic survey information before publication. The consultation period on that draft report commenced on 15 October and will conclude on 28 November 2014.

It is important that my Department does not in any way pre-empt the outcomes of the consultation exercise; hence the way forward with the scheme thereafter can be determined only after careful consideration of all the responses received.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. Without pre-empting the findings of the consultation, does the Minister believe that his Department will be in a position to issue the orders by the end of this year?

Mr Kennedy: As I have indicated to the Member, it is important that we work through the processes involved. The next step in progressing the scheme would be the publication of the new environmental statement, the draft vesting order and the draft direction order for the scheme. Development work on those is now at an advanced stage, but a firm date for publication cannot be given until after consideration of any submissions to the ongoing public consultation exercise into the impacts on the Tully Bog special area of conservation.

Publication of those documents would be followed by a further consultation period, a minimum of six weeks, when formal representations and/or objections to the scheme can be made. That consultation is likely to lead to the need for a further public

inquiry, but a decision on that can only be made following careful consideration of the representations and level of objections raised in response to the consultation exercise. If deemed necessary, a public inquiry is likely to be held later in 2015.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

2.30 pm

Concessionary Fares Scheme

T1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to review the free travel scheme for people aged 60 and over, given that, like all Ministers, he refers constantly to the need to make savings within his budget. (AQT 1761/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am not going to ask him to declare any special interest in the scheme. I am a very firm supporter, as is my party, of the concessionary fares scheme. It brings considerable benefits to the travelling public, not least people who may be regarded as senior citizens. It gives them the opportunity to enjoy a day out in the company of friends and, perhaps, family or to go and visit family. It gives them the opportunity to engage socially, and, importantly for our town centres and cities, to shop, spend money and help the local economy. I am not interested in cutbacks to the concessionary fares scheme, and I have argued that consistently around the Executive table. I believe that the Executive should fund it centrally, and I believe and hope very much that I have won that argument around the Executive table. I want to see people benefiting from the concessionary fares scheme as it is presently constituted.

Mr Lunn: The Minister has prompted me to declare an interest of a sort, although not in the particular age range that I am going to refer to. I understand that around 27% of journeys undertaken under the scheme are by people in the age range of 60 to 65, some of whom are probably still working. Without advocating the termination of the scheme, is the Minister prepared to even consider a possible adjustment to the minimum age, perhaps to 65? I understand that that might save between £7 million and £10 million.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I concede that

there are anomalies in the system, but I do not believe that it is worth addressing them. I am not sure about and will want to check his assertion that the savings could amount to £7 million. We will look at that, but, irrespective of that, the concessionary fares scheme provides an opportunity for people to go out and socially engage and to spend money. Even the few who perhaps use it to travel to work at least have other opportunities to use it at weekends, when they can benefit local economies. It strikes me as strange electoral policy to be in favour of water charges and cutting the concessionary fares scheme. I will be interested to read the Alliance manifesto when it is published.

Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track: Escalating Costs

T2. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Regional Development who was at fault in cocking up the costs of the rail track between Coleraine and Londonderry, which have escalated from £22 million to £40 million, given that, regrettably, relations between his departmental officials and Translink executives have descended into a blame game over who was responsible. (AQT 1762/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. We had the opportunity, as he will know and remember well, to have an exchange at the Regional Development Committee last Wednesday. I set out clearly my view of and my displeasure at the failures involved in the project. He will also know that I have initiated a lessons learned exercise in Translink and in my Department, and I expect those reports to be on my desk before the end of this year.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer, but I remind him that, after he left, the Committee, having heard from him and his officials, also heard from Translink. That was why I asked the question.

Has the Minister any doubt that £40 million will be the final cost of the project? If it is not and if it spirals again, what percentage increase will he tolerate? Will he hold to the £40 million as a fixed sum? Can he tell us just how he intends to get this £40 million?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I can confirm that I believe the current estimate to be accurate, but, to give belt and braces to that, I will insist that we test the validity of that projection before we go out to procurement and award the contract. I do not want to second-guess that process at

all, but I believe that the project is very worthwhile. It remains an Executive priority; it has been a huge success for rail travel, as I outlined; and I believe strongly that, for public transport reasons and for the public good, we should continue to pursue the project.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Alasdair McDonnell is not in his place. I call Tom Elliott.

Park-and-ride Scheme: Tamnamore

T4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on progress on the proposed park-and-ride scheme at Tamnamore outside Dungannon, about which he has made representations. (AQT 1764/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. All politics is local, it was once famously said, and park-and-ride is very important locally and in general. I place great importance on the provision of park-and-ride facilities, not only at Tamnamore but all over Northern Ireland. We are making progress on that, thereby making it easier for people to use public transport or share transport with others.

Construction of the park-and-ride facility at Tamnamore is expected to be complete in January 2015. It will provide 280 spaces. The original intention was to remove hard shoulders to encourage better use of the new facility.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that answer. Because so many vehicles are being parked just off the Stangmore roundabout between it and Dungannon town are there any measures to ensure that those vehicles use the Tamnamore park-and-ride?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will know, obviously, because we have had representations from him and from his office in relation to this, that the hard shoulders are used by traders who have applied for and been given licences by Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council. Following representations from sources including the council and Mr Elliott, the hard shoulders will remain in place and traders will continue to be able to use their licence.

Belfast to Londonderry Rail Track: DRD Engagement

T5. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether, given the debacle about the Belfast to Londonderry rail track, he

believes that his Department is sufficiently engaged in the overall project and the project board. (AQT 1765/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Again, we spent much time exploring the issues in some detail in the Regional Development Committee last Wednesday. He will know that I have set in place the lessons learned, and those will be undertaken by the chief executive of Translink and will look at not only the performance of the executive of Translink but the role of the board and all issues. The issue of how my Department and officials have performed is also being scrutinised. I expect to have both reports by the end of this year.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that answer. I am sure that he was as surprised as we were when, after he left the Committee last week, Translink came to the table to tell us that the observers were more than observers and had full access to the papers. Minister, when your departmental officials describe themselves as observers but Translink come on board and say that they are not just observers but have full access to papers and can speak and actually sit at the same table as the project board, what are you going to do with your officials?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I understand that the Committee for Regional Development is conducting its own inquiry into the issue. I have not yet had an opportunity to study the terms of reference, but I have no doubt that the evidence that he and the Committee produce will better inform the whole situation.

The role of the official at the relevant subcommittee of the Translink board reviewing these things is simply to observe. As the Member will know, all projects are carried forward by Translink executives, but I will, of course, be interested in any work that the Committee wishes to provide.

Gully Cleaning: Flooding

T6. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are any plans to revisit or adjust in any way the policy on gully cleaning in light of last week's flooding problems. (AQT 1766/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. He will know that last week's exceptional rainfall in areas of Northern Ireland was absolutely astonishing in many ways. I sympathise with all householders and business

owners affected by the recent flooding. I will put it in context: the average November rainfall is around three and a half inches, and the total rainfall to date — it is only 18 November — is over five inches, which is 140% of the average for the entire month. Counties Down and Armagh were worst hit, and areas such as Newry, Portadown and Lurgan were badly affected. In some parts of south Down and south Armagh, up to four inches of rain fell — more than the average for the entire month — in the three days from Tuesday.

I underscore continually that my Department has never stopped cleaning gullies. Yes, we have had to restrict the work of external contractors, which accounts for about 25% of the normal work, but we continue to maintain gullies, particularly in areas with known wet spots.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his reply. Minister, in light of the war of words that ensued between your Department and DARD, which has responsibility for river maintenance — I think that a lot of the problems arose there — can you outline what steps are being taken to ensure better cooperation between the two Departments?

Mr Kennedy: I regret that I found it necessary to defend myself and the role of my Department when it would have been better to concentrate on improving things for the people who were at the very sharp end and having their homes and businesses impacted by flooding. However, I will say with particular regard to Bridge Street in Newry that it was very clear that that occurred because one of the local rivers had burst its banks on at least two occasions. Given the high volume of rainfall that had occurred in the period running up to that, no system could have coped.

I refer the Member to the PEDU report following the June 2012 flooding incident, about which I also reminded some ministerial colleagues. It recommended that one Department and a single Minister take account of and be responsible for emergencies of this nature. I support those recommendations, but it is rather a pity that some of the people who complained most loudly around the Executive table have not done so. However, I look forward to seeing whether there will be a change of attitude.

2.45 pm

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Questions 2, 5 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Stephen Brimstone: Fact-finding Investigation

1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the findings of his Department's fact-finding investigation into the actions of Mr Stephen Brimstone. (AQO 7071/11-15)

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): It would not be appropriate for me to outline the findings of the fact-finding investigation, as the report relates to a personnel matter. It is an established principle that such information be treated as confidential.

Mrs Dobson: I was going to thank the Minister for his answer, but it was really a non-answer. Perhaps we can explore it a bit more deeply. Despite a direct request from the head of the Civil Service and the report being conducted by DFP, that Minister is still feebly trying to claim that the issue had nothing to do with him. He is either avoiding his duties or is wrongly trying to protect a party colleague.

Nevertheless —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can the Member come to a question, please?

Mrs Dobson: Nevertheless, can this Minister tell us what legal advice his Department and the former Minister got previously, where it came from and whether he will be able to let the Assembly see it?

Mr Storey: It is quite clear that the Member is not aware of how legal advice is retained in the House. Equally, I remind the Member that the issue was dealt with by my predecessor. There is where it rests.

Mrs D Kelly: Did the Minister actually familiarise himself with the report's findings? Can he share the conclusions that he has reached on it?

Mr Storey: It is quite clear that there are others who are more interested in this issue than they are in matters that relate to the Department. Since I came into office, my focus and attention

has been on ensuring that I get to grips with the responsibilities that I have as Minister. When we look across the piece at the many issues that the Member and others in the House have, that should be the priority and focus. I repeat that it was an issue for my predecessor. I believe that that particular matter rests there. He made the decisions that he made. As far as I am concerned, that is where the issue remains.

Mr Allister: This was a fact-finding investigation that was initiated by the permanent secretary not by the Minister. Doubtless it made findings of fact about the special adviser's role as a civil servant. What are the facts that the Minister is so anxious to hide? Why is he ducking and diving to hold from the public domain the finding of facts?

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

Mr Allister: Does that not speak greatly about the attitude of the Department to this particular matter?

Mr Storey: It is a personnel issue. As I would not release information on any individual in my Department, I would not do so on this issue. For those of slow hearing or learning, I repeat that this is a matter for my predecessor. That is where the issue remains.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Robin Swann is not in his place.

Stock Transfer Programme

4. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the stock transfer programme. (AQO 7074/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. A review of the stock transfer scheme was commissioned in February 2014. The review group concluded that the current model will not deliver the announced programme, and therefore a different approach has been proposed. It focuses on a smaller number of schemes, with each scheme comprising larger bundles of properties. That has been endorsed by the Housing Executive board. I have also approved the proposals.

I have written to the chairman of the Housing Executive asking him to develop a revised programme of stock transfer schemes as one element of a wider initiative to improve and invest in Northern Ireland Housing Executive

properties. Once a revised programme is agreed, the Housing Executive will write to all the affected tenants to clarify whether they are to remain in the programme and, if so, the timescales that will be involved.

Additionally, given the delays in the programme to date, I have agreed that stalled planned maintenance schemes for the properties that had been included in the original stock transfer programme can now proceed. The Housing Executive will also continue to undertake normal response maintenance works where necessary.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he expand on which areas of south Antrim have a proposal to do transfers? What protections are going to be there for current Housing Executive tenants?

Mr Storey: The stock condition survey that is under way will provide a firm basis to enable a strategic decision to be taken regarding what properties are to be included in the revised programme. It is not possible to predict the results of the survey or to comment on the possible outcome of any specific areas at this stage. However, once a revised programme is agreed, the Housing Executive will write to all the affected tenants to clarify whether they are to remain in the programme and, if so, the timescales involved. I am quite happy to give the Member an assurance that this will be done with the agreement and consent of the residents. That is a vital issue. I am well aware of the concerns that have been expressed to me by him and others in regards to concerns that tenants have about elements of the process. I am quite happy to give the assurance that it will not be done in a way that in any way ignores the concerns raised by tenants.

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. Are he and his Department committed to ensuring that social housing largely remains in the public sector?

Mr Storey: Yes, I think I am. Since coming to office, I have discussed this with officials and a number of Members. We will have to have a discussion. While a number of reviews are going on, and the Department, in conjunction with the Housing Executive, has set out a policy direction, I think that there are issues that we need to address about how we deliver for specific areas and needs. I am quite happy to have those discussions with Members, the Committee and the organisations. It is my intention to keep social housing provision in the public sector, but we have to make progress on

how the Housing Executive, in particular, delivers.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister will be aware of the large number of derelict and abandoned buildings that are blights on our landscape. Is he envious of the regime that applies in England, where councils can acquire those properties through compulsory possession orders? Will he give consideration to such a scheme here where you cannot establish the ownership of derelict properties?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. When you look at any jurisdiction, you will see variances in how they apply policy. When you come to the area of housing, you have a variety of approaches. The Member will be aware that there was a proposal to have a regeneration and housing Bill. In that proposal, reference was made to powers that would be given to local councils. Unfortunately, other Members felt that those provisions were a step too far. When I came into office, I expended considerable time trying to address those concerns. As a result of that, we now have a different Bill, which primarily focuses on the regeneration element and does not primarily give consideration to the housing elements. One of those elements would have been around houses in multiple occupancy. That could have led us to a position where we would have looked at particular locations where dereliction is the case.

I am quite happy to consider what the Member said, in light of the ongoing review of the future of housing provision in Northern Ireland. I share the concern that the Member raised: there are locations where you have dereliction and it becomes very difficult to find out who the owner is and who, ultimately, is responsible for addressing that need.

Coownership Housing: West Tyrone

6. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in West Tyrone have benefited from the continued investment in coownership housing since May 2011. (AQO 7076/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. Between May 2011 and 31 October 2014, the last date for which data is available, the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association received 163 applications and has supported the purchase of 77 affordable homes in the West Tyrone constituency area at a total value of £8 million at the time of purchase. A further 17 properties are in the process of being

purchased in the area at a total value of almost £2 million. It is important to remember that the shared equity housing that coownership provides is demand-led and that potential homebuyers approach the association with a property already selected.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his answer. Of course, coownership will suit some, but there are towns and villages in West Tyrone that have not seen social houses built for years, indeed decades. Can I ask the Minister whether he is aware of the waiting list for social housing in the Omagh and Strabane districts and to explain how his Department plans to address this objective need?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member. Obviously, this is an issue. It is not that long ago — in fact, it was just when I took up office — that I made a comment, which I stand by, about the important role that coownership plays in the provision of housing. We have ensured that the financial model that we use has to be revised because I do not believe that we have all the financial tools in place to give us the outcome that we have. It is also important to remember that coownership housing is necessarily demand-led and that potential housebuyers approach the association.

So, while the Member talks about other specific areas, it is important to ensure that, in those areas, those who see the need are raising the concern because the system operates on a demand-led basis and because of the potential of those homebuyers to approach the association with a property already selected. If the Member wants further detail on Strabane, or any other part of his constituency, I am quite happy to furnish him with further information.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. We all, as community representatives, are aware of the need not only for social housing in our areas but for affordable housing. Could the Minister go into a bit more detail on what role coownership and affordable housing have in addressing our high housing demands?

Mr Storey: It plays a very important role. Coownership homes that are offered on a shared equity basis provide an alternative to social housing for people who want to purchase their own homes but who cannot afford to do so without some help or intervention. There has been a high and sustained public demand for the scheme, mostly from first-time buyers who want to grasp the opportunity to take the first step onto the property ladder but at a lower

cost. It also provides an alternative housing solution to those who would otherwise join the social housing waiting list or become part of the private rental market. It is something that I want to continue to encourage. It is something that I think we need to look at as a very good financial model, and it is something that I believe gives first-time buyers, but not exclusively first-time buyers, the opportunity to be in possession of their own home.

Mr Kinahan: The budget for the coownership scheme has previously been given major additional allocations because of the previous Minister's underspending on the social housing development programme. Does the current Minister accept that, as positive and successful as coownership is, it should not be used to provide political cover for managerial failures?

Mr Storey: I do not accept the premise of the question. It is just a typical assault by a party that wants to have the privilege of being in government but not take responsibility for any of the decisions that happen to flow from a five-party mandatory coalition. I know that the Member has difficulty understanding that that is the case, but here is the situation.

Let us remember when the change of policy came. Let us remember that it was not when my colleague was in post that the focus changed in terms of how we deliver housing; it was when Margaret Ritchie and the SDLP were in possession of the Department for Social Development that we saw a change in focus and emphasis.

In terms of the affordability of any of the schemes, they all are under financial pressure. The reason for that is that the envelope or the money that we have to spend to deliver any element in my Department will solely be dependent on how I can ensure that the money that I have to save is found and on the impact that that will have on a variety of schemes. That will be an extremely difficult and challenging place for me to be in, and there is no doubt that it will generate criticism and concerns from many. However, I give this assurance: the importance that I place on the provision of affordable as well as social homes means that it is on my priority list.

3.00 pm

Housing Crisis: North Belfast

7. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Social Development how he intends to address

the housing crisis in North Belfast. (AQO 7077/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise that there is a high demand for social housing across all communities in North Belfast, but I do not consider it to be a housing crisis. In terms of provision of new social homes, my Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have invested heavily in social housing in the area. In fact, over the past five years, almost 1,000 new social homes have been delivered in the North Belfast parliamentary constituency at a cost of £140 million. A further 260 new social homes are under construction, and the social housing development programme contains plans to deliver more than 370 additional homes over the next three years. Through new builds and relets, much has been done to address housing need in the area, and we will continue to do all that we can within the constraints of the serious financial challenges that we face. The Member will appreciate the comments that I made to the Member who asked the previous question: it will be a challenge for us. However, on the basis of what we have done to date, it is clear that a commitment has been given and that delivery has been provided for in relation to the constituency that the Member represents.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's looking at North Belfast afresh. That is important, and I know that the Minister will do that very seriously. In relation to his comments about there not being a crisis, the demand in North Belfast —

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

Mr A Maginness: — suggests that there is, in fact, a crisis. I ask the Minister to look afresh at the figures and look in particular at the demand —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member ask the question, please?

Mr A Maginness: — from single men for housing in North Belfast. That is definitely very, very critical.

Mr Storey: Let us take a moment or two to put the situation in North Belfast in some context. Since coming to office, I have endeavoured to ensure that, irrespective of the location — in this case, it is North Belfast, but it could be any part of Northern Ireland — we do not accept the failure of the Housing Executive or any other agency to deliver services to the community.

That is a challenge for us. It is a challenge for me, as a Minister, and it is something that I take seriously. Let us look at the figures. You cannot look at the figures for North Belfast in isolation, because, if you did, it might suggest that there has been a drop in the number of houses completed in North Belfast. Let us look at the completions over the last number of years. In 2011-12, there were 179 units. In 2012-13, there were 182 units. In 2013-14, there were 124 units. However, in 2014-15 to date, 198 units have been completed in the first eight and a half months, with a further 63 due for completion shortly. This will make a total of 261 completions during this financial year, the largest to date.

There are factors that influence when dwellings are completed, including the size and length of construction, the contract and the time of the year that the construction commenced. Over the last five years, North Belfast has experienced the highest number of completions of any parliamentary constituency. It is also fair to say that there remains a robust social housing building programme in North Belfast, with 229 starts in 2012-13 and 182 in 2013-14. That gives us a sense of it.

The specific needs of individuals are an issue that I am happy to raise with the Housing Executive, and I am happy to raise the category of individuals to which the Member referred.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the fact that the Minister referred to the parliamentary constituency and the Assembly constituency of North Belfast and his commitment to look at the whole constituency. Will he do all he can to ensure that the Housing Executive delivers in all areas of the constituency to meet the need that is there?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member. I thought that I was going to escape from addressing issues in the North Belfast constituency, but I will not ignore the needs of the people in North Belfast or those in East Belfast, South Belfast or West Belfast. We had better not forget the four component parts of the city.

I have to say that it is an issue, and, across the North Belfast constituency, there is a high demand for social housing from all communities. I will give the latest figures that the Housing Executive has made available to me, but I have to say to Members that I find it somewhat difficult to give these figures. I will give you the figures and then say why I find it difficult. The latest figures that the Housing Executive has provided to me show that there are 1,485 Protestants and 1,587 Roman

Catholics on the waiting list in North Belfast. Those figures clearly demonstrate the need for social housing for both communities in North Belfast. We have to move away, if we can, from the arbitrary distribution of homes solely on the basis of a person's religion. However, that is the reality of where we are, and I have to deal with that reality. To ensure that we meet the need across the community, I am committed to that, and that is a message that I have conveyed to the Housing Executive.

Mr Dickson: I have one further question on north Belfast. It is in relation to the type of housing that is regularly allocated, and I have particular concerns, having received representations from those who are housed in inappropriate flats where families are expected to be housed in flats with little or no outdoor play or other facilities. What action will the Minister take to move that issue on as well?

Mr Storey: The Member raises the valid point that it is not just the type of provision that you make but the location that is important. The difficulty is ensuring that we meet demand. It is interesting that I have just made enquiries about the number of times when people who have made an application have refused an application. A large percentage of people have refused the second and third offer, and that makes it difficult to deal on an ongoing basis with the demand and with meeting that need. Space and available recreation provision is always a challenge. That needs to be looked at, not only in conjunction with the council and the Housing Executive but with other providers to ensure that we are not only building the appropriate type of dwelling but giving communities the space that they need. That is a key component of a good and stable community and environment.

Make the Call: Update

8. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the success of the Make the Call campaign. (AQO 7078/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. Since the introduction of the Make the Call advertising campaign in 2011-12, over 36,000 people have been helped with their benefit entitlement, resulting in the generation of £10.8 million of additional income. The 2013-14 campaign led to nearly 12,000 people receiving assistance, which led to over £4.6million in additional income being generated, a 63% increase on the 2012-13 figure. The 2014-15 campaign, consisting of television, press and outdoor advertising, is being completed over

two stages. The first set of adverts was broadcast during June 2014, and the second set commenced in October 2014 and will run until February 2015. The results will be published later.

Make the Call is one of the success stories. I do not believe in premonitions, but I was pleased that, when the Department for Social Development launched the campaign in 2013, my constituency of North Antrim was selected, and I had the opportunity to launch it in Ballymoney. However, had I known then what would happen to me, I might have been a bit more reluctant to use North Antrim as the launch pad for the scheme.

I encourage all Members to ensure that the campaign is highlighted in their constituency offices. In the work that we are doing with food banks, we include in the food that goes out a leaflet that informs people of the importance of the Make the Call campaign and the access that they have to it.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline whether he would support Make the Call campaign roadshows revisiting areas of high deprivation to ensure that the maximum benefit is gained by the most in need?

Mr Storey: Yes. We will continue to do that. Obviously, when we come to the end of this programme, we will have to look at how we continue to roll it out. Given its success and the very positive feedback, I believe that it is of value and worth. I have no difficulty with government offices or Departments being criticised for a lack of ingenuity or forward thinking, but this campaign has brought real benefit to individuals, families and communities. Remember that people are entitled to this money, and we need to continue to encourage that. We will give serious consideration to further roadshows.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Trevor Lunn is not in his place.

Coal Fires: South Down

11. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in social housing in South Down still heat their homes with glass-fronted coal fires. (AQO 7081/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. The Housing Executive has advised that 50 of its properties in South Down still have room heaters: 24 in the area covered by the

Banbridge office; 18 in the area covered by the Downpatrick office; and eight in the area covered by the Newry office. The Housing Executive confirms that all those tenants were offered the option of changing their heating system as part of the heating replacement programme but chose to retain their original system. The Housing Executive will continue to offer those tenants an upgrade. Housing associations advise that they do not have any properties in South Down that are heated with glass-fronted coal fires.

3.15 pm

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

Child Maintenance Service

T1. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development how many children in Northern Ireland have benefited from the work of the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) in the past year. (AQT 1771/11-15)

Mr Storey: This is another example of success. It came about as a result of reorganisation within the Child Maintenance Service. Although we would prefer that we did not need to have such a provision, it is obviously vital for families.

During 2013-14, the Child Maintenance Service collected or rearranged £27.2 million, which supported 22,123 children across Northern Ireland. That was a record amount of money collected, from which a record number of children benefited. We did that by reducing the number of non-paying cases. In March of this year, almost 91% of cases with a current liability were contributing. That was another record high. To give Members some context, the number of cases contributing in the United Kingdom in March stood at 85%. That means that we significantly outperform GB, getting more of our cases paying on time. That is something that we should be considerably pleased about. Last year, we achieved 98% accuracy levels across the work. Again, that outperformed GB, which achieved only 95%. Therefore, CMS increased the quantity and quality of what it does, which has meant more money for more children across Northern Ireland.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response and congratulate him and his predecessor, who happens to be sitting beside me, on the work of the Department in achieving those results. Further to his answer, can he

explain what impact that has had on reducing the outstanding debt balance?

Mr Storey: Reducing the non-paying cases and getting more money flowing has contributed to reducing the amount of child maintenance that is outstanding. Our recently published accounts show that the amount of outstanding child maintenance debt during 2013-14 had fallen by £2.69 million. During the same period, we reduced our non-paying cases by almost 1,000. Therefore, there is a clear link between arrears and the complaint cases.

There is no doubt that today's Child Maintenance Service is a totally different organisation from that which was established some 20 years ago. These results are the culmination of some very hard work by the staff in the service. I pay tribute to them, because it is an exceptionally difficult field of work. It is very challenging for my staff and for those who are involved in the Child Maintenance Service, and I believe that this is something that has been of benefit. However, I sound a note of caution because there can be no complacency. There are undoubtedly many challenges facing communities and families, and we want to be there to ensure that the organisation is there to help and to make a positive contribution to families who are in particular need.

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

Bungalows: New-build Programmes

T3. **Mr Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development, on a subject on which he probed the previous Minister, whether he is in a position to review the regulation or influence that the Housing Executive can bring to bear in ensuring that disabled and older people are not discriminated against across Northern Ireland by the lack of new-build bungalows from housing associations, particularly given the example of a young family with a child who is a wheelchair user who have been waiting eight and a half years since their application for a new build, albeit, at present, only one new-build home in every 100 is a bungalow. (AQT 1773/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question and for the work that he has done on the issue. He is one of the Members who continues to bring to his work a commitment and focus that reflect his personal priorities. He is to be commended for that.

On 31 March 2014, there was a total of 21,781 bungalows in the social housing sector. That equates to almost one fifth of the social housing stock, which means that the majority of need can be met through the current bungalow stock. However, I understand that the Housing Executive is reviewing the bungalow provision in the housing development programme. Even though a restriction has been applied in my Department's housing association guide to ensure that land is maximised to its full potential, it does not mean that bungalows are prohibited. In fact, in Charlemont, just a few weeks ago, I cut the first sod on a new social housing scheme, and one of the homes will be a bespoke wheelchair bungalow. So, needs are beginning to be met. However, I still think that there is further work that we need to do in relation to the issue that the Member raises.

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. In the social mix of new-build programmes, there is not much point in the allocation of 100 homes in my constituency to single parents and the social issues that are created by that. There needs to be a change of focus. Will the Minister be prepared to meet me and others representing disabled and older people to have a discussion around how we can improve those circumstances?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will be more than happy to meet the Member. As the House knows, I have endeavoured to ensure that where those requests have come, I have accepted them, much to the annoyance of my diary secretary and, maybe more importantly, the Minister of home affairs, who is my wife. My diary has been completely chock-a-block over the last few weeks and will continue to be so. However, it is a priority for me to ensure that where a Member raises particular concerns, I am quite happy to meet the Member and those whom he wants to identify. I will also ensure that, before that, we have more information for the Member, particularly around the issue of allocations in his constituency.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 4 has been withdrawn.

DSD: Senior Staff Numbers and Cost

T5. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Social Development how many senior staff at grade 5 and above there are in his Department and how much they cost annually. (AQT 1775/11-15)

Mr McNarry: This is my first opportunity to congratulate the Minister on his appointment, and I do so willingly and trust that he will endeavour to look after my Strangford constituency.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his words of congratulation. I can give him the assurance, as I have given all Members, that I will endeavour to have a listening ear to the issues that were raised by him, whether it is in Strangford or any other part of Northern Ireland.

I do not have the specific figures for the number of staff at grade 5 in my Department, and you would not expect me to have them. However, because of the Budget process, we now have a situation in which, over the next number of weeks, I will have to look seriously at the issue of staff, not only in the programmes that the Department delivers but the complement of staff. The Department for Social Development covers a range of organisations, including the Social Security Agency, the Child Maintenance Service, voluntary and community and the Housing Executive. I think that it equates to almost 26% of the Northern Ireland Civil Service complement. So it is an issue. I will come back to the Member with the specific numbers of staff at grade 5.

Mr McNarry: The Minister may have the answer to my supplementary question, but I am sure that he will come back to me if he does not. What opportunities for sharing non-specialist administrative staff has the Minister sought out with other Departments and agencies?

Mr Storey: The Member raises a point that, just this week, I have asked for a discussion with the Minister for Employment and Learning about. As you will know, when we come to the implementation of welfare reform, I have particular concerns in relation to jobs and benefits offices, where you have Social Security Agency and DEL staff. We have asked the permanent secretaries to meet on this issue, and Minister Farry and I have had a brief discussion about it and intend to meet. That is one example, but there may be others. I am quite happy to look, and will undoubtedly be put in a position over the next number of weeks where we will have to look, at inventive ways of ensuring that we stay within our budget but, equally, that we continue to deliver the service that the public expects us to deliver.

Housing Associations: Performance

T6. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Social Development whether there has been any improvement in housing association performance. (AQT 1776/11-15)

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her question. If she had asked me whether there had been any improvement in the performance of the Housing Executive, I might have taken longer to answer, because it is no secret that, since coming to office, I have had concerns about the capacity of the Housing Executive. However, we have had a number of meetings, and we will continue with those over the next number of weeks.

I am pleased to report that, over the past five years, there has been a significant improvement in the performance of housing associations. For example, only four housing associations have failed the inspection, as opposed to 10 in 2010. I can also advise that, in 2010, 42% of the social housing stock was being managed by associations that had failed the maintenance element of inspections, and that is now down to 3%. That indicates that progress has been made. However, I still believe, as I indicated when I spoke at the housing associations' annual conference, that there is a journey that we have now embarked on and there is still some progress that we need to make.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. I recognise the progress that is being made and welcome it. Will the Minister outline what efforts his Department is making to ease the regulatory burden on housing associations?

Mr Storey: Yes, the regulatory impact and the difficulties that regulation brings have been raised across a number of organisations. Obviously, that falls within the remit of the social housing reform programme, which is a vast programme covering a variety of elements in organisations, tenants and all the component parts. Given the improved performance of housing associations over the past few years, I am keen to consider what changes we can implement to the inspection regime and how we can make that process less intrusive and onerous while still achieving an appropriate level of assurance. That was the assurance that we gave at the conference, and I am working through how we will deliver the promise that we made that would make it less arduous for housing associations to deliver on their programmes.

Homelessness: Social Housing

T7. Mr Ó Muilleoir asked the Minister for Social Development how he will get the appropriate resources to address the grave and urgent need for social housing, given that, although he avoided using the word "crisis" earlier, it remains the case that just over 4,600 presented as homeless during the last quarter from April to June, which was a slight increase. (AQT 1777/11-15)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. This is my first time not only addressing him but addressing Question Time. It is also appropriate to convey the thanks of the NI Federation of Housing Associations for his emphasis on social housing and homelessness when I addressed them after he addressed them last month.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member and welcome him to the Chamber to ask questions today. I said some weeks ago that there were two things that we needed to address in homelessness and housing provision generally. The first is to change the language that we use; the second is to change the financial structure. In the Housing Executive, a definition is given to homeless, and I have repeatedly asked the Housing Executive to tell us how many people are really homeless — how many people in Northern Ireland tonight will not have a home. It is very hard for it to give us a definite figure. I have seen figures of 22 or 23. However, housing need is a completely different issue. I have had discussions with the Simon Community. In fact, last week, I met representatives from the Simon Community to discuss a number of those issues, including how they make an application, how they are assessed, what really is their need and, of course, the vexed question of location.

We sometimes come to dealing with very difficult situations that families face, and a lot of the figures are based on break ups of a family and the family unit, and particular domestic situations. We need to ensure that the appropriate location is being offered to people who present themselves as homeless and that we are not allowing the system to be abused in such a way that people get into the system because they have been inventive. I am committed to ensuring that we address the need, but it will take a collective approach —

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister's time is up.

Mr Storey: — between the Executive, my Department and the community and voluntary organisations to ensure that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister's time is up.

Mr Storey: — we are adequately addressing the needs of the constituency that he refers to.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The first question on the list has been withdrawn.

Questions for Written Answer: Irish

2. Mr Ó Muilleoir asked the Assembly Commission for an update on whether it intends to revisit its decision to prevent members of the Commission answering tabled written questions to the Commission in both Irish and English. (AQO 7087/11-15)

Mr Weir: I am suitably relieved that the questioner is not following on with the supplementary on homelessness given that he did not have his opportunity for a supplementary in the last section.

I appreciate that the Member is relatively new to the Assembly, so I will give some background. The current policy was adopted on 7 May 2013. It was not adopted unanimously; there are different views. Prior and subsequent to that, the issue has been raised on a number of occasions in correspondence and directly at the Commission meeting. An equality screening exercise on the policy is being conducted, and it is anticipated that that will hopefully be completed for the next Commission meeting, which is due at the end of November. It is likely to be discussed at that.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Commission for that response. Tá súil agam go dtagann sé chuig freagra gasta ar an cheist seo. I hope that it reaches a speedy conclusion. I am considering sending a nice Irish language Christmas card so that we get a nice answer in Irish. It certainly seems to me, if I may ask —

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir: As part of the screening, what has been the result of the equality impact assessment?

Mr Weir: The screening is due to come back to us within the next week. So, I am not in a position to prejudge that. I am sure that everyone will want to see speedy conclusions. Whether that is necessarily the decision that I or others would welcome is something that we will have to simply wait and see. I am sure that the Member will be very busy with Christmas cards in the days to come.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar an téama chéanna, tá sé tamall de bhlianta ó shin anois ó bhí comhairliúchán ag an Choimisiún maidir le polasaí Gaeilge ginearálta don Tionól. Is cuimhin liom gur chuir mé aighneacht isteach ar an chomhairliúchán, ach níor tháinig polasaí ar bith as sin ó shin i leith. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí de bhall an Choimisiúin cá huair a thig linn a bheith ag brath le polasaí cuimsitheach Gaeilge don Tionól. It is some years since the Commission conducted a survey on the Irish language policy for the Assembly in general. I remember making a submission to that exercise. As of this point —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can the Member please come to his question?

Mr D Bradley: — nothing has come out of that, and that is almost five years ago. When can we expect to see a comprehensive policy for Irish in the Assembly?

Mr Weir: I cannot really answer from five years ago because I was not in post at that stage. I think that the Assembly Commission held a meeting in 2013 where a draft language policy was under consideration. There is no agreement at the Commission on an agreed Irish language policy. It is an area where there is a difference of opinion in the Commission and, as such, I am not in a position to give the Member a particular date by which there could be any level of agreement on that. I can simply indicate to the Member that there is no agreement in the Commission on a policy at the moment.

Roof Project: Update

3. **Mr Allister** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the cost and timescale of the Parliament Buildings roof project. (AQO 7088/11-15)

7. **Mr Lynch** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Parliament Buildings roof project. (AQO 7092/11-15)

Mr Ramsey: I propose to take questions 3 and 7 together. I thank both Members for their questions.

The Assembly Commission appointed Tracey Brothers to undertake the roof project in April, and work on site started in late May, with a projected contract period of 52 weeks. Although the contractor has fallen slightly behind on some areas of the work, he is still reporting that the works remain on target for completion by the end of May 2015. The estimated construction cost, taking account of the working restrictions placed on the contractor — they are clearly obvious for Members on Mondays and Tuesdays in particular — was £5.4 million, and the approved contract sum was £5 million.

The project team has been issuing regular postmasters to report on progress in an effort to keep all building users, members of staff and political parties up to date on progress. The primary objective of the project is to provide a waterproof solution to ongoing problems, but the works also include the refurbishment and replacement of all roof-mounted building services installations and incorporates environmental improvements, including the installation of photovoltaic panels.

Work to date has included the removal of the majority of redundant roofing materials, and the roof has been re-covered with the proprietary waterproofing product. There have been some unfortunate incidents whereby inadequate temporary waterproofing measures led to further water ingress during the recent heavy rainfall. With work of this nature, some of that was inevitable. While the restrictions placed on the contractor have limited the impact on Assembly business, the Commission is very conscious of the noise and disruption that building users have had to tolerate and endure, and is very grateful to all members of staff and MLAs for their patience and tolerance. A number of staff had to be temporarily decanted, and we also thank them for their cooperation.

Mr Allister: Should I understand the member's answer to indicate that, whereas the original contract price was £5 million, it already appears to be almost 10% over budget? What assurance is there that there will not be a further drift in that direction? In respect of the waterproofing —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I think that the Member has asked a question.

Mr Allister: Is it a fact that, when part of the roof was supposedly finished —

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

Mr Allister: — it was still leaking?

Mr Ramsey: On the latter point, which I do not mind responding to, there were some issues during the work, and there was further rain penetration. Given the nature of the job, one would expect that during a major construction. We have identified the issues and are dealing with them, and we hope that they will not occur again.

The overall estimated cost for the project was £5.4 million, and the tender document was for £5 million, so we are under target at this stage and hope to keep that going, depending, obviously, on circumstances as we progress with the contract. If there is any unforeseen work, the Assembly Commission will have to look at that, but, at the minute, we are under the estimated price of the tender by almost £500,000.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the member for answering the questions. He has answered one part of a question that I was going to ask about the budget. I know that the work is progressing, because I know most of the contractors on the roof. Is the project coming in on time, or will it be delayed?

Mr Ramsey: There was a delay for a number of reasons, but we expect the roof project to be on schedule and concluded by May next year. It takes a lot of effort to do that, given that you are trying to manage parliamentary business here. You are trying to manage a series of Committee meetings and to relocate and decant quite a high volume of staff during the period. We can only be grateful for their cooperation, support and help.

Mr Clarke: Following on from one of the first questions, how many companies tendered for the original contract?

Mr Ramsey: I do not have that information with me, but I think that there were quite a few. A contractor was approved under the procurement process, and that is the contractor who we have in place. I will provide the

Member with further information on the number of people who put in a tender for the roof project.

Mr Kinahan: As one of those who enjoyed the clink, clink of water into buckets in my office on Monday and Tuesday, I want to know whether we have got to a point where that is the end of the damage that is going to be done or whether it is likely to continue if we have further bad weather.

Mr Ramsey: I certainly apologise to the Member. I know that a number of Members have been inconvenienced and disrupted as a result of the roof project. That is something that the contractor, along with our staff, is very keen to minimise. However, I am not going to dare suggest that it will not happen again. Every effort is being made to minimise any disruption, including any further rain penetration to offices in the Building.

Mr Eastwood: The Member spoke about environmental improvements. What impact will they have on the Building's carbon footprint?

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Member for his question. In preparation for the work, we examined a number of areas at an officer and Commission level. The combination of works undertaken will improve our carbon footprint by almost 30%, which is significant. That is a good exercise, given the extent of the project and the restrictions placed on the contractor to try to improve things. I think that we have had a good, safe landing with that 30% reduction in our carbon footprint.

Parliament Buildings: PSNI Costs

4. **Ms Boyle** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the cost of the PSNI presence in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 7089/11-15)

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Member for her question. A service-level agreement exists between the Assembly Commission and the PSNI on the provision of policing in Parliament Buildings. The PSNI provides a small team of police officers, known as the Northern Ireland Assembly police unit, and the PSNI applies charges on a monthly basis at national rates. Those charges are met from within the budget of the Assembly's facilities directorate.

Following recent discussions between the Assembly and senior PSNI officers, the latter provided a number of options for minimising the cost to the Assembly Commission. One agreed

option came forward. The change, which took effect on Monday 3 November, should result in a significant reduction in overall policing charges from around £523,000 to £364,000 per year.

To date, policing arrangements at Parliament Buildings have worked very well, and it is envisaged that the change can be brought about without any loss in the overall service provided by the police, either in its efficiency or effectiveness. The management team and the Commission remain confident that the Assembly's policing needs will continue to be fully met.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. Can the Assembly Commission detail the cost of the police presence in the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly?

Mr Ramsey: Those questions came up at the Assembly Commission. I do not have the exact pricing, but in the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament, the costs are based on national pricing, which I referred to in answer to the original question. Those are proportionate to the level of policing here. The level of policing in Westminster is considerably higher than it is here, and it is also considerably higher in Wales and Scotland. However, at the same time, we are confident that we can meet the challenges, considering where we have come from. In late 2006, there was an incident here with Michael Stone that forced us to change course to ensure that those using the Building, whether that be members of staff or MLAs, were protected. So, we made that investment.

3.45 pm

The cost of policing in the Oireachtas is not met by the Commission there, but in the Assemblies of Wales and Scotland, and the Parliament of Westminster, the cost is paid by the appropriate Commission for each House.

Mr Spratt: I thank Mr Ramsey for his answer and I congratulate the PSNI on the good job it does in protecting the Assembly. Will the Commission look at this issue very soon? The cost is over £500,000 per year and is really a double dunt on the public purse. The Justice Department already provides the money for the officers to the Chief Constable through the public purse, and here it is being charged again. Effectively, what is that money being used for in the Police Service? That is a very important question, because I do not think that

the public purse should be hit twice with those charges.

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Member for his comments and I agree with him about the excellent service that the police officers give us all in ensuring that we are protected. We constantly keep all policing here under review, depending on circumstances. At the present, we are reasonably content. However, I can assure the Member that the recent review, which was completed within the last few weeks, has made significant savings of £160,000 for the Assembly Commission. That is no mean task, given that we are receiving the same level of staffing in Parliament Buildings.

It is also a matter that Member could raise, as he is a member of the Policing Board, and there may be other members of the Policing Board present.

However, I take his point on board and, as a result of the matter being tabled, I will check whether there is double pricing or double charging that I am unaware of. I presume that the price that the Assembly Commission is paying, over £360,000, is the total cost of having the police here.

Assembly Secretariat: Gender Equality

5. Ms McCorley asked the Assembly Commission to outline its plans in relation to gender equality within the secretariat. (AQO 7090/11-15)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. In June 2013, at the request of the chief executive, a group of senior staff — comprising both genders — met to discuss how the secretariat might examine the existence of any barriers, whether perceived or real, to gender in the Northern Ireland Assembly secretariat and consider what actions might be necessary. Following that meeting, the directors were asked to nominate senior members of staff to form a gender action plan steering group.

In late 2013, the steering group developed a questionnaire, in consultation with the Equality Commission and the Assembly's internal communications group. The questionnaire was circulated to secretariat staff in February 2014 and 192 responses were received. The steering group examined the questionnaire's themes and comments against current policies, along with the organisation's decision-making structures. Details of the questionnaire, along with recommendations and relevant research and data, have now been included in the

group's final report. That report will be made available after the Assembly Commission has considered it at its next meeting on 26 November.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a fhreagraí. I thank the Member for that answer. An dtig liom fiafraí den Chomhalta an mbeidh an plean gnímh bunaithe ar spriocanna agus cá huair a bheidh an plean curtha i gcrích? Will the action plan be target-based, and when will it be completed?

Mr Weir: The report makes a considerable number of recommendations. For instance, it details, at a quick count, 10 separate and wide-ranging areas for action. Some of those will have differential impacts as part of that. The report recommends that a working group be established to take forward the actions identified in a range of areas such as: affecting the decision-making structures, dignity at work, staff-Member protocols, childcare schemes and caring responsibilities, just to name a few. Once the actions have been identified, the working group will develop and consult on a gender action plan.

It is anticipated that the working group will have developed a gender action plan by April and will then consult staff in May/June 2015, with a final report to be tabled at the Assembly Commission in September 2015.

Assembly Commission: Savings and Assembly Budget 2015-16

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Assembly Commission if it plans to deliver additional savings in 2015/16. (AQO 7091/11-15)

11. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Assembly Commission for its assessment of the proposed outcome for the impact of the draft Budget 2015-16 on the Assembly's budget. (AQO 7096/11-15)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ceisteanna 6 agus 11 a fhreagair le chéile. Gabhaim buíochas le Comhaltaí as a gceisteanna.

Choinnigh Coimisiún an Tionóil leis ag soláthar réimse iomlán seirbhísí don Tionól agus dá Chomhaltaí, ainneoin laghdú ina bhuiséad airgid de 8.9%; sin é £4.32 milliún thar na ceithre bliana in athbhreithniú caiteachais 2010. Chruthaigh an gearradh seo dúshlán mhóra,

ach d'éirigh leis an gCoimisiún brúnna boilscitheacha a iompar, agus d'éirigh leis freisin riar ar éileamh ó Chomhaltaí ar sheirbhísí, éileamh atá ag síor-fás, ainneoin gur laghdaíodh an buiséad.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I propose to answer questions 6 and 11 together, and I thank the Members for their questions.

The Assembly Commission has continued to deliver a complete range of services to the Assembly and its Members despite a reduction in its cash budget of 8.9%, equating to £4.32 million over the four years of the 2010-14 spending review period. The cut has already presented major challenges. However, the Commission has managed to absorb inflationary pressures and meet an increasing demand for services from Members within this reduced budget allocation. I am sure that all the Members here will applaud the Assembly's workers for the amount of work that they do.

The draft Budget for 2015-16 proposes that the departmental expenditure limit resource allocation for the Assembly Commission remain unchanged from its 2014-15 level. While this allocation is flatlined in cash terms, it represents a cut in real terms of almost £800,000 for next year. That means that, in the five years from 2010-11, there has been a 19% real-terms cut. I am sure that the Member will agree with me that that is a significant amount of money.

The Commission will continue to meet its statutory requirements to provide the Assembly with the property, staff and services that it requires. Members will know that some £15.9 million of the Commission's budget relates to costs that are established by the Independent Financial Review Panel and cannot be amended, upwards or downwards, by the Commission.

The Commission will seek to meet upward inflationary pressures for 2015-16. This is —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Commission member's time is up.

Mr Elliott: The Member said that there is no financial reduction in the budget for 2015-16 but that there is one in real terms. Where will the Commission find that reduction? Can she point to any specific areas?

Ms Ruane: I absolutely agree with the Member that there has been no cash reduction but a significant reduction in real terms. Compared with Departments, the Assembly Commission is

relatively small, and it is hit by any cut in money. How will the priority services be identified? The Assembly Commission will continue to work closely with Members and parties to ensure that its corporate priorities are aligned, first, to its statutory provisions, and that will be done in the context of budget constraints. The Commission will carry out a full review of the range of services currently provided and their associated costs, and it will ensure that the resources are allocated to functions and activities essential to the running of an institution such as the Assembly.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Member for her answer. I am aware that the Commission previously engaged in a business efficiency programme that looked at each area across the secretariat and identified a series of measures to help to meet budgetary obligations. Will she outline in more detail the measures adopted?

Ms Ruane: We are still discussing some of the outcomes of the business efficiency review. The Commission is a corporate body, and I will happily send the detailed information required as appropriate.

Mr Clarke: I welcome the Member's answer, as I do the answers to both supplementary questions, about the Commission's desire to drive down costs. However, is there not a conflict, given the answer to the first question, about translating some of this into Irish, which will be an additional cost to the Commission and, as such, is a waste of money?

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gComhalta as an gceist sin. I thank the Member for that question. He will know that I was one of the people who believed that they were being discriminated against regarding questions for written answer. I look forward to the equality screening and the results of that. I do not believe that Budget allocations, or lack thereof, should be used in a manner that can potentially discriminate.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Education Service provide a good and value-for-money outreach service?

Ms Ruane: Arís gabhaim buíochas leis an gComhalta as an gceist sin, nó ceist is antábhachtach í. I thank the Member for that question. It is a very important one. I think that I speak for all Assembly Commission members when I say that I support the Information and Outreach Directorate's Education Service. I believe that it does a tremendous job,

especially as this institution is relatively new, and it is important that members of the public, whether schoolchildren, active citizens or international visitors, wherever they come from, see that we have a good, strong programme here. I put on record my commendation to the staff who work on that programme, because I think that we all agree that they do a very good job.

Speaker: Impact of Vacancy

8. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Assembly Commission whether not having a Speaker in place is impacting on its duties and responsibilities. (AQO 7093/11-15)

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that he will appreciate that not having a Speaker in place has been a matter of concern for the Commission. The vacancy has led to some disconnect between the Speaker's procedural, corporate and representational roles. Providing guidance and support to officials between Commission meetings is more difficult than when there was a permanent Chair of the Commission. However, just as the Deputy Speakers have agreed arrangements to ensure that disruption to the business of the House is minimised, the Commission, too, has put measures in place to maintain the operation of the corporate body in those circumstances.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his answer. Does he agree that the House not having a Speaker impacts negatively on the Commission's ability to carry out its work?

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Member for asking the question. To ensure continuity during this period, the Commission agreed on the 17 September 2014 that meetings that occur in the absence of a Speaker would be chaired by a temporary Chairperson from within the Commission membership on a rotational basis, as far as is reasonably practical, in the order of party strength. The temporary Chair for each meeting will be involved in the preparations and follow-up actions from the meeting that he or she is chairing. It was also agreed that the Clerk/Chief Executive would keep all Members briefed on any significant emerging issues and seek informal advice via email or by convening short, additional briefings of the Commission.

The Commission will continue to keep the matter under close review and looks forward to the appointment of a new Speaker.

Mr A Maginness: Could a Deputy Speaker assume the role of Chairperson of the Commission in the absence of an elected Speaker?

I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments as we change the staff at the Table.

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

Mr Gardiner: That has not been the case. At the moment, as there is no Speaker a member of the Commission will preside.

Private Members' Bills: Resources

9. **Mr Milne** asked the Assembly Commission what consideration it has given to providing additional resources to allow Members to bring forward private Members' Bills. (AQO 7094/11-15)

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission has not given specific consideration to providing additional resources to allow Members to bring forward private Members' Bills. Additional temporary resource has been allocated to provide support for the development of the Committee Bill being promoted by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to reform and update the role and powers of the Assembly Ombudsman.

However, the Assembly Commission seeks to ensure that adequate resources are available to support the work of the Assembly, including Members' Bills. The Commission's commitment is evidenced by the significant resources currently devoted to supporting the development of increasing numbers of Members' Bills proposals and providing professional drafting services by way of an external contract. The Member will appreciate the difficulty of obtaining any further resources for private Member's Bills in the current financial climate.

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends Question Time for today.

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not in my place to ask my question during questions to the Minister for Social Development. I apologise to the House and to the Minister. I am glad that he is back in the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I thank the Member for his comments.

Executive Committee Business

Pensions Bill: Second Stage

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA Bill 42/11-16] be agreed.

The Bill follows on from the Pensions Act 2014, recently enacted by the Westminster Parliament. The Bill introduces a new state pension system from April 2016, as well as a number of changes to private pension provision and bereavement benefits. The aim of the Bill is to put in place a pension system that not only reflects the reality of our society now but ensures the sustainability of state pension provision for years to come. To help the House understand what the Bill aims to achieve, I will endeavour to outline its main provisions.

The initial provisions in the Bill relate to the introduction of a new state pension for future pensioners. Considerable complexity has built up in the state pension system over time. At the core of the Bill, therefore, is the provision for a new state pension that will simplify the system and provide a firm foundation for pension saving. The current two-tiered system of the basic state pension and the additional state pension will be replaced with a simpler, single-tier state pension for all those who reach state pension age on or after 6 April 2016.

The full rate of the new state pension will be set above the pension credit minimum guarantee level, currently £148.35, which means that fewer people will have to rely on means-tested benefits for their needs. The full-rate new state pension will therefore be no less than £148.40 a week. However, the actual amount will be set in autumn 2015. There will be a minimum qualifying period for entitlement to the new state pension. This will be set out in regulations and will be not more than 10 years.

Integral to the reforms is the closure of the additional state pension for people reaching state pension age on or after 6 April 2016. Contracting out of the additional state pension will therefore come to an end in April 2016, and all employees will pay the same rate of National Insurance and become entitled to the state pension in the same way.

Transitional arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the contributions that people have

made in the current system will be recognised in the state provision. If someone has earned a higher pension, the excess will be payable over and above the new state pension.

As part of the simplification of the system, entitlement will be based on an individual's own National Insurance record. The current provisions that allow a spouse or civil partner to boost their state pension on the basis of the record of their spouse or civil partner or ex-spouse or ex-civil partner will end. Those provisions, introduced in the 1940s, no longer reflect today's society, in which the vast majority of men and women receive a full basic state pension in their own right.

Furthermore, the introduction of the new state pension will reduce the inequalities faced by low earners, in particular women and carers who are unable to accrue large sums of additional state pension under the current system. It will also benefit the self-employed, who will be treated in the same way as employees for pension purposes.

Part 2 makes provision for increasing additional state pension under the current scheme. The Pensions Act 2014 introduced a new class of voluntary National Insurance contributions, class 3A. The relevant provisions in the Act extend to Northern Ireland, as National Insurance contributions are an excepted matter. The state pension top-up scheme would allow people who reach or are due to reach state pension age before 6 April 2016 to boost their retirement income by gaining extra additional state pension by making class 3A contributions. As the state pension is a devolved matter, the Bill contains provision for the additional state pension entitlement that will arise as a result of paying class 3A contributions. The Government have advised that the facility to pay class 3A contributions will be available from October 2015 until April 2017. In reality, people in Northern Ireland will not be able to avail themselves of the scheme until the Bill has been enacted by the Assembly. It is important that we move ahead with the Bill to ensure that people here can take advantage of the scheme if they wish to do so.

Part 3 provides for accelerating the increase in state pension age to 67. Despite previous increases in the state pension age and a programme for further increases, the Government are concerned that life expectancy is increasing faster than projected. Under the current law, state pension age is due to increase to 67 between 2034 and 2036 and to 68 between 2044 and 2046. However, the existing timetable for increasing the state

pension age to 67 was determined using 2004-based projections by the Office for National Statistics. The 2010-based projections have since revised the cohort life expectancy for those reaching the age of 66 in 2027 upwards by 1.5 years for men and 1.6 years for women. The Pensions Bill implements a revised timetable for bringing forward the increase to 67 by eight years to between 2026 and 2028. No one will experience a rise in state pension age of more than one year compared with the original timetable that was set by the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008.

I turn now to Part 4, which provides for the abolition of the assessed income period in pension credit. The assessed income period was introduced as part of pension credit in 2003. It was a new approach to case maintenance for claimants aged 65 and over. That was based on the assumption that pensioners were more likely to have relatively stable incomes with fewer changes in their circumstances, and so a lighter-touch maintenance and review regime was deemed to be appropriate. However, it has proved more complex than originally anticipated. It has allowed inaccuracies to build up in the system. As claimants with an assessed income period do not need to inform the Department if they experience changes in their capital or the make-up of their retirement income, an increase can legitimately be ignored until the end of the period. In future, any change in circumstances should be reported when it occurs, and a review of the benefit award will be conducted at that point. That will ensure that people get the benefit they need when they need it. Older claimants will be protected through the continuation of the existing indefinite assessed income period for those aged over 75.

I will move on from state pensions. The Bill contains measures to replace the current bereavement benefits with a new bereavement support payment. Bereavement benefits form an important part of the state safety net. However, the current system is based on a complicated system of payments and contributions to determine eligibility. A single bereavement payment with a simplified contribution condition should reduce complexity in the system. The new benefit will focus support on the period immediately after bereavement and will consist of a lump sum with instalments over 12 months. Whilst the precise amount will be determined nearer to introduction, indicative values are in the region of a £5,000 lump sum and £400 a month for 12 months for those with dependent children. Those without children will receive a £2,500 lump sum and £150 a month for 12 months.

Bereavement support will do a number of things. First, it will provide additional upfront help in the year after bereavement, when it is needed most. Secondly, it will be available to childless people under the age of 45 who would not have been entitled to bereavement allowance or widowed parent's allowance. Thirdly, it will be disregarded from capital and income calculations for entitlement to other benefits. Longer-term support will be provided through other benefits as appropriate. The bereavement support payment will not be payable to anyone over pension age. If a person is entitled when reaching pension age, entitlement will cease. Current beneficiaries will retain their rights under the existing scheme. That is an important point to underline.

Finally, the Bill contains a number of private pensions measures. Some of the provisions are designed to build on earlier reforms, such as the introduction of automatic enrolment, and to encourage private pension saving, while others are purely technical in nature. Under the current system, every time someone moves to a new job, there is the potential for them to leave behind a small pension pot that they may lose track of over the years. However, knowing the Members of the House, I suspect that some have kept a very close eye on those pension pots. The Bill, therefore, contains powers to introduce a pot-follows-member system of automatic transfers of small pension pots. That will help people to keep track of their pension savings and ensure that they reap the intended benefits of automatic enrolment.

The Bill extends powers to set minimum quality requirements for workplace pension schemes and limit or prohibit charges to ensure that such schemes are well governed and administered.

In addition, the Bill contains a number of measures to clarify and strengthen existing private pensions legislation, including a power to prohibit the offering of incentives to transfer pension rights. The Bill gives the Pensions Regulator a new objective to minimise the impact on the sustainable growth of an employer when regulating defined benefit pension scheme funding. It also makes changes to the calculation of the pension protection fund's compensation cap to reflect long service.

4.15 pm

In conclusion, the Bill introduces significant reforms to both state and private pensions. The central issue is about ensuring the financial stability of the state pension system for the

future. Expenditure on state retirement pension in Northern Ireland in 2012-13 was more than £1.9 billion, which equates to just under £37 million a week. I accept that some parts of the Bill, such as the accelerated timetable for increasing state pension age, may not be universally popular. I would be the first to say that, in an ideal world, we would not want to increase state pension age. Equally, however, I think that there is a consensus that pensions must be sustainable and fair across the generations. We cannot leave a legacy of unsustainable pension costs to be picked up by the current younger generation. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I suppose that, at the outset, I should declare a vested interest in that my pension is not that far away, but we will move on. I thank the Minister for his remarks about the Bill.

The importance of pensions cannot be underplayed. Everybody hopes for a healthy retirement and a good and fair pension to ensure the security that they need to enjoy that time of life. The Westminster Bill reforming pensions came into operation in May 2014. The Committee received a briefing on that Bill in June 2013. The Department also briefed the Committee on the equality impact assessment for the Bill, which gave the Committee an opportunity for a question-and-answer session about the projected impacts of the Bill prior to its introduction.

As Minister Storey outlined, the Bill consists of seven Parts. He touched on each Part in some detail, and I do not intend to repeat what he said. Rather, I note that the detailed consideration of the Bill will take place in Committee over the coming weeks, and the Committee will report back to the Assembly in due course. Departmental officials gave a pre-introduction briefing on the Bill to the Committee just a couple of weeks ago, during which the Bill was described by officials as something of a mixed bag. That is an apt description, as it proposes changes to the state pension, private pensions and bereavement benefits.

I will comment on some but not all of the Parts to which the Minister referred. Part 1 raises some of the key issues. The headline issue is that a single-tier pension will replace the current two-tier scheme that consists of the basic state pension and the second state pension. On the surface, this appears to be an attractive proposition. The Committee welcomes

proposals that will reduce the complexity of pensions and provide people with certainty about their pension income on reaching state pension age.

As a result of these changes, there will be winners and losers, and others will fall somewhere in between. As the Minister mentioned, the Committee heard, for example, that the state pension will be £148.40, contingent on meeting the full qualifying criteria. That is more than the current rate, but the number of qualifying years for a full pension will increase from 30 to 35 years. I believe that the departmental briefing stated that any major changes to policy in the current fiscal environment will involve trade-offs; this is an example of such a trade-off.

Young people will also be long-term losers. The TUC calculated that losses increase over time. It has estimated that, the longer the period of service after 2016, the greater the shortfall against the current system. Even lower earners are likely to receive significantly less if they retire after 2037. A person aged 49 years on £26,000 a year, for example, would be £29 a week worse off, while people in their mid-30s would be £40 a week worse off.

It might be argued, as is the intention of the Bill, that uncertainty about state pension entitlement would encourage people to take decisions about private savings towards provision for retirement at an earlier stage in their lives. It is undoubtedly important that everyone takes responsibility and plans financially as best they can for their retirement. It may be the case that knowing that you will have less of a pension acts as an incentive to do so. However, to some Committee members, that sounded like, "Expect to work for longer and to get less for your contributions."

There is also concern about people in low-paid jobs who cannot save much for their retirement, with the possibility that, in the long run, the Bill will simply increase the number of pensioners in poverty.

Contracting out also raises a concern that the Committee will further explore with the Department. People who are in private sector final-salary schemes that are contracted out will get more of a state pension but will pay more National Insurance — they will pay an increase of 1.4% — as will their employers. That is a swings-and-roundabouts scenario. The Bill will allow employers to recoup the loss of their rebated National Insurance contributions, which is currently 3.4%, by changing scheme rules or increasing member contributions. The

Committee will clarify those powers with the Department to ensure that there is an equitable balance between employers and employees in sharing the burden of those associated negative impacts.

Members will note that the Bill will increase the minimum qualifying period for receipt of a state pension to 10 years. The Committee will seek to better ascertain the potential impact of that in the North and the number people that it is likely to affect. However, it is likely that those who are close to retirement age will be the most seriously affected, as they will have less time to make alternative provision.

We need to ensure that there are transitional arrangements in place to address that issue and that an effective communication strategy is in place to ensure that the relevant groups are made aware of issues they might face and steps they might take to minimise any adverse impact.

A person has a right to their spouse's or civil partner's pension based on the National Insurance contributions of that spouse or civil partner. The Bill intends to remove that right for a person who reaches state pension age under the new scheme. I am sure that the Committee will wish to consider the issue in more detail and to reflect on whether it agrees with the Department that the current provisions no longer reflect today's society, given that most individuals will qualify for a full state pension on their own National Insurance record.

Part 3 of the Bill details the arrangements for accelerating the timetable for phasing in the increase to the state pension age. To be clear, the increase in state pension age to 67 will be phased in earlier than previously anticipated. It will happen between 2026 and 2028 instead of between 2034 and 2036. Again, people's ability to plan for retirement is the issue.

It is also clear that anyone who reaches the state pension age before 5 April 2016 will be excluded from the new rules with the possibility that some, although not many, will be better off under the new scheme. The Committee will discuss with the Department the options that are open to those people, including the purchase of extra years to maximise their state pension.

Part 5 of the Bill will introduce a new bereavement support payment to replace existing bereavement benefits. The rationale for that change is to simplify the current arrangements, which comprise three different payments. The Department has advised the

Committee that the aim is not to save money but to change how it is dispensed. That means that it will be paid upfront rather than over a long period.

The Committee has been given only indicative sums, with a commitment to provide the actual values and details of instalments in subsequent regulations. However, I think that the Committee will be eager to know what those are sooner rather than later.

It would be unfair of me to not mention the winners of the proposed reforms. The self-employed will benefit, and the Committee welcomes that. They will get the full state pension as long as they have accrued the 35 qualifying years. Lower earners and carers will also benefit from the measures in the Bill. However, in the Committee Stage, the Committee will have to weigh up the pros and cons of the Bill in discussion with the Department and stakeholders.

The Committee has begun its engagement process on the Bill with the Department. However, pensions are complex, and the Bill is highly technical, and as such, it will require detailed consideration. The Committee will be taking its time to give the Bill the consideration that something of that importance warrants. We will be engaging with stakeholders to get a broader and better sense of the anticipated impacts of the Bill and will discuss those with the Department.

The Committee is also committed to working with the Department to ensure that the eventual impacts of the outworkings of the legislation are as positive as they can be, minimising any outworkings that could have a negative impact.

People may be living longer, but that does not automatically mean that they are healthier. Everybody is entitled to feel secure in their retirement and confident that they will have the financial resources that they need. It is clear, however, that the Westminster Government's aim is to prevent poverty in retirement, not to provide a replacement income for those who earn enough to provide for their own retirement.

As I noted, we must recognise that there will inevitably be winners and losers as a result of this legislation. It is young people who will perhaps most noticeably lose out as the retirement age increases and they find that they have to save more towards their retirement.

This might be bundled up as incentivised saving, and, of course, we can all acknowledge the benefits of encouraging prudent saving.

However, we cannot ignore the challenges and difficulties that this will also inevitably present, particularly at a time when people are still struggling to find employment in the first place, and when the ability to amass personal savings cannot necessarily be relied on. The importance of pensions for people's peace of mind cannot be overstated. The Committee looks forward to scrutinising the Bill in more detail over the coming months and will embark on this scrutiny process with this thought in mind to ensure that the impact of the new Bill on real people's pensions is as positive as it can be.

I will now make a couple of remarks as an MLA. A report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies on the GB Bill estimated that most people would have to live to over 100 to be better off overall under the new system. Some of us may reach that milestone, but I am not sure how many of us will do so. The only significant exceptions to that are the long-term self-employed and people who start to receive credits to the basic state pension but not the second state pension. That is under universal credit, which, of course, has not been introduced and may well not be.

The other issue in relation to the new scheme was about how it is likely to be indexed. The Department, when asked about that, did not really seem to have an answer. So, there are many questions. A lot of the political thought behind this is to encourage people to save, which is fine if you have an income that allows you to do so, but not for the majority of people and the majority of pensioners. Here in the North and in Britain, we have the meanest state pension in the developed world, so I think that we need to bear that in mind as well. While the Government, a couple of years ago, were talking about £185 being a minimum amount of pension, they are now talking about approximately £148. Obviously, that has not taken into account inflation and all those other issues. So, I think that this is something that the Committee needs to address seriously. Obviously, we will do that as we scrutinise this Bill.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill. The Deputy Chair is absolutely right when he talks about declarations of interest. I think that we all have a declaration of interest here. Sadly, I am now looking at putting my pension age up to 68, so I dread to think what it will be by the time that date arrives. If only we all had the Deputy Chair's genetics, we might all live to that older age, as he knows from his own family.

We know that we have to make changes to our pensions scheme in line with the changing demographic make-up of our society. When the pensions scheme was first introduced, there was an underlying assumption about life expectancy, and, of course, gender-specific roles in our society. That resulted in many women receiving a much lower pension than others. These assumptions are no longer experienced by our society and, therefore, to make our system fit for purpose, it is important that we make the necessary changes. In England, this change has already occurred, as the Minister said, with the Pensions Act 2014 receiving Royal Assent in May this year. Northern Ireland needs to bring this Bill into being to be, amongst other reasons, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

From April 2016, the proposed new state pension will replace our existing pensions scheme as we know, and I am pleased to say that the new pension rate will be set above the basic level of means-tested support, which is known as the pension credit standard. The aim of the changes is to simplify the pensions system and make it more user-friendly. We are already aware that a high number of older people in our community miss out on payments that they may well be entitled to either because they do not know about their entitlement or because they are put off accessing the money because of the complex system of application and the effect on other forms of income. The new scheme will, hopefully, empower people to make positive choices for their own future, and I believe that this is a positive move for our society and will encourage the need for more financial responsibility, albeit that I concur with the Deputy Chair that there are issues around that. There are issues especially for people who are slightly older and are facing a later pension age where they do not have the necessary time in place to build that pension pot up to a viable level.

The state pension should not be seen as a retirement scheme, and we have already seen the implementation of the requirement of employers to provide pension schemes for their employees. I am happy to note a number of changes to private pension schemes in the Bill that should help individuals to make more positive choices about their financial future. However, we have to ensure that those most vulnerable to the changes are protected while the transition occurs. I am pleased to note that a number of transitional arrangements are in place that will protect that group.

4.30 pm

The changes proposed in the Bill will create a simpler, fairer and fit-for-purpose system. Through these changes, we will have a robust pension system that will stand us well into our future. Our current system is simply not maintainable when we look at the changes in our lifestyle and at our projected life expectancy coupled with a lower birth rate.

I look forward to debating and scrutinising the Bill further in Committee and support its passing Second Stage.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP has been steadfast in its fight against the attacks on public servants, at Westminster and Stormont. The SDLP voted against the Public Service Pensions Bill in February this year. However, it became law as it was supported by the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party. We were the only party to oppose that Bill because of its detrimental impact on the 210,000 public sectors workers across the North. It was the most far-reaching legislation to pass through the Assembly for some time.

Whilst, in principle, we welcome the concept of a simplified system, as outlined by the Minister, that would help pensioners living in poverty, we have a significant number of concerns about the Bill. Changes to pension ages mean that, when the Bill comes into effect, public servants will be forced to work until their state pension age or 65, whichever is greater.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Maybe she has lost sight of something, so I remind her where we started this process. It was her colleague Margaret Ritchie, now the MP for South Down, who put forward the proposal to increase the state pension age to 66, 67 and then 68. Maybe that will tone down the Member's contribution, rather than her just making a political point in the House.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his intervention. I do not think that there is anything wrong with stating the party's position on the increase in state pension age.

As the Minister will well know, there has been lobbying from various public sector workers. Workers in the Fire Service, for example, lobbied on the basis of the impact that raising the state pension age would have on their performance and ability to do their job. That is also true of other public sector workers in the teaching, medical and nursing professions. I am sure that the Minister will appreciate that we want to listen to as many people as possible who will be directly impacted and want to raise

concerns. We do not want more and more people having to take the option of being medically retired because they are not fit to go on for much longer. That is, I think, a fair comment from our party.

As I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge, public sector workers get a bad press, which is not, I think, justified on most occasions. As the Minister will know, many of these jobs are not only physically demanding but emotionally demanding, and I hope that he will listen to those concerns. Our party will listen to them as the Bill goes through its various stages.

We will have the opportunity to table amendments. It is the intention of our party to look at that and try to convince people of the argument. We are all very much aware of the financial constraints under which we have to make tough decisions. However, there are some principles in relation to terms and conditions that the trade union movement and others fought long and hard for. In fact, over the past 100 years, some people died for the very protections that others are so blithely giving away. As members of a party that retains labour in its core values and, indeed, title, we will seek to protect those principles as we scrutinise the Bill's passage.

As the Deputy Chair said, we should take the opportunity to reflect on the poverty levels among pensioners in the North and on the high cost of living versus the level of income that many of our people are receiving. Poverty levels are rising, not just among children and young people but among pensioners. That is something that our party is very alert to. We make no apology in the House or elsewhere for saying that they need to have their voices heard in Chambers such as this and on such pieces of legislation, which will have far-reaching consequences for many.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the opportunity to make a few comments at Second Stage in place of our social development spokesperson.

The Bill makes a number of changes, some of which are very significant. Of course, the Bill mirrors the provisions of Westminster's Pensions Act 2014. Pensions across the UK are parallel. Although I believe that the Assembly is right to use its powers to dissect every technical aspect of welfare reform, we are right to exercise caution with pensions. Our pension system needs to be forward-looking. Given our rapidly ageing population, as well as that across the wider UK, support for our elderly is going to demand increasing attention, as well as financial investment, over years to come.

We need to keep our pensions structure flexible, but we must also ensure enough stability to allow people who are approaching pension age an awareness of what support they are likely to receive.

I welcome the fact that one of the Bill's objectives is to reduce the number of people who have to rely on pension credit, but, of course, the objective may differ from what happens in reality. Therefore, that will need to be watched carefully.

I hope that the introduction of the new pension scheme in two years' time, with its single component flat rate, will lead to a more simplified system. In addition, the introduction of the bereavement support payment will, hopefully, move to a more uniform structure and a simplified payment system.

One area of concern that my party has is the further change to the pension age. As the Minister said, bringing forward the planned increase in state pension age to 67 — or 68, I think, in some cases — by eight years will deliver net benefits-related savings to the Department for Social Development of almost £2 billion in real terms. That is a significant sum. The continual changing of the timetable, however, is not ideal. One must remember that, in the 2008 Act, the pension age was meant to increase to 66 between 2034 and 2038. The 2012 Act brought that forward to October 2020, and this Bill proposes to accelerate the increase to 67 years from 2034-36 to 2026-28. In other words, this is the third increase and/or acceleration in six years. That continual moving of the goalposts is going to have an increasingly significant knock-on impact on people's ability to save and plan for the future.

Only today, when meeting teaching unions, we heard how many teachers wish to, or need to, retire early and 68 years may not suit many teachers. We need flexibility. Therefore, I ask the Minister, dependent on future provisions in Westminster of course, whether the Bill will settle the issue for the foreseeable future or does he envisage further changes?

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister and Members who have contributed to the debate so far. Undoubtedly, changes need to be made to our pension system, not least because of our requirement to keep parity with the Pensions Act that became law earlier this year but also because of our ageing society and the need for a sustainable approach to the future for those whom we owe a pension.

There are changes to the state pension age, and the reality is that life expectancy is also increasing. We need to try to maintain the proportion of life that is spent in retirement. I have heard the arguments for those who feel that the nature of their employment does not permit them to work to the new pension ages that are being proposed, and I will be interested to hear those arguments worked out in the Committee. Nevertheless, life expectancy is perhaps substantially longer than it was when many of us started our employable years, and certainly when I did.

The Pensions Act 2008 provided for an increase to 67 by 2034-36, but since the projections used to calculate that timetable were published, the predicted average life expectancy and state pension age in 2027 has increased by a year and a half, or thereabouts, for men and women.

So, we need to be mindful of sustainability. Those are important issues, and we have heard in the last few days continued concerns about our economic recovery. The Office for Budget Responsibility expects spending on state pensions to rise by 5.5% of GDP in 2018 to 7.9% in 2063, which is a year that I probably do not expect to see, but I need to stand here today planning for people's futures in respect of that. I really do not think that I will be here at that stage, but it is important for those of us who are closer to retirement — like Mr Brady, I declare an interest; I am not at pension age yet, but I am getting there — that we do not leave our younger generations with a financially unsustainable system. That is one of the key elements of what we are trying to do in the new Bill.

I particularly welcome the changes that allow for more flexibility in the transferring of small pension pots between employers. Evidence shows that the average number of jobs that people have in their lifetime is increasing. It is, therefore, important that we make adequate provision to reduce the number of dormant pension pots and make it easier for people to keep track of their pension savings. Perhaps it would be more useful than the tax statements that people have received recently from the Inland Revenue, telling us how much we have to spend on various other things but reminding us that we have small pension pots and encouraging people to make sure that they are all joined up and that they get the benefit of the larger investment.

I also welcome the introduction of the new bereavement support payment. Many, if not all, of us will know someone who has been affected

by a bereavement and the considerable associated costs. The impact of spousal bereavement can be particularly acute in the months immediately following loss. It is a time when people definitely do not need the stress of worrying about how to negotiate the welfare system or how their other benefits may be affected. Therefore, I welcome the simplification of the payments and the fact that they will no longer affect other benefits. I am, however, concerned that whilst the initial support up front may be there, money to keep supporting families longer term through, for example, the widowed parent's allowance, will disappear. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that. What steps will he take to mitigate the worst effects for families who will require support until their children are no longer dependent?

Finally, while the Bill is undoubtedly a necessary response to changes that have already been made at Westminster and our changing society, I believe that it will require detailed scrutiny. We have heard many comments around the Chamber about how that can and should be scrutinised, and I look forward to dealing with those matters further in Committee.

Mr Allister: I will be brief, in no small measure because this is largely a futile debate. Everyone knows that pension policy, of necessity, has to follow the pattern set in the United Kingdom. Even those who protest and pretend that they are unhappy with, wish to see changes to and are opposed to various propositions in the Bill know that there is no other way, because, as part of the United Kingdom, we are quite properly bound into a national scheme relating to pensions and indeed welfare.

Indeed, in my view, it is folly to have even had pension policy devolved to this House because we can only be a rubber stamp in respect of it and, likewise, in respect of welfare. Yet, we go through the motions of the Bill, with each and every person knowing perfectly well that we have no option but to legislate in this direction through the Bill. That is because of the very simple premise that if you are part of a nation and if you contribute in a common taxation system, paying the same taxes as everyone else, you are right to expect and receive the same benefits as everyone else.

That includes pension benefits.

4.45 pm

If, as a constituent part of that nation, you are in a situation, as we are, where you raise less than you spend, it would be a very foolish individual indeed who would say, "Ah, we want to have a different taxation system, we want to have a different pension system, we want to have a different welfare system". If you said that, you would need to be careful what you wished for, because you would get the obvious riposte, "Well, if you do, then pay for it". If you are a region such as we are that spends more than it raises, that situation would be utterly unsustainable. That is why parity on pensions is essential, right, and in our interests in this part of the United Kingdom. Of course, the same argument applies to why it is absolute folly to contemplate anything like devolving corporation tax, which reduces the block grant correspondingly and gives the Treasury the glorious opportunity to say, "If you want to reduce corporation tax, you raise the shortfall for your education, your hospitals and everything else". It is the same principle. It is the principle that there are certain fundamentals, certain guy ropes, that hold the United Kingdom together, and one of them is a common taxation arrangement, a common welfare arrangement, a common pension arrangement and matters such as those. No matter how much some people might pontificate on these issues, they know that, in practice, in reality and for very good reason, they cannot and will not do anything about it.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: I have listened to what the Member has said. Does the Member not recall that, when the previous Pensions Bill went through the House, amendments and modifications were made to it, one of which was in favour of the Fire Service? It is not good enough for us to sit back and pass whatever Bill comes before the House without question or amendment; it is our duty to scrutinise it and, where we can, amend it and make it better for the people in Northern Ireland. That is our duty.

Mr Allister: I accept in some measure what the Member says. Yes, incidental changes can and have been made. Indeed, I have been instrumental in making one of them myself. However, on the fundamental of, for example, the critical issue of retirement age, the House kids itself if it thinks that, realistically, it could depart from what is in the pension legislation of the United Kingdom. It utterly kids itself if it thinks that.

On the big-ticket issues, the point that I make is that there is nothing that the House can, should or will do about the fundamentals. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, when the consultation — a UK consultation — took place in April 2011 on state pension reform, the explanatory document tells us, five responses were received from Northern Ireland. That is recognition by the people of Northern Ireland of the immutable reality that their pension arrangements and policies, of necessity, are set as part of the bigger picture of the United Kingdom. When, further in 2011, the Government published their proposals for a regular review of the state pension age, there were three responses from organisations in Northern Ireland. Again, that is recognition of practical political reality. That practical political reality has to inform very much our debate on this matter.

Mr Storey: At the outset, I thank the Members who participated in the debate this afternoon. I want to make a few comments as we bring this stage of the Bill to a conclusion. Before I go to Members' contributions, I will say that I intend to put in the Assembly Library a ready reckoner, and I think that most Members, if they have not already seen it, will want to look at the dates to see exactly when their retirement date is. A number of Members have sort of made declarations of interest about when they are retiring or the longevity that they want to attain. Self-interest, of course, goes no further than me, and I looked at that. I fall between 6 March 1961 and 5 April 1977, and so I will receive my pension on my 67th birthday. Therefore, it applies to the Minister just the same as anyone else. I will put an updated version of that in the Library, so that Members will have access to it. That will be helpful and, I trust, useful, particularly for Members who will be asked about it by their constituents, because that will become an issue and relevant questions will be asked.

Let me turn to the comments of the Deputy Chair of the Committee. I thank him for his comments. I also thank him for the commitment that he has given in relation to working with the Committee. That is certainly my intention. That has already been the case for my officials, and they will continue to engage with the Committee and provide whatever relevant information is necessary.

Mr Brady covered a wide range of issues. I thank him for the interest that he takes, on a personal basis, in the issues, given his history and the work that he has done in the community in giving advice to people on a range of issues, not least this type of issue.

I should point out that the new state pension is part of the wider pension provision, and automatic enrolment is being rolled out, which will ensure that most workers will be building up a private pension at the same time. Whilst the rate of the new pension will be above the rate of pension credit, pension credit will remain, so that those not entitled to a full pension will have access to pension credit. The safeguards remain, which is an important point.

The new scheme merges two schemes: the basic state pension, which involves qualification after 30 years, and the state second pension, which is up to 32 years. Thirty-five years strikes a balance, and we need to remember that.

The Member also raises the issue of life expectancy. Life expectancy in Northern Ireland at the age of 65 is broadly comparable with the north of England and Wales and is higher than in Scotland. Whilst healthy life expectancy for men here is lower than the UK average, it is higher than Scotland, and, for women, it is the same as Scotland and higher than Wales.

I want to refer to the Member's point about pensioners and the suggestion that, in Northern Ireland, we have some sort of mean deal for our pensioners. That issue has repeatedly been raised, and Members can easily make comments that cause concern to those who take the time to listen to the issues, particularly pensioners who are listening to us even this evening. I want to make a number of comments in relation to pensioner poverty in Northern Ireland and the way it compares with the rest of the United Kingdom. Pensioner poverty is in decline across the United Kingdom. Levels of poverty can be considered before housing costs or after housing costs. After housing costs analysis for Northern Ireland is comparable with the rest of the United Kingdom, and before housing costs analysis is not. That is due to the difference in the way in which, in particular, water charges are collected. The percentage of pensioners in relative poverty after housing costs is lower than the percentage of pensioners in relative poverty in the before housing costs category. That is due to pensioners having lower housing costs compared with the population as a whole, with approximately two thirds owning their own home in 2011 and 2012.

In 2012-13 in Northern Ireland, 20% of pensioners were in relative poverty before housing costs, which represents some 58,000 pensioners. That figure decreased by four percentage points from last year. In 2011-12

and 2012-13, relative poverty for pensioners was at its lowest over the period. In 2012-13, the percentage of pensioners in relative poverty after housing costs was 14%, which is one percentage point lower than in 2011-12. That is the lowest point in the time series and six percentage points lower than the series high of 20%. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2013' found that the proportion of UK pensioners in poverty was at its lowest for almost 30 years.

You could ask what measures are in place to address pensioner poverty. No one would want to treat poverty just as a statistical issue; it is a real issue that is relevant to people in Northern Ireland. Pensioner poverty is monitored through a range of national statistics, such as the annual 'Households Below Average Income' report, which provides a full analysis of the levels of relative and absolute poverty for pensioners and of pensioner material deprivation.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is developing the new Active Ageing strategy to consider issues such as poverty, housing, transport, health and social care and education. The strategy proposes a number of cross-departmental initiatives. Along with OFMDFM, the Department will develop projects to improve the uptake of benefits by older people, as we heard in Question Time, and of the warm homes scheme, which will then be part of the Active Ageing strategy.

Mr Brady made other points to which I want to refer before I move on. Someone with 30 qualifying years will get significantly more under the scheme: £127 a week as opposed to £113 under the current scheme. We also want to make it clear that the proposed amount of £148.40 will be uprated in line with earnings. That is an important point for us to bear in mind.

I will comment on Dolores Kelly's contribution. The SDLP, of course, never fails to have a memory loss when it comes to some things. I reminded the Member that her colleague Ms Ritchie introduced the increase in the pension age. On that issue, all good accounting should start at home. We currently spend around £37 million a week on state pensions, which is undoubtedly a considerable amount of money. It is not the case that we are trying to do it on the cheap. I take the Member's points about specific groups of people. During the Bill's progress here and in Committee — she is a member of the Social Development Committee — Members will have every opportunity specifically to scrutinise the provisions and how they will impact on people in the years to come.

Mr Kinahan referred to life expectancy. Let us face it: this is a good news story.

Someone once said that life expectancy is longer in Ballymoney, or that it at least seems that way. I do not know whether that is the case, but, as someone who is proud to live in the town, I say that you can come to Ballymoney and your life expectancy will be extended.

5.00 pm

I do not think that anyone could stand here and say that the state pension will not increase in the future. Indeed, the Westminster Government propose a review of the state pension every five years. It has been an issue. When I met my officials on the issue, I was reminded that, over a number of years, there have been ongoing reviews of the state pension age. I do not think that we are any different in that cycle.

Mr Stewart Dickson referenced a number of things, including longer-term help for the bereaved. That will be provided for through a wider social security system. The intention is that financial help for children will be provided through universal credit. I look forward to us moving forward with that legislation. I do not think it is a case of having one piece of legislation and not another. While they are not inextricably linked, I think that they are component parts of an overall process and system being put in place.

When we look at the overall National Insurance contribution that Northern Ireland makes, we see that it is somewhere in the region of £1.7 billion. We needed an annual subvention to that particular pot somewhere in the region of £334 million in 2012-13. That bears the point that we are beneficiaries of being part of the United Kingdom. Being part of the United Kingdom brings to Northern Ireland considerable financial advantage. It is clear that, in this process and given the amount of money that is involved in the provision of the state pension, that will continue to be the case.

I thank Members for their contributions. I know that engagement with the Committee will commence very soon. It is now over to the Committee to take the Bill and to have its proper legislative scrutiny of it.

In conclusion, the Bill aims to create a pensions system that is financially sustainable in the light of demographic, social and economic challenges. In the future, all the years that are

spent contributing to society, whether through paid work or caring responsibilities, will be of equal value. I trust that I have dealt with the issues that Members raised. However, if I have inadvertently failed so to do, I am quite happy to write to Members. Members know that, at any stage, I am happy for them to raise specific issues with me as the process continues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA Bill 42/11-16] be agreed.

Assembly Business

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Disgraceful comments were made in the Chamber during Minister Jim Wells's statement on child exploitation. Sweeping statements were made on west Belfast and Donagh. They were made by other MLAs and, probably even more disappointingly, by Minister Wells himself. He went off at a tangent from the enormously important issue of child exploitation to score cheap political points. Our party is very disappointed by the lack of intervention from the Deputy Speaker and, indeed, by the tone in the House today. I ask the Deputy Speaker and the Speaker's Office to review comments and to come back to us. I inform the House that we will be making a complaint to the Speaker's Office. Go raibh maith agaibh.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, it is a recognised truism —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Sorry, could I deal with —

Mr Allister: — that the truth hits home.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Would the Member please be seated? I will certainly undertake to review the record and I will come back. I hope that the Member appreciates that it was a very difficult debate to chair. I am of the belief that I did my best; however, the Member has raised the point and I will certainly come back.

Mr Storey: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, does the Deputy Speaker think that, in the contribution that has been made by the Member, she is challenging the authority and actions of the Deputy Speaker when he was in the Chair?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): No. I do not believe that at all. I believe that any Member is entitled to ask a question about a particular debate and the contributions that were made across the Floor. Personally, I was not happy with it; but I believe that I did my best in very difficult circumstances.

Ms Ruane: I was not challenging the Deputy Speaker in any way, but I believe that the debate was totally inappropriate and I am very disappointed in the role of the Minister of Health. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I am really disappointed that, despite my efforts earlier in the day to persuade people not to make remarks from a sedentary position, even now when we are discussing it, it is still going on. That really disappoints me and it reduces the standard of debate in the Assembly to a level that I am certainly not happy with. I made that clear on several occasions earlier today.

Does Mr Allister wish to raise a point of order?

Mr Allister: Further to Ms Ruane's point of order, I made the comment and I repeat it: the truth has a habit of hitting home.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): That is not a point of order and, again, I express my disappointment that any Member should abuse their privilege in the Chamber by using a point of order to make remarks that are not appropriate. Hopefully, we can proceed.

Private Members' Business

Commonwealth Youth Games 2021

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

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the success of the Olympic Games in London 2012 and the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow 2014 and the impact hosting these games has had to positively transform those cities; and calls on the Executive to develop a bid for Northern Ireland to host the Commonwealth Youth

Games in 2021 with a view to a future bid to host the Commonwealth Games.

I am delighted to move the motion. Northern Ireland has a proud history of involvement with the Commonwealth Youth Games. The games are a multi-sports event for participants between the ages of 14 and 18. The youth games were first held in 2000 in Edinburgh, and they attracted 773 athletes from 15 countries, competing in 112 events across eight sports. The most recent Commonwealth Youth Games was held in the Isle of Man in 2011, and it saw 804 competitors from 62 participating countries. Pune in India played host in 2008 to 1,220 competitors from 71 countries; and Perth in Australia witnessed 980 participants from 63 countries. It has developed into a fantastic global occasion.

Team Northern Ireland has played its part with a total of 23 medals won across the four youth games that have been held. That is a fantastic return for such small nation and a tribute to the athletes, their families, the coaches and the officials involved.

Evidence shows that the youth games can act as a springboard for future sporting success. Jessica Ennis competed in the 100 metres and high-jump events in the 2004 games, and Kirani James, the reigning 400 metres Olympic champion won gold in 2008. Our own boxers, such as Michael Conlon and Joe Fitzpatrick have tasted success at the youth games. It presents an incredible opportunity to witness the development and nurturing of the next generation of global superstars. The next two cycles will see Samoa play host next year, and St Lucia in 2017.

There is not only a history but a clear intention to encourage the smaller nations of the Commonwealth to play host to the youth games, and I want Northern Ireland to bid for and host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games.

Northern Ireland has shown that it is more than able to deliver world-class events on the global stage. In recent years, we successfully played host to international events such as the MTV European Music Awards in 2011, the Irish Open golf championship in 2012, the World Police and Fire Games last year, the Carl Frampton world title fight and the Big Start of the Giro d'Italia this year. In future years, we can look forward to the Irish Open returning in 2015 and 2017, with the prospect of the Open Championship returning to Royal Portrush, perhaps as early as 2019.

We have seen how well we can accommodate not only athletes and officials but spectators and supporters. I believe that Northern Ireland is more than capable of developing a successful bid and delivering an amazing games experience. Events such as those that I mentioned, as well as the Commonwealth Youth Games, serve as an invaluable vehicle to promote Northern Ireland internationally. I am proud to say that, as a nation, we have a tremendous amount to offer, and it is essential that we market ourselves effectively by showing off what is positive, which is an incredible amount.

What is required to bid for and host such an event? A Commonwealth Youth Games programme must consist of a minimum of six and maximum of eight sports, with no more than two of those permitted to be team sports. All are selected by the host city, except athletics and swimming, which are compulsory. The other sports must be chosen from those recognised by the Commonwealth Games Federation. The sports chosen by Samoa include boxing, lawn bowls, archery, rugby sevens, squash, tennis and weightlifting. The Isle of Man's programme included badminton, boxing, gymnastics, rugby sevens and cycling.

Consider some of the infrastructure that we will have in place by 2021. Northern Ireland will have some fantastic venues, including Ravenhill, Windsor Park, Bangor Aurora, Queen's Sport Upper Malone, the National Badminton Centre in Lisburn, the Odyssey complex and the Mary Peters athletics track, to name just a few. We are in excellent shape to produce an amazing bid.

To house the athletes, officials and supporters, we now have a great range of hotels, student accommodation at Queen's Elms and the proposed University of Ulster accommodation in the city centre. The cost to the Isle of Man of hosting the event was in the region of £1.7 million, and I understand that the expected expenditure to host the Games in Northern Ireland would be in the region of £3 million to £4 million. Considering that £13.8 million was spent on the World Police and Fire Games and over £4 million on the start of the Giro d'Italia, that represents reasonably good value for money for a week-long series of events.

This is a tiny investment when one considers the potential positive benefits that Northern Ireland in general, and our sporting fraternity more specifically, can derive from holding such an event. Children in primary school today will be the athletes competing in these games. Imagine having a home games to aim for in

seven years' time and the boost that that could give aspiring athletes in the next few years. Imagine the encouragement given to local sports organisations to become involved not only in the training of local competitors but in the organisation of a local games in the knowledge that they have the full support of Northern Ireland behind them. You need only look at the effect that a partisan crowd had on home athletes in the London Olympics and Glasgow Commonwealth Games to see the fabulous boost that it would be for our local participants.

In advance of the bid, it will be necessary as a country to show our commitment to the Commonwealth Youth Games, so we should endeavour to send as strong a team as possible to Samoa and St Lucia. I encourage the Minister to engage positively with the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council and to provide what assistance and support her Department can. I understand that participation in Samoa next year for approximately 17 competitors and 13 coaches and support staff will cost in the region of £70,000. However, the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council has not yet been provided with an opportunity to discuss future funding with Sport NI, and I am concerned that funding for that organisation will cease in March 2015.

5.15 pm

It is vital that our team be supported if we are serious about bidding for the games. We cannot logically expect other countries to support our bid if we are not seen to be playing a full part in other games. It is also important in development terms. If we want to grow as a sporting nation, we need to be taking part across a range of sports. I urge the Minister to do what she can to assist the NICGC as it seeks to secure the necessary financial assistance.

I believe that a successful bid for the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games is achievable, but it needs our support. The first step, I feel, would be a very clear message being sent from the Assembly of our unequivocal desire to see the Commonwealth Youth Games come here. The next step would be for the Executive to work with the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council to develop a strong, persuasive bid. The 2021 bid must be submitted to the Commonwealth Games Federation before the host is determined at the general assembly in Auckland during August 2015.

Since initially writing to the Commonwealth Games Organising Committee in the summer and subsequently meeting the NICGC to discuss the proposal, I understand that NICGC has had positive meetings with senior officials from the Minister's Department, as well with as a representative from the major events bid group. I believe that there are encouraging signs from the group. Any business case, however, will need to be finalised and approved by late spring. That is undoubtedly a tight timescale, and I really hope that it can be met.

Having seen how Glasgow, Melbourne, Delhi, Manchester and others have been able to market themselves on a world stage, I would hope that a successful bid and event for the youth games could serve as a launch pad for a future Commonwealth Games bid by Northern Ireland. We have a proud and rich sporting history, and it is not outside the realms of possibility that the second largest multisport event in the world could take place on these shores. I look forward to the rest of the debate, and I hope that I can get the support of the House.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé sásta labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I am happy enough to speak on this subject. We have all seen the impact that a number of major sporting and cultural events have had on this part of the world in recent years. Last year, the City of Culture in Derry left a huge and lasting legacy for the city and further afield. Investment in the legacy of that event will mean lasting sporting provision for the Derry City Council and Strabane areas, as well as adjoining council areas. That has addressed and will address a long-standing deficit and is most welcome.

Likewise, the huge success of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann has provided the opportunity to bid for its return in 2016 and also to bid for the Irish City of Culture in the same year and, hopefully subsequently, the European City of Culture.

Last week, I met the Loughs Agency and other interested bodies in the north-west that are developing a very exciting infrastructure project, on the back of the World Police and Fire Games, with huge potential. Should that come off, and I see no reason why it should not, the whole Lough Foyle basin could be hoaching with a series of small and medium-sized projects that, when combined, would provide a facility and attraction second to none. All that from a very modest sea-angling competition at Longfield.

Likewise, the success of local golfers has made the North the world's oyster in attracting the major competitions — the Irish and British Opens. Hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, we might see confirmation of the Rugby World Cup coming to these shores and to this city.

Those of us of a certain age remember the dark and dismal days when to suggest any provision of world-class sporting events would have raised more than a single eyebrow. Our boxing success down through the years has benefited from well-worn routes through county, Ulster, all-Ireland, British, European, Commonwealth and world titles to justify alone the promotion of any of those methods of advancement of in-the-ring prowess. I am very proud that a significant number of boxers from my local club, St Canice's Amateur Boxing Club in Dungiven, have received their plaudits at nearly all those levels. Indeed, Eamonn O'Kane captained the Commonwealth boxing team at the 2010 games, a team that returned with its then greatest haul of medals. They were, of course, outdone in the same disciplines in the 2014 Glasgow games, at which other successes included lawn bowls and judo.

In all, 117 competitors took part in 14 sports during 11 days of competition. The entire team, including coaches and mentors, numbered 160. The continued and increasing success of athletes and competitors at this and indeed at any level is due to the careful encouragement and nurturing of our young people in sport.

Like many other competitions at whatever level, the Commonwealth Youth Games will provide many young people with the opportunity to compete in Samoa in 2015 and St Lucia in 2017. The fact that it caters for young people from 14 to 18 years of age will ensure that many of our young people, particularly in the younger age groups, can compete at the very highest level for their age. Notwithstanding the governance and selection issues, I see no reason why a bid cannot be made to host the youth games here, with a view to hosting other national and international competitions in this part of the world.

We have come a long way in our communal promotion of sport. We still have a bit to travel, but to forgo any opportunity for our young people would be remiss of us in our duties and responsibilities. I, with others here present, attended the charity event for deteMND at the Kingspan Stadium on Saturday night, and I applaud the courageous efforts of Anto Finnegan and others to bring people together in the name of sport and to challenge a deadly and disabling disease. I have, through the

years, witnessed the healing power of sport and passionately believe that we should all work together for its promotion. In this spirit, I endorse the motion.

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome the opportunity to extend my warmest, sincere congratulations to the entire Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games team. The joint effort and perseverance of the 160-strong team of athletes, coaches, management and other support staff ensured that outstanding success, and the Assembly must ensure that the necessary support is available for them to replicate and hopefully exceed this achievement in 2018. I also hope that we experience similar success in the upcoming Commonwealth Youth Games in Samoa in 2015 and wish all those involved the best of luck. No discussion of our Commonwealth Games success would be complete without highlighting the dazzling performance of our boxers, who secured nine of the 12 medals. Their skill and commitment set the bar at the highest standards that Northern Ireland's athletes can attain.

The Olympic Games and the Commonwealth Games were great successes for the cities of London and Glasgow respectively. The prospect of replicating that in cities across the North is very exciting. Sports tourism is a booming industry, and Northern Ireland would benefit greatly from the economic and social benefits that the Commonwealth Games and the youth games would bring.

Recent years have seen Northern Ireland firmly establishing itself as a fantastic host for world-renowned sporting events. We made European Tour history with the Irish Open in 2012 by being the first regular event to sell out completely. This brought in £1.2 million of sales in accommodation and £9.5 million in tourism revenue, and it generated £12 million in economic benefit to Northern Ireland's businesses. Likewise, our ability to host a successful sporting event was made clear through the Giro d'Italia and the World Police and Fire Games. The economic benefits of sports tourism do not end with each event. Tourists return to visit again, and the reputation of Northern Ireland will be enhanced by each event.

Northern Ireland has dedicated, skilled athletes as well as the unwavering support of fans, and we must do our utmost to nurture that. Our athletes must be allowed to focus solely on their performance without the burden of worrying about inadequate funding or resources. If the Executive are to make such a bid, it is essential that they also ensure that the North has the

facilities and infrastructure in place. I have visited boxing clubs in Newry where the coaching staff and boxers have to deal with snow falling in around them in winter because of the lack of repairs. We must listen to people who avail themselves of these facilities day in and day out and hear the calls of the 80% of boxing clubs that see improved facilities as being a top priority. All our sports need to be funded adequately and enjoy full support from the Department and the whole Assembly. The 2018 Commonwealth Games pose a real opportunity for us to maximise our success.

I also urge the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to take measures that will encourage the full participation of women. Almost 15% fewer women than men actively take part in sport, and there is a very real disparity between men and women in Northern Ireland sports. The provision of adequate funding and facilities, such as women's changing rooms, is the first step in tackling this. I urge the Minister to do her utmost to support all our excellent athletes and inspire more through the provision of the best training, resources and facilities. We have some of the best athletes and coaches, so let us make sure that they have the facilities to match in time for a bid for the Commonwealth Youth Games. I am delighted to say that the SDLP will support the motion.

Mr Cree: It is nice to hear us all apparently singing off the same hymn sheet; I will try not to change that.

The Commonwealth Youth Games were first held in Edinburgh in August 2000, the second games were held in Australia in 2004 and the third in India in 2008. In 2011, it was the turn of the Isle of Man, while Samoa has been lined up for 2015 and St Lucia for 2017. The number of participating countries has increased from 15 in Edinburgh to 63 in the Isle of Man, while the number of athletes rose from 773 in Edinburgh to a peak of 1,220 in India. The number of sports involved has ranged between seven and nine.

We are all appreciative and supportive of our Northern Ireland athletes, both at junior and senior level, but that does not happen overnight; it requires extensive training to take part in competitions, and that is best started at a young age. It also requires investment in state-of-the-art training facilities. Our athletes certainly proved their competitiveness in medal success at this year's Commonwealth Games in Glasgow by bringing home 12 medals, ranking Northern Ireland fifteenth out of 71 countries on the medals table. That was a great achievement, considering that there were over

6,500 competing athletes at the event. Indeed, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure hosted a reception for local athletes at Stormont in celebration of those outstanding achievements.

In light of Northern Ireland's recent successes in attracting major sporting events such as the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia and the recent Carl Frampton world title fight, the Minister stated that her Department, through Sport Northern Ireland, would continue to develop facilities subject to the availability of budgets. That is welcome news, as Sport Northern Ireland has identified lottery funds of £17.5 million to invest in a capital programme to improve sports facilities over a five-year period from 2014-15 to 2018-19. I am also pleased to learn that Sport Northern Ireland is developing this programme and, as a first step, procuring a specialist organisation to develop a sports facility strategy. With its links to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's new strategic vision for events and its representation on DETI's global events bidding group and international events development group, which considers the facilities that are available when bidding for events, I remain optimistic that Northern Ireland will be well positioned, through the Executive, to bring a bid for Northern Ireland to host the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021, which is, of course, the centenary of the founding of the state of Northern Ireland, and it would be extremely fitting if the Commonwealth Youth Games were to take place here to help to mark that date. Perhaps a future bid to host the Commonwealth Games may be an option after that.

We have first-class athletes in Northern Ireland. What a wonderful platform it would be for local athletes to welcome hundreds of young people from across the Commonwealth to join them in a spirit of friendship and hospitality to compete at the highest level on home ground. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: First, I thank the Members who tabled the motion; it certainly has the Alliance Party's support.

Last month, the House congratulated all our athletes who competed in the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow over the summer. I asked the Minister then whether a feasibility study could be carried out to see whether a future Commonwealth Games could be hosted in Belfast. We saw how successful the World Police and Fire Games were; it would be brilliant to build on that. I agree that hosting the Commonwealth Youth Games would be an appropriate step to encourage more

international events to be held in Northern Ireland.

The Commonwealth Youth Games is the biggest multi-sport event for the 14-18 age group and is a stepping stone for athletes who aspire to win medals at future Commonwealth Games.

That is not just a theory; Michael Conlon, who won a bronze medal in the bantamweight division in the India youth games in 2008, went on to win a gold medal in Glasgow this year. The Commonwealth Youth Games provides the perfect dry run for athletes, coaches and support staff. It is the nearest thing to the real thing that those young athletes can get. They experience the build-up, the pressure and the excitement that is all part of a large multi-sport event.

5.30 pm

Sporting activity increases confidence, empathy and a sense of community. Of course, it is not about just talent; it is about discipline, training, coaching, resources and a positive mental attitude. When we debated the success of the Commonwealth Games, I mentioned that perhaps one of the most endearing qualities about Northern Ireland is that we are self-deprecating. The problem is when that translates to sport. We tend to see ourselves as the underdog. At times, we assume that we will never be the best. That is a shame when you consider that there are many sports in Britain where athletes are some of the best in the world.

Part of the problem, as with most things, comes down to money. Better training facilities, quality full-time coaches and travelling to international competitions are all very expensive, but they make a huge difference. With the fantastic successes of the Giro d'Italia, the World Police and Fire Games and the Irish Open, we know that we are more than capable of hosting world-class international events. Let us be ambitious. Investing in sport is worthwhile for not just the development of our athletes but the economic benefits. It would also showcase the many wonderful things about Northern Ireland.

Mr Hilditch: I, like others, support the motion. It was only a few weeks ago that we celebrated and acknowledged the success of many of our sportsmen and sportswomen who had returned from Glasgow having represented Northern Ireland so proudly and who showcased their individual sports, reaping the reward of years of hard work, dedication and commitment. I

certainly share the view that the time is right to look at the long-term future and to start setting goals and targets more in line with how our sportsmen and sportswomen plan their careers and futures.

The Executive have, to date, a fairly decent record in the delivery of international events, should they be sporting, political summits, music or the arts. Here is an opportunity for the Executive to develop a bid to host a major international event, which can really connect at a local level and involve grass-roots sports, with the potential to leave a lasting legacy in our sporting communities, complementing the work of the professional bodies like Sport NI and the great work and contribution that the Northern Ireland Sports Forum, which is a voluntary association, makes to our society. Its membership consists of some 84 governing bodies in the Province.

The main thrust of the motion is to host the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021. That is a reasonable target, physically, through our existing sporting infrastructure, and financially, as, having looked at the concluding reports of some previous hosts, I think a realistic figure can be achieved to deliver the project. However, while the youth games are a small-scale version of the Commonwealth Games, there is no reason why the Executive, and, in particular, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, could not set in motion a development plan and devise a strategy that could lead to a future bid to host the Commonwealth Games.

While I stated that the youth games are a smaller version of the Commonwealth Games, it would be no mean feat if a bid were successful to host the event, with the potential of over 1,000 athletes competing in a packed programme over seven or eight days. I have no doubt, however, that many in our sporting communities could step up to the plate and deliver, in conjunction with government organisational structures and using existing skills from previous events, like administration, finance, marketing and event infrastructure.

Another strength is our record of volunteering in Northern Ireland. While 2021 is still some time off, a lot of our experience gained from the likes of the World Police and Fire Games has been a valuable contribution. Hopefully, the enthusiasm of volunteers would be repeated and built on in the future.

What an opportunity 2021 would be for our young people. Many who are now just starting to participate in organised sport could look towards 2021 as a target on their ladder of

achievement. It could be a goal for many to strive for. We are all aware of how our divided communities rally behind our sportsmen and sportswomen, which adds a potential legacy to any event.

While our sporting experts will determine the six or eight sports and the two team sports of any bid, what an attraction it would be to the other Commonwealth countries to come to some of our well-known locations. Athletics and swimming could be at the Mary Peters Track and the Bangor Aurora respectively. Cycling could be in the Mourne or the Antrim coast area, sailing on the ideal waters of Belfast lough, rugby sevens at Ravenhill, and boxing at the famous home of amateur boxing, the Ulster Hall. Who could resist such a bid?

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé i bhfách leis an rún seo inniu. I support the motion.

It is always a pleasure to see people excel in their field. We heard about and witnessed successes among local sportspeople in the recent Commonwealth Games, the Olympics and the World Police and Fire Games. Once again, we wish to extend sincere congratulations to each and every one of our local sportsmen and sportswomen who competed in those events, particularly our local boxers who brought back so many medals. We also commend those who, despite not making it onto the medal table, nevertheless broke personal records and achieved greatness in other ways.

Medals are undoubtedly important, but there is so much more involved that is worthy of our admiration: participation with a genuine sporting attitude; commitment to lengthy hours of training, which takes real dedication; and the volunteerism that has been an emerging feature of such events, which allows everyone to take part and creates a route into the sporting world for so many. Recognition must also be given to support staff, trainers, coaches, families and friends, who deserve to be commended for their roles in the great achievements of athletes.

Such achievements are a source of great pride for us all. We should continue to encourage and support those athletes in their pursuit of sporting excellence in whatever way we can. Sport NI is the body with responsibility for sport. Its remit is to support a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport that contributes to a healthy, fair and prosperous society.

Dúirt Antoinette McKeown, príomhfheidhmeannach, ar na mallaibh go

bhfuil an eagraíocht s'aici tiománta do ráth i spórt a bhaint amach mar ghnáthrud seachas mar eisceacht. The chief executive of Sport NI, Antoinette McKeown, stated recently that her organisation is committed to the achievement of success in sport being the norm rather than the exception. She went on to say that a review of the Commonwealth Games performance would be carried out in a very detailed way to set targets for future games, to identify where resources can be best used, and to learn particular lessons from the success of boxing in Glasgow this year. This review will be very important and will include participation from the Commonwealth Games Council and all the governing bodies of all the sports.

If our sporting organisations are to reach their full potential, it will be important for them to address the under-representation of women as sporting participants, coaches and representatives on sports governing bodies. In terms of equality, there must be a focus on strategies to increase the involvement of women in local sport.

While competitive sport is very important, it is also crucial that we continue to encourage all people to undertake any form of physical activity so that we are protecting our health and creating a better quality of life. We know that inactivity and poor diet go hand in hand with health problems. We cannot continue to be blasé about the rising levels of obesity, particularly in children, which often lead to diabetes and other serious diseases in later life. Our support of sport must include creating opportunities for all people to lead a more active and healthy life in whatever way they can.

It is with all that in mind that we turn our attention to the next challenge and to see where we can set our sights. It would be a real opportunity if we were able to attract a major sporting event to the North of Ireland that will focus on our young people and give them a great goal for which to strive. If the sporting fraternity wishes for the North of Ireland to become the host for the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021 with a view to a future bid to host the Commonwealth Games, we have a responsibility to ensure that we do all in our power to make that a reality.

The benefits that can be achieved will ripple right through the community here. We know that after hearing about the legacies of the Isle of Man youth games and Glasgow 2014. The Isle of Man's Minister for Community, Culture and Leisure said that the Manx games:

"saw the whole Island come together and put on a fantastic event that showcased the Manx hospitality to our Commonwealth friends. We provided a platform and offered an opportunity for people of all ages to be part of an outstanding celebration of sport. It is testament to the success of the Games that a lasting legacy lives on."

Leis an fhocal sin, a LeasCheann Comhairle, molaim an rún. On that note, Mr Deputy Speaker, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCausland: I thank my party colleagues for bringing the motion before the Assembly. It is a good motion, and I am glad to see that there is support from all parties in the Assembly for it and for bringing the Commonwealth Youth Games here to Northern Ireland.

My colleague Michelle McIlveen set out very clearly and extensively the potential for and the benefits that would flow to Northern Ireland by bringing the Commonwealth Youth Games here in 2021. A number of smaller countries have hosted the event, and there is absolutely no reason why Northern Ireland should not be in a position by 2021 to bring the games to the Province. We have seven years between now and then, but it is important that we start very quickly.

Northern Ireland has considerable experience and expertise that has been built up by hosting major events, a number of which Members listed. We have demonstrated time and time again that we have the capacity, the skills, the experience and the infrastructure — all the things that we need to make major events a success. If we encounter difficulties in a particular area, we have the capacity to work our way through them.

A lot of work has already been done to improve our sporting infrastructure. More work is under way, and more is to come. In addition, where accommodation is concerned, I think that we would be in a very good position to bring such an event to Northern Ireland.

One of the key things for me was a comment that the Minister made about the Commonwealth Games. She said that the Northern Ireland team brings back:

"a sense of pride and achievement."

That is good for Northern Ireland. It is good for the country; it brings a sense of pride and achievement to people; it raises Northern Ireland's profile on the international stage,

which we are always keen to do to generate good publicity and business; it is good for the athletes because they have an opportunity to perform on their home territory; and it is good for the sports, because it raises their profile and will, I hope, encourage higher participation levels.

With the Commonwealth Youth Games in particular, we want to increase the potential for participation in sport amongst young people. Quite often, young people will go through their school years participating in sport, and when they leave school there is a dropping off in their level of participation. Something like this could help to sustain participation, because it is in the period at the end of the school years that you see it drop. As a number of Members highlighted, there are potential health benefits from sport, including an opportunity to tackle obesity. All those things are good.

There are no downsides to this. It is good for the country's profile, good for the pride of the people of Northern Ireland, good for opportunities for the athletes and good for the sports.

We are in a much better place today than we were some time ago. I notice that Cathal Ó Oisín referred to "dark and dismal" days in the past when people did not want to come to Northern Ireland. That was true, and we know the reasons for it only too well. For the vast majority of people, Northern Ireland has moved on and is now a better place. We want to reap the benefits of that, and one of those is to see events of this type coming to the Province.

5.45 pm

I am glad to hear that conversations have already started and that discussions are under way between the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council and Sport NI and, presumably, officials in DCAL. As the motion says, this has to involve everyone. It calls on the Executive to develop a bid. This has to involve Sport NI, the Commonwealth Games Council, DCAL and the Executive. I hope that we will be in a position to make a good strong bid to bring the event here to the Province.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas daoibh as an rún seo inniu. Thank you very much for today's motion and debate. Everyone who has spoken has listed the major events. For me, there is no doubt that the Olympics, the

Paralympic Games and the Commonwealth Games have played a particularly positive role in the transformation of the host cities, which I had the privilege of visiting and participating in during the aforementioned events. Members know and I should clarify for their sake, particularly the Members who tabled the motion, that responsibility for the events rests with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and, indeed, her global events bidding group.

In response to the motion, I have considered three key areas. The first is in respect of the impact that hosting a major event can have on people and their communities. Secondly, in considering the motion, we need to be realistic about the type of events that we should aspire to host. Thirdly, I will explain why I would encourage the Executive to support the development of a bid to host the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021.

Major events are extremely influential and increase the number of people who participate in sport across the community, and we have seen that in recent years. It has helped to improve health and well-being, which are priorities not only for DCAL but for the Executive. Recent experience of international sporting events such as the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games and, for us, the World Police and Fire Games and the Giro d'Italia have raised the profile of sport in a very positive way.

These events and the athletes and, indeed, the teams who took part did inspire more people to get involved in sports, and, for us in recent years, that has meant cycling, gymnastics, boxing and athletics. Local sports clubs have seen applications to their clubs increase in numbers, and we can be certain that the success of local athletes in major events across the world has been a real and contributing factor. Hosting major events here brings a sense of pride. That was demonstrated when many of our local communities came out on the streets to support the torch relay for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. They certainly supported the Giro d'Italia, and, indeed, they came out across the many venues that hosted the World Police and Fire Games events and activities.

Secondly, the motion calls for us to consider hosting a future Commonwealth Games, which is much bigger than the Commonwealth Youth Games. While I am confident that we currently have the facilities to host the Commonwealth Youth Games and that this will need to be explored in much more detail before the bid is

made, we need to be realistic about our expectations of hosting the Commonwealth Games in the near future.

In January 2014, the Assembly Research and Information Service published a paper entitled 'International Sporting Competitions'. That paper looked at the hosting of major international sporting events and, indeed, the infrastructure required to hold them. I am sure that all Members saw the paper. The first key point in that paper noted that we do not currently have the capacity to hold major sporting events such as the Commonwealth Games. While we certainly do aspire to host major competitions, we need to be sure that the infrastructure is there and that we are ready to do so.

Finally, to address the main element of the motion, I am supportive of the proposal that we should bid to host the Commonwealth Youth Games. These games, whenever and wherever they have been held, have offered a wonderful opportunity to our talented young athletes for their experience. It is an international competition with a strong network of support. The Commonwealth Youth Games can often be the first stepping stone for young athletes in their international sporting careers and has been the foundation for some of our athletes, many of whom the Members here have mentioned.

I referred to the influential role that major sporting events can play in the development of sport, and other Members mentioned their power in community cohesion.

For athletes who have taken part, major events can provide an opportunity to build and develop. Additional facilities can be built, and the coaches and governing bodies, who work very diligently with great commitment behind the scenes to support our athletes, can develop their skills and expertise. Such events provide opportunities for volunteers to help out and develop their organisational and leadership skills.

Our athletes, and others like them, have inspired people from across communities to get out, get involved and have a go. That has to be welcomed by everybody. By bringing the Commonwealth Youth Games to the North in the future, we can build on our achievements of the past. We have a lot to be thankful for.

The Youth Commonwealth Games can also provide us with an opportunity to reach out to other cultures, given the diverse nationalities now participating in the Commonwealth Games.

The motion calls on the Executive to:

"develop a bid ... to host the Commonwealth Youth Games".

As I said earlier, the responsibility for submitting a bid to the Commonwealth Games Federation rests with our local Commonwealth Games Council, and it is important that the council receives the support that it needs to make the bid happen. I know that the council has held preliminary talks with DETI and the Tourist Board, and it has the sole responsibility for bidding for future sporting events. My officials, along with Sport NI, have also met the council to hear about the proposal and find out how we can help.

There is no doubt that there are significant challenges in taking the proposal forward, and we are all very mindful of the timescale involved in carrying out feasibility studies and submitting a final bid for the 2021 youth games by May of next year. That will involve ensuring that we have all the facilities and funding required to deliver such an event, an amount that is lower than the proposer of the motion indicated. It would be anything between £3 million and £5 million, possibly up to £7 million. That said, I think that it is an investment worth going to the Executive for.

I believe that the youth games would offer another fantastic opportunity for us to showcase the North and all that we have to offer. I would be happy to give Minister Foster my support should she wish to take a proposal to the Executive. I would also be happy for my Department to work in collaboration with DETI, the Tourist Board and the Commonwealth Games Council in their preparation of any proposed bid.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the former Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Michelle McIlveen, who, on her comeback, moved the motion so enthusiastically. During her contribution, she pointed out that those who take part in the Commonwealth Youth Games have to be between 14 and 18 years of age and that the first youth games were held in Edinburgh in 2000. She also said that Northern Ireland boxers such as Michael Conlon and Joe Fitzpatrick had taken part in the games and delivered success. She also mentioned that Northern Ireland has successfully hosted the MTV awards, the Irish Open, the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia and the recent Carl Frampton fight. She told us that the games had to consist of at least of six sports and possibly up to eight, two of which need to be team sports. She said that our sporting

infrastructure and facilities had been greatly improved and that hotel accommodation had been put in place.

Mr Ó'hOisín talked about the boxers and the success that they had attained in 2010 and in this year's Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. He also mentioned the successes delivered in lawn bowls and judo.

Mrs McKeivitt said that she hoped that the success realised by the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games team this year would be replicated in 2018. She mentioned how important it was to have proper training facilities in place and coaching to support that. She also talked about the economic benefits that would flow from the Commonwealth Youth Games being held in Northern Ireland. She mentioned world events that Northern Ireland has hosted, the Giro d'Italia and the World Police and Fire Games, and said that continuing investment needed to be made in sporting facilities, particularly boxing.

Leslie Cree mentioned the 12 medals that Northern Ireland won in the Commonwealth Games in 2014, which placed it fifteenth in the medal table. He also talked about the lottery funds and said that £17.5 million is in place. He talked about Sport NI's sports facility strategy. He said that he looked forward to welcoming many young athletes from across the Commonwealth in 2021. I hope that you are about to do that as well, sir.

Anna Lo talked about the youth games. She said that they would provide a great opportunity for Northern Ireland and that competing in the likes of those games would well prepare young athletes for the full Commonwealth Games as they develop as sportsmen and sportswomen. She also said that sport increases confidence and discipline.

Mr Hilditch talked about the importance of legacy. He said that the Executive and DCAL should have a development plan put together and be working on the bid now. He also talked about volunteering and how important that is. He said that 2021 had to be the target and that we had seven years to work towards that goal.

Ms McCorley talked about the commitment and training of not only the athletes but their coaches. She talked about the Sport NI review of the Commonwealth Games that had been discussed by the chief executive of Sport NI. She also said that it is important that coaches be given the recognition that they deserve. As well as that, she talked about how sport can be

important in tackling obesity and in dealing with health issues.

Nelson McCausland said that we must use the next seven years to prepare. He talked about Northern Ireland's profile being increased internationally because of events such as the Commonwealth Games and others that have been held. He said that much of the infrastructure is either in place or is being put in place and that there are other announcements to follow. He also mentioned accommodation, particularly in the city of Belfast, that would host the athletes as they arrived from across Her Majesty's Commonwealth. He said that there is considerable experience here of delivering events and that there is great pride in achievement. He also referred to the comments that the Minister made about that.

The Minister said that the bid would have to be made by the Commonwealth Games Council, with, from an Executive point of view, it coming from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment through the global events bidding group. She talked about athletes, their skills, their achievements in the recent Commonwealth Games and the legacy of the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games team from recent competitions. She talked of the achievements of the past and about reaching out. She said that it is important that the Commonwealth Games Council get the support for a bid. I absolutely agree with that.

Northern Ireland has a great legacy from the Commonwealth Games. If we look back at Mary Peters, Mike Bull, Philip Beattie, Davy Larmour and a list of boxers and bowlers, we see that we have a tremendous legacy from the Commonwealth Games. However, it is limited to a small number of sports. I follow the Northern Ireland football team but not just at full international level. That is a point that Ms Lo made. I follow them at youth level, under-19 level and under-21 level, because the development of young players is very important. As they move through the age groups, they get the experience to develop as players, enabling them then to compete on the full international stage.

The same applies to other sports. Last week, the Irish Bowling Association was before the Committee. Its representatives made the same point about attracting young sportsmen. That is something that we need to do. We need to attract young sportspeople, and we need to ensure that they are trained and that the facilities are available for them to develop and compete on the international stage. We also need to retain those sports personnel.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I am happy to.

Mr Ross: The Member has rightly outlined other sports in which Northern Ireland has a good track record. One in which we have many elite athletes yet cannot participate in Commonwealth Games is hockey, for which there is not a Northern Ireland team. Does he agree that the Commonwealth Games Organising Committee should look at the example that cricket has set? We are not looking at having a Northern Ireland team for all events but for those in which Northern Ireland could participate, such as the Commonwealth Youth Games. Does he agree that we should look at setting up a hockey team specifically for that event?

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. The development of elite athletes, individually and in teams, is hugely important. I made that very point in our most recent debate on the Commonwealth Games.

Ulster Hockey really needs to sort out the issue of hockey players like Iain Lewers, who has to play for England and is no longer available to Ireland. Such players cannot play for the Northern Ireland hockey team at the Commonwealth Games because we do not have a Northern Ireland hockey team. There are two or three other younger hockey players who are following him into the England set-up and not playing for Ireland because they want to compete in England and then they can compete at the Commonwealth Games.

6.00 pm

The same applies to rugby and rugby sevens. The Commonwealth Youth Games could be held here in Northern Ireland, but we may not have a Northern Ireland team taking part in the rugby sevens. That, to me, seems ludicrous. Both those sports — hockey and rugby — need to sort that out, so that we can have the situation that prevails in swimming or boxing, where you can compete for Ireland or GB at the Olympics, but you compete for Northern Ireland at the Commonwealth Games, and that is absolutely right. If we are to maximise our medal haul, we have to maximise our participation in sports and provide training and support for coaches.

We in the DUP are very keen to see the games coming. We have met the Commonwealth Games Council, and we have had conversations with the chief executive of Sport

NI around the very points that Mr Ross made in his intervention about ensuring that the maximum number of sports personnel are able to take part in the maximum number of events. The governing bodies need to address the issues that we have just raised.

I welcome the debate today. It was very good and positive. I will conclude by saying that, as Northern Ireland celebrates its centenary as a state in 2021, it would be great to have the Commonwealth Youth Games here. The Minister will have noted that our motion calls for the Executive to take action and put together a bid. I welcome the Minister's commitment to working with and across Government, particularly with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that the bid will be put in place. I assure the House that all of us will work together for the sake of the young athletes of Northern Ireland, who, at that time, will be in their prime and able to compete in the Northern Ireland youth games that we will host here on behalf of the Commonwealth across the Commonwealth of Nations. It is vital that that work is done now.

I welcome the commitment from all across the House to the motion. I am delighted that, as we had in the previous debate around the Commonwealth Games, we have full agreement across all the parties in the House, and I look forward to the work commencing very soon, led by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment but with commitment from all Ministers —

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

Mr Humphrey: — across the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that we deliver the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Youth Games here in 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the success of the Olympic Games in London 2012 and the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow 2014 and the impact hosting these games has had to positively transform those cities; and calls on the Executive to develop a bid for Northern Ireland to host the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021 with a view to a future bid to host the Commonwealth Games.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

'Appreciating Age': A Report from the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland's Report, 'Appreciating Age', which places an economic value on the wide and varied contributions made by the over-60s across Northern Ireland; acknowledges the positive contributions made by older people through caring, childcare, volunteering, replacement parenting and working; and will seek to challenge negative perceptions around older age in order to make Northern Ireland a better place to grow old.

This is an all-party motion, and we thank the Business Committee for facilitating and prioritising it, given the timing of it and the launch of the recent report. I welcome the junior Minister Jennifer McCann to the debate. Her presence and comments are important.

I welcome the opportunity to highlight the positive contributions — and Jonathan, thank you; both of you are very welcome — made by older people across Northern Ireland and to recognise the many and varied roles that they play in our lives. The report clearly attaches an economic value to the many and varied contributions that they make. The SDLP welcomed the establishment of an older persons' commissioner and would like to thank her for the work that she has done to ensure that the voice of older people is heard and that they are involved in all policy-making decisions at that level.

Northern Ireland is an ageing society, with the most rapidly ageing population in the UK. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) figures show that, by 2062 —

a long way away — there will be an additional 318,000 people over 60 in Northern Ireland than there are today. For too long, we have heard just one side of the story: that older people cost money and that they are an economic burden. When cuts to public services need to be made, it is often older people's services that are cut. The motion offers an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that older people actually contribute more than they cost — a staggering £24.7 billion over the next 50 years.

Among the contributions included in the report were caring, childcare, volunteering, replacement parenting, kinship care and working, as well as paying taxes that, over the next 50 years, will amount to a staggering £117 billion. We all know someone who looks after their grandchildren, a spouse or a family member. In 2012, older carers saved the Northern Ireland economy almost £1.02 billion. We are all aware of many older people who volunteer.

In my constituency, there are many examples of good volunteering by older people who play key roles, including the Culture Company volunteers who ensured the smooth running of events during our wonderful City of Culture year last year. Many of them were over 60, they brought maturity and a sense of perspective to their job, and they acted as mentors in many regards to many of the younger people who participated in the events. Many older people continue to work and, therefore, continue to contribute to the economic fabric of our society through their taxes and other financial contributions.

The commissioner's report also takes account of the associated costs of older age-related spending, including benefits such as pension credits, disability living allowance, attendance allowance and winter fuel payments as well as protected housing and health and social care costs. The projected spending over the next 50 years is £92.2 billion.

The report challenges the one-dimensional view of ageing and tells the untold story of the positive ways in which older people contribute to our society day in and day out and how they will continue to do so for years to come. The report is based over 50 years; therefore, it is in everyone's interest to change the way we as a society view and talk about older people.

The SDLP wants to see an end to discrimination against older people in the workplace. As well as being grossly unjust, such discrimination is costly and inefficient. All

of us, one day, will be deemed older — many of us probably already are by many of the younger generation. None of us would like to think that our age would stop us contributing positively to society. I will continue to promote the rights of older people in every aspect of work in the Assembly. I welcome the commissioner's report and wish to fully support the motion.

Mr Weir: It is good to see a motion that has cross-party support, and I think that the House will unite today. It is also cross-generational. Mention was made of those who will be turning 60. I look to Mr Lyttle, who will be turning 60 a few years after me, and I look to others in the Chamber, such as Mr Ramsey and Mrs Dobson, who will be turning 60 a few years before me.

Mr Ramsey: Point of order.

Mr Weir: Pat, if you are younger than me, you have had a very hard paper round.

I look to colleagues to my left, such as Mr Anderson, who has achieved that level of —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It might be time to stop digging, Peter. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Yes, I know.

Quite often, when we are debating the issue of an ageing society, there is a tendency to concentrate on the negative aspects and so we look at, for example, the impact on pension provision as we look into the future and at the impact on the health service. It is particularly positive today that we are able to look not simply at the very positive aspects that our older community contributes but at ones that are based on hard evidence and hard fact and that show a very positive way forward. That can be shown through a number of aspects. For example, the extent to which there will be a higher number of older people in years to come has been mentioned. In many ways, we look at the problems in the health service, but it is sometimes important to take a step back and say that a tremendous positive has happened in the last generations in the extent to which people's life expectancy has increased. That is positive and to be celebrated. Sadly, we often still see in our society tragedies such as that last week in north Antrim where a young person died. The old adage about life expectancy is three score years and 10 or 70 years. However, now, if somebody dies at the age of 70, it is deemed to be quite young. The vast bulk of our citizens can look forward to a much greater age. We should celebrate that.

With celebrating age and appreciating age, as the report says, it is also about respect for age. I found myself in the unusual situation of having common cause with the Member for Mid Ulster Ian Milne when, at the weekend, I saw and took exception to the portrayal of a 94-year-old man from Castledawson whose contribution to a programme was subtitled. I think that it was completely unnecessary for it to happen, and the question in my mind when thinking about that was this: did the BBC subtitle him because of where he came from or because he was 94 and perceived to be frail and elderly? Either way, it is unacceptable. It shows the need for us to show respect for the full community, particularly our older folk.

The importance of the report is in highlighting not just the individual stories but the broad facts and figures and the financial contribution that is to be made over the next number of years. Financial circumstances mean that a lot of people now go beyond retirement age, and, although some of that can be through the pressures of economic circumstances, in other cases, there is an opportunity for people to work on through choice and have that liberating experience. They can make an enormous contribution. The report is particularly good in highlighting, in many ways, the hidden advantages of the financial contribution that has been made. We talk about contributions, particularly as the glue to hold the family together, whether it is through volunteering — the proposer referred to the City of Culture but it can be on a whole range of subjects — whether it is through the contribution of care as unpaid carers or whether it is on the basis of either childcare with the grandparents directly looking after their grandchildren or, indeed, even as replacement parenting. A massive contribution is made to our society that, in the report, is highlighted at around £25 billion in net contribution, which is probably a conservative estimate. That is even taking into account the various cost aspects that are in play.

I believe that there are a great deal of positives in the report. I commend the Older People's Commissioner for producing the report. There is a lot of substance in it, and I look forward to the rest of the debate. I support the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion, which welcomes the Commissioner for Older People, Claire Keatinge's major report, 'Appreciating Age'. I commend the commissioner for her efforts to reframe the debate regarding older people and society while having the contributions of older people properly valued. More importantly, we, as legislators, must draw upon the report's positive

findings and make time for exploring how best we can invest resources, time and effort in making our local communities great places to grow old. The report, which was launched on the UN International Day of Older Persons, reveals that the over-60s living in the North of Ireland will contribute almost £25 billion to the economy over the next 50 years through volunteering, caring, childcare, replacement parenting and working. The report attaches an economic value to contributions made by older people to highlight the positive roles that they play, while considering the cost of older-age-related spending, subtracting those costs from the total contributions in order to give a true reflection of the net economic value older people bring to society.

6.15 pm

As more of our citizens are living longer and healthier lives than ever before, older people work, volunteer, provide care and participate widely in community and family life, contributing significant social and economic value to life in our local communities. The report helps to ensure that those important contributions do not go overlooked. Along with a full range of civic actors, we must challenge the negative voices that say that older people are a burden on public expenditure and, therefore, on society.

'Appreciating Age' challenges the negative perception that older people are a drain on the public purse, as it clearly shows that the over-60s put much more into society than they take out, in economic and in social terms, to the tune of almost £25 billion. The report, however, is not just about older people. Those who are 20, 30 and 40 years of age today are the older people of tomorrow. They will contribute in many different ways over the next 50 years, so it is in all our interests to change the way wider society perceives older age.

My colleague junior Minister Jennifer McCann made the following comment at the time of the report:

"As this report shows, we all gain from the contribution of older people to society. Too often the discussion focuses on the costs related to an ageing population. However, older people have extensive life experience and skills to share".

I am glad that the Executive have committed to creating a society that values older people and supports them to live actively to their fullest potential. The Executive's Active Ageing strategy aims to ensure strong foundations for

the future generation of older people to age with respect, dignity, choice and good health.

While commending the good work and many initiatives aimed at promoting positive and active ageing, we must not allow austerity to hit our older people. People who need a nursing home or home care must be able to count on it unconditionally. Austerity should not affect the basic needs and dignity of our older people. If we are to ask people to work longer, we need to give them opportunities. Equal access to employment, education and health insurance are crucial, as well as opportunities to contribute to an active and healthy life in old age.

It is critical that we recognise our debt to older people and encourage everyone to challenge ageism and fully appreciate the vast contribution that older people make, socially and economically, to make our society a better place. The report dispels the myth that is often propagated in the media, which is the idea that ageing populations are a burden on the state, on working people and on younger people.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to tonight's debate. I did smile, however, during Mr Weir's contribution, when he pointed out that I would reach pensionable age before him — a fact that I know people watching the debate will find incredible. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: It is true.

Mrs Dobson: True, but not to those observing. I will give him style tips at some point. *[Laughter.]* As has been said too often when we are discussing a growing and ageing population, too much of the focus is on the cost of support and not on what our older people give back to society in return. There is no doubt that an increasing elderly population will put greater pressure on some of our care services, but we must never forget that those additional costs are offset by the massive contribution that our elderly people make in their later years. They are not only an economic asset worth heralding through directly supporting our local economy but our elderly generation make a major societal impact on their communities.

On a day when the Assembly considered yet further fundamental reform to our pension system, it is imperative that we look at the massive and positive contribution of our elderly population. Whilst the report is to be warmly welcomed, I note that pension costs have not

been included. In basic financial terms, we cannot ignore that fact of life. Until we look properly at pension costs, how can we plan for the pressures of our ageing population?

It is to be celebrated that people are living longer and are able to continue to make a greater contribution to our society than was possible in the past. That is why it is important that older people have the opportunity to continue working, if they choose to do so. We all know many examples of older people who are doing brilliant work and providing key services. Take, for instance, grandparents providing childcare for their children's children. In some of those cases, without that arrangement, the cost of childcare would be too prohibitive to allow the parent to work at all.

The childcare role is especially relevant in Northern Ireland, where, despite the many promises and strategies, our local childcare system is still largely ineffective. In addition, without the dedication and commitment of older people, many of our best-known charities would not be nearly as successful. As I know too well from my association with the many local organ donation charities, volunteers, many of them over 50, make a fantastic contribution every day. The value of volunteering, whether through charities or, indeed, our church organisations, is enormous each year and could never be accurately costed. From supporting local events to sitting on committees and relaying their knowledge and experience, older people are often the backbone of many local charities and institutions, using their expertise to help others and bring forward leaders and champions for the future.

Whilst the Assembly talks about preparing to care for an ageing population, we must remember that older people themselves are often the ones providing the care. At a time when our Health Department and the trusts appear so committed to reducing key services, huge numbers of older people living here say that they regularly help out their elderly neighbours. If services like domiciliary care are to be reduced, reliance on that generosity is only likely to grow. In addition, it is hard to get an absolute definitive value of the contribution made through care, as it is typical of Northern Ireland people to be modest when asked how many hours they spend helping their neighbours and friends.

We need to remember that growing numbers of older people are exploring new opportunities as they reach pension age. Those in the current generation of pensioners — the baby boomer generation — are the best educated that

Northern Ireland and the UK have ever seen. People in the current generation, with their relatively good health, ideas and energy, will no doubt make an even greater contribution than their predecessors.

In conclusion, I hope that tonight's debate will have a positive impact on the wider public debate about the future of our ageing population.

Mr Lyttle: The Alliance Party fully supports the all-party motion and commends the excellent work in 'Appreciating Age', the Commissioner for Older People's report. The report sets out clearly the immense value of older people and the vital contribution that they make to our community. I recognise the wider work of the Commissioner for Older People and her staff. One of the key commitments in her corporate plan is the promotion of positive attitudes towards and about older people. I think that this evidence-based research is a clear demonstration that the commission is well on its way to achieving that aim.

The report complements the work that the commissioner did in a previous report, 'Valuing an Ageing Workforce', the launch of which the Alliance Minister for Employment and Learning, Stephen Farry, supported here at the Assembly. That report clearly states that, if the Government can enable older people to remain in the workforce for as long as they wish, the benefit could be as much as £2.3 billion by 2037. I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning's investment in lifelong learning, including the Step Ahead 50+ programme, which is in line with the Alliance Party manifesto commitment to lifelong learning, as well as skills development to help older people to remain economically active and independent.

I would also like to recognise the work of the NGOs in our community, such as GEMS NI, that have excellent lifelong learning programmes for older people.

We have heard that Northern Ireland is indeed an ageing society. We are living longer lives, and that absolutely must be celebrated. However, there are also negative perceptions or, as Age NI aptly put it, "benign prejudices" about older people that must be tackled.

The report not only collects very valuable data but has some key testimonies from vital organisations such as Business in the Community, which states:

"Older workers are now the fastest growing age group in the labour market",

and that there are opportunities for employers to harness the skills and experiences of older people. Parenting NI states:

"many families would lose out both financially and in emotional stability if it were not for the support of grandparents",

and that children,

"gain enormously from having a second nurturing environment".

We also have Volunteer Now, which states:

"Older volunteers are a very important resource for the community in Northern Ireland, giving their time to support a range of community activities and services".

I think of the many football coaches I have had over the years and of Cecil Braniff, who is a fixture at our own football club. He puts in many hours, despite being of an old age. He is an extremely active gentleman. I think of Boys' Brigade leaders and GAA volunteers whom we saw at the weekend coming together for the Game for Anto. There are those in our churches, and there are community safety volunteers, like Street By Street, in my constituency, East Belfast. These are all people who make vital contributions to our community.

We also hear from Carers NI, who reference the fact that:

"our community care system would collapse without the input of older carers. However, this unpaid work needs to be valued and supported, otherwise it can come at a real cost to the older carer's own health and wellbeing".

Kinship Care is a vital organisation which estimates that between 8,000 and 10,000 children live in kinship care and a huge proportion of them — 41% — are with grandparents. There are key testimonies drawn out in the report.

There is also valuable data that over the next 50 years older people will contribute about £25 billion to our economy in many different ways. It is summed up best by chief economist for Danske Bank, Angela McGowan, who said:

"This latest report by the Commissioner's Office shines a bright light on the true value of older people to both our economy and ... society as a whole. By providing a greater understanding of the direct and indirect benefits of older people this report both progresses us socially and provides older people with recognition for their extensive economic contribution."

Despite that, we still have prejudice in our community, and another vital contribution to tackling this will be the OFMDFM older persons' strategy, Active Ageing. That is a positive step which presents a real opportunity for government to increase participation and ensure the care and protection of older people in our community. We also have the important work of Age NI, the Age Sector Platform and the Pensioners Parliament, which provide vital advocacy for older people in our community. There is vital intergenerational work as well by organisations like Linking Generations —

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

Mr Lyttle: — and I think that this report is another important contribution to ensuring that older people are valued in our community.

Mr Anderson: At the outset, I declare an interest in the cross-party motion before us as I am a member of that illustrious over-60s club. I am proud to be in the age group to which this report refers.

A Member: How far are you into it?

6.30 pm

Mr Anderson: We will not go into that, but my party colleagues would have been disappointed had I not referred to that. They are always reminding me of that, not only in the House but outside it. They should maybe learn to respect their elders. *[Laughter.]* On a more serious note, I am greatly encouraged by the report of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland on the subject of appreciating age. It is timely and helpful. It ought to be warmly welcomed by all, and I am glad to see that that is the case in the House.

We live in a rapidly changing society. People over 60 still have much to offer society in many ways. What they lack in youth and youthful vigour, they more than make up for in experience. As the report highlights, people over the age of 60 contribute in a great variety

of ways, socially and economically. In the words of the commissioner:

"The evidence in this report will help to challenge negative attitudes towards ageing and highlight the very positive difference that older people make to our quality of life and our economy."

We now live longer and, generally, healthier lives. Life expectancy has increased by 11 years since 1950. The number of older people living in Northern Ireland is set to rise significantly. According to the report, the number of older people living in Northern Ireland will increase by 86.9% over the next 50 years, and they will then represent one third of the population. In that light, it is right and fitting that the Assembly acknowledge older people's positive contribution and lead from the front in promoting it.

The stand-out headline from the commissioner's report is, no doubt, the fact that older people in Northern Ireland are set to contribute almost £25 billion to the economy over the next 50 years in a variety of ways. That totally demolishes the myth that older people are nothing but a drain on a country economically. The figures are clearly set out in the report. It is full of detailed statistics and projected figures on the anticipated contribution from the over-60s during the next 50 years. I will not simply repeat what is in the report, but it is interesting to note the range and variety of these contributions.

Such contributions can be seen in the business world. In many SMEs, for example, which are the backbone of our local economy, senior members of a family firm are likely to keep their hand on the tiller for much longer than was the case a few years ago. In the public sector, those who have given many years of dedicated service to society are now able to work on well beyond the age of 60, health permitting. In doing so, they set a fine example to younger staff by giving added value to the overall performance of the Civil Service and its delivery of front-line services.

Older people are also engaged in many roles in the voluntary, community and charity sectors, where their skills and experience are invaluable in helping others. We are all well aware of the significant contribution that older people make through caring, which enables loved ones, relatives or friends to live a dignified life at home for longer, thus also saving the health service millions of pounds every year. Grandparents play a crucial and growing childminding role. Indeed, grandparents, who

have always been important in family life, are now key figures in the family, often childminding out of love and seeking no financial reward.

Those are just some of the vital and positive contributions that the over-60s in Northern Ireland provide now and will provide to an ever-increasing degree in the years to come. The report presents a positive picture for the over-60s. It tackles negative perceptions head-on and clearly highlights the key roles that older people continue to play in the community and family in so many ways across Northern Ireland.

I will conclude, as Mr Lyttle did, with the words of the chief economist for Danske Bank, Angela McGowan:

"This latest report by the Commissioner's Office shines a bright light on the true value of older people to both our economy and NI society as a whole."

I agree entirely with that and wholeheartedly commend the motion to the House today.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat. I am grateful to be afforded the opportunity to respond to the motion. Junior Minister Bell and I welcome research of this kind, and, indeed, we attended the launch of the report on 1 October in the MAC in Belfast. It was a very informative and well-supported event.

When the First Minister and deputy First Minister were taking legislation through the Assembly to create the office of the Commissioner for Older People, they felt it critical that promoting positive attitudes towards older people should be a major part of the role of the commissioner. In fact, the Commissioner for Older People Act 2011 places a legal obligation on the commissioner to do so. I know that Claire Keatinge and her team have worked tirelessly to bring issues facing our older population to the fore and to help to change attitudes to this valuable and diverse section of our community.

The publication of the report is particularly relevant given the changes in population here. Over the 10-year period between 2002 and 2012, the number of adults aged 65 and over increased by 20%.

The trend is expected to continue, and the number of people in that age group is projected

to increase by 12% between 2012 and 2017 and by 64% between 2012 and 2032.

It is good news for all of us. It means that people should be able to enjoy an active life for longer and be able to share their skills, knowledge and experience with the rest of the population. We all gain from the contribution of older people to society. However, too often, the discussion on this topic focuses solely on greater pension and health and social care costs. That is a highly imbalanced and inaccurate picture and feeds prejudice against older people. We do face challenges in those areas, but the central fact is that, as a society, we greatly benefit from people living longer and contributing longer.

That should be the starting point for any discussion about what is referred to as the "ageing population". For example, the size of our working-age population is declining, yet many people in their 50s who need to change jobs or their career to continue working to support their family are unable to do so because older workers can be particularly disadvantaged owing to unfair attitudes about their ability to work. That could become an even greater problem in the future as the state pension age rises. People with decades of experience and many skills could become benefit claimants for many years before getting their pension, and we need to tackle ageist attitudes wherever they are found.

The focus on costs in discussions about people living longer implies that the key factor in getting older is that people become ill, frail and dependent. The reality is that the great majority of older people are living healthier and active lives. That is an issue that many older people feel strongly about. During the recent consultation on the draft Active Ageing strategy, many people expressed anger about the ageism, discrimination and disrespect that older people experience. It is a prejudice that some people feel no qualms about expressing, and that should not be tolerated in any society. It is very important that we challenge prejudice and ensure that people are aware of the very significant contribution that our older people make to society.

Additionally, research has shown that holding negative attitudes towards ageing when people are younger may cause poorer health for those people when they in turn reach old age, and it may even lead to a shorter life. The prejudice becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so it is in all our interests to view the entire life course as the positive, fulfilling journey that it can be.

We need to instil respect in our communities for the older population: people who have often worked all their life, raised a family and supported others. As well as the financial contribution that our older people make to the economy, we need to recognise their non-financial contributions as well. There are many examples of our older people providing valuable services to the community. They have high levels of membership and leadership of many local organisations, groups and societies, and they also share their time, skills and knowledge through volunteering. Indeed, Minister Bell and I had the pleasure of hearing Mary Scally, at the launch of the report at the MAC, talk about her experience of volunteering and the many hours that she is giving to many volunteer programmes and projects, from which she gets a lot back.

Mr Ramsey: She is from Derry.

Ms J McCann: She is from Derry. That is right, Pat.

By being active users or customers of community-based facilities and resources such as local shops, post offices and libraries, older people are supporting the viability of local services. They also play a central role in contributing to childcare. Grandparents are often unpaid childcare workers who enable parents to work. Older people vote in much greater numbers than those in other age groups, supporting the democratic process. Although those things cannot be quantified in cash terms, they are no less valuable and vital and must be recognised as such.

We acknowledge the many contributions made by older people to our society, but we must not lose sight of the significant challenges faced by some. Too many older people are living in social disadvantage and poverty, particularly fuel poverty. As part of the development of the Active Ageing strategy, which we are currently finalising, we have strategic aims to address those issues, and we will work with Departments to develop the outcomes that we want to achieve. We have also worked with Departments to develop signature programme proposals under the Delivering Social Change framework. The programmes are designed to complement the existing programmes, policies and services of all Departments that have primary responsibility for tackling these issues.

We need to recognise that individuals' personal circumstances will impact on how ageing affects them. For example, people from minority ethnic communities may have particular experiences and needs, especially

around language issues, obtaining information about services that they are entitled to, discrimination and feelings of isolation. Older women who have remained at home or worked part-time owing to caring responsibilities may have less pension income than men as they will not have built up as much of a personal employer's pension, and they may live in poverty and fuel poverty as a consequence.

Fear of crime is another major issue of concern to older people. More generally, it is important to stress that, for some older people but not all, living longer can also mean living longer with illness, disability or a dependency on others. The benefits of living longer will only be realised if we recognise and respond to both the challenges and opportunities that it brings. In order to do that, we must first listen to older people and discover precisely what services and policies they want and are entitled to have in place. We must then involve older people in their delivery so that those services can change to meet their needs.

Over the years, the Executive's policies have focused on the health and social care needs and inequalities faced by the growing number of older people in our society. While we need to continue to support the proportion of older people who have health needs, we also need to recognise that older people are changing and are living more active and fulfilling lives.

In order to address the challenges to people fulfilling their potential in later life, we are, as I said, in the process of finalising the active ageing strategy. We will continue to work with our ageing strategy advisory group, which includes, as members, older people and representatives from organisations with expertise in this area. At our request, the Commissioner for Older People chairs that group. The strategy's vision for the North is to be an age-friendly region in which people, as they age, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential with their rights respected and their dignity protected.

I very much welcome the research that has been published in this area, which highlights the very positive contribution that older people make to our society. I encourage everyone to strongly challenge ageism wherever and whenever they encounter it. It is critical that we recognise our debt to older people for all their support and expertise and for the leadership that they have shown us. I am sure that there is not one person in the House tonight who does not have a grandparent or an elderly aunt, uncle, mother or father who they have gained from and used as a role model. It is very

important that this motion has all-party support tonight.

Mr Dickson: I suppose that I need to declare an interest as well: I know that none of you can imagine that I am actually over 60, but, as the motion makes reference to it, indeed I am. I am living proof that you can look a lot younger.

This has been a very positive and welcome debate. I will briefly run through the contribution of all Members who spoke. Pat Ramsey reminded us at the beginning, as has just been referenced, that this is an all-party motion and that it is important that the voices of older people be heard and celebrated and that their contribution be noted. That could be through volunteering, and he made particular reference to volunteers at the City of Culture. I do not know whether he remembers, but I remembering seeing a short news piece, probably on the BBC, which interviewed a number of the older volunteers who were acting as city guides during the City of Culture events. What stuck in my mind was their positivity and eagerness and their delight that somebody had recognised that there was value in the job that they were doing as volunteers.

Peter Weir definitely dug a very deep hole, certainly with Jo-Anne Dobson at least, if not with a few others in the Chamber. He mentioned the cross-party support for the motion and for the positive contribution that older people make. He specifically mentioned the facts and figures contained in the report, as did others. He particularly made reference to the need for respect for those who are of an older age.

Bronwyn McGahan told us that the report reframed the debate on the value of older people and how we should invest in them. She said that communities should be great places to grow old in, and I thought that that was a very important comment for the Assembly to make: every corner of Northern Ireland should be a place in which people should be valued in growing older.

Jo-Anne Dobson referred to the value of people who volunteer in a whole range of styles and activities and with a raft of organisations across the community. She referred to those of us who might be described as baby boomers, perhaps better educated than the previous generation, and the positive impact that we, they and older people can make to this society in giving back some of our life and work experiences. However, some of us do not see our work careers as being over for a very long time yet.

6.45 pm

Sydney Anderson fessed up to being in the over-60 club with some of us. He also welcomed the report and told us that it had much to offer. He referenced the key figure of the £25 billion contribution that it made to tackling negative perceptions.

Chris Lyttle commended the commissioner's report to us as well, particularly the benefits of an ageing workforce and the importance of how we focus, quite often, on young people being unemployed rather than the employment pressures on those who are 50-plus who perhaps have not been reskilled to meet the needs of a growing workforce and of encouraging employers to ensure that they value older workers. He also referred to the value of volunteers, as many have done. He mentioned in particular the work of people like Kinship Care and their contribution to society.

The junior Ministers are both present, with Jennifer McCann speaking today. They welcomed the report. They noted that the role of Commissioner for Older People had been brought into existence by the Assembly and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. She cited it as an important role that was brought into being by the Assembly and delivers for older people in the community, which, I think, has to be described as a positive step forward among the many things that we do not see as very positive in the Chamber. Again, she referred to all the activities that older people do to contribute to our community and to various organisations across the community, particularly in supporting local services. Many get involved in campaigns, such as saving local libraries and things like that, because, very often, they are the backbone of the community.

The Minister also made an interesting reference to those who are in isolation, particularly ethnic minorities. As people who come from an ethnic minority continue to live in Northern Ireland, they will also grow old with us here. We have to make special provision and note how people from an ethnic minority background should be looked after and cared for in our community and that they, too, have a contribution to make to society in Northern Ireland. I watched the Commissioner for Older People's video and the contribution that was made by one particular gentleman.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate tonight. I do not want to bore people with the facts and figures that we have already gone through, but there are perhaps one or two things that I would like to say by way of

conclusion. We have referred to all the things that people do. I would like to highlight in particular the volunteers who work hard in community organisations across the Province. Churches perhaps are neglected when it comes to that reference. There is not a church in Northern Ireland that could operate in the way in which it does or make a contribution to communities, towns and villages across Northern Ireland if it were not for the contribution of older people.

We know the amount of money that older people can put back into the community. That is very important.

The report asks us to appreciate age. We must ask ourselves how we recognise the positive contribution of older people. It is often said that a way of measuring a society is by looking at how it treats its older people. The reality is that the day will come when, after all those years of paying taxes, volunteering and caring for others, many older people will themselves come to depend on the state to reciprocate with quality community transport, access to community services and perhaps even excellent nursing and health care. I have taken a particular interest in the latter that is in part due to the failings of facilities in my constituency. I must say that we have been found wanting at times in the care of older people in this community.

In my opinion — I believe that this is backed by recent reports — while the majority of those who care for older people do an outstanding job, we could do a lot more with regard to robust oversight and protection to ensure the best care for them when they come to the time of life when they, in turn, need to be cared for. That would be one way of recognising the positive contribution that they make by saying this: you have served our society, and now we will serve you by ensuring that your last years are spent in comfort, peace and dignity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland's Report, 'Appreciating Age', which places an economic value on the wide and varied contributions made by the over-60s across Northern Ireland; acknowledges the positive contributions made by older people through caring, childcare, volunteering, replacement parenting and working; and will seek to challenge negative perceptions around

older age in order to make Northern Ireland a better place to grow old.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Fish Kill: Sixmilewater

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Girvan: It is with great sadness that we have to have a debate about what is another major fish kill in the Sixmilewater. Unfortunately, it is not the first incident that we have had in the area; we have had several incidents. There was a fairly major one in 2008. There was a further incident in 2011, where a very major kill took place. It wiped out not only the fish but the invertebrates in the watercourse right through to Antrim town.

The incident took place at what is probably a very important time in the spawning calendar. Unfortunately, it has wiped out mature fish. Lough Neagh has an indigenous species: the dollaghan. They make their way into the river courses. The Sixmilewater is very important to me, but other rivers feed into Lough Neagh as well. They also make their way into those river courses, but the Sixmilewater is key. As a consequence, certain protections have to be put in place.

On the day on which the incident was identified — we do not know the exact time — we know that it was identified by a young fisherman who was on the river. He identified that fish were floating in the water. A pollutant had made its way into the water and wiped out a large number of fish. On the morning in question, 30 to 40 fish were lifted out of the water right away. Officials were on site, but they did not engage in removing fish from the water. That created frustration among the individuals who were there. They could see the fish struggling for breath, but officials did not accept fish that had been removed for samples. It ended up with 964 fish being removed from the river. That might be only the tip of the iceberg; there might well be others that were not picked up because we do not know exactly when the incident took place.

I do not wish to point fingers directly, but it happened at the south side of Ballyclare. There is an industrial park in that area, and there is a major water treatment works that recently received approval to have £2 million of spend on upgrading the site. Most of the water makes its way into the combined system and then passes through the sewage treatment works before it enters the watercourse.

I appreciate that the Minister of the Environment is here. Perhaps the Minister for Regional Development and the Agriculture Minister should have been present as well because this issue crosses several Departments. Unfortunately, there is serious frustration with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) because of how it went forward with the issue. There has been delay. People who take a great interest in the river are willing to do samples and everything, but they are frustrated. There is a lack of a two-way street in relation to feedback on communication.

The NIEA is happy to take information from individuals, but it will never feed back information on what is going on in a timely fashion.

The most recent incident took place on 29 October. I mentioned other incidents, when it took years before we got what were not even answers but vagueness, which was not necessarily directed to where the problem arose. I have my own suspicions. I still believe that there is an intentional cover-up. We need to get to the bottom of exactly what went on. We heard that a meeting was to be held at the latter part of last week to review this case and come back with some information. We have still not heard what caused this pollution and what the contaminant in the water was that caused us to lose a serious amount of fish.

I live on the Ballynure side of Ballyclare. The river water in that area has been great. Fish counts indicate that there is great recovery at that part of the Sixmilewater. I just hope and pray that the invertebrate tests that are being undertaken show that we still have invertebrate and fly life in the river bed. That is important.

There is frustration about the way in which officials dealt with the matter on the day. When they arrived, they were ill-equipped to go into the river to take samples and deal with the matter.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Girvan: I am happy to give way.

Mr Clarke: I note what you say about the actions of the officials. You touched on the fact that the issue is cross-departmental. Do you agree that there has to be a more joined-up approach, with all Departments working together? I was there that day, and they were working hundreds of yards apart and not joining forces.

Mr Girvan: I said that a major cross-departmental approach is needed. These are wonderful natural resources. Whether people believe it or not, fishing is one of the most-followed sports in Northern Ireland. Fishing does not take away from fish in rivers; it ensures that there are fish in rivers. We have catch and release to ensure that we have a sustainable fish stock in the watercourse of the Sixmilewater, and that is vital.

On many occasions, money also came from other Departments to help to restock the river. Funding came from DARD and DCAL to help us with that. However, we are not addressing the link. If a farmer had been guilty of this pollution, a smoking gun would have pointed us directly to where it came from. In 2008, we had a major problem on the Ballymartin river, which feeds directly into the Sixmilewater. That wiped out virtually everything right down to Antrim.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Girvan: I will, yes.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that I will get an opportunity to speak in a few moments, but you mentioned farmers and smoking guns. I am pleased that the Minister of the Environment is here today. Does the Member agree that the paltry fines for people who have been caught and prosecuted do not deter them from doing it again? There are anglers in the Gallery today, and some of us have been approached about another discharge into a watercourse in the same vicinity. When people are prosecuted, they get only a paltry fine, which does not deter them from doing it again.

Mr Girvan: I have to agree with the Member. Sufficient penalties are not in place to ensure that they do not do it again. It is sometimes easier to allow the pollution and pay the fine. Unfortunately, that has been the case on many occasions. We need to ensure that that loophole is closed and that those who pollute are made to pay. That needs to be dealt with correctly, whether by a government agency or a Department.

I referred to the Ballymartin incident, which polluted and killed everything from where the discharge entered in Mallusk to where the river enters Lough Neagh. There is a water treatment plant in Lough Neagh that extracts drinking water, and it is not far from where the Sixmilewater enters Lough Neagh. We also have to think of the public's health and welfare. Whatever goes into Lough Neagh and the Sixmilewater ultimately ends up in our drinking water.

7.00 pm

It is vital that we are having this debate this evening. I am opposed to Departments trying to cover up and not engage or feed back the information to those who are on the ground. We have the Six Mile Water Trust, the Ballynure Angling Club and the Antrim and District Angling Association, all of which have best interests at heart in trying to deal with the matter. Unfortunately, the Department tends to hide behind saying, "We have to take the samples; you can't bring us samples. We have to actually take the fish; you can't take the fish out of the river." When the incident was happening, the fish were struggling in the water. Three weeks later, we still have not got any results or answers about what caused the incident or what pollutant was in the fish. So, I will be asking further questions.

I hope that the Minister takes this back. There is a frustration about how NIEA has dealt with this matter and how it deals with other such matters. I appreciate that the Minister is here this evening, but I believe that the Department for Regional Development, which, along with DARD, potentially causes more pollution than any other Department, should also be represented here to answer questions.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas as an seans an t-ábhar seo a phlé.

I thank Mr Girvan, a Member on the opposite Benches, for securing this topic for the Adjournment debate. I declare an interest as an angler and, indeed, as a Member who has been trying to put together an all-party group on angling for quite some time. There are quite a number of active anglers in the Assembly, and I think that it would be useful to put together such a group so that we can discuss these and other matters that affect angling, which is, of course, one of the biggest participant sports in the world.

It is very unfortunate that we are gathered here yet again to discuss another pollution incident, particularly on the river in question. Wearing my DCAL hat — I also wear a DRD hat — I have worked with anglers, particularly those on the feeder streams of Lough Neagh. I was instrumental in putting together a funding package for Professor Paolo Prodóhl, a professor of genetics and DNA in Queen's University. He was working on a project on dollaghan in Lough Neagh and the individual species in the lough and its feeder rivers. I know that quite a number of the anglers helped with that by providing scale and fin samples. They were working towards producing a report, so the pollution incident was a major setback to that development work and to the unique species that is Lough Neagh dollaghan. We have dollaghan in other lakes across Ireland, whether it is ferox in Lough Corrib or gillaroo in Lough Melvin. They are a unique species and attract many foreign visitors who come for a specialist fishing experience.

The fish-kill details are quite horrifying when one considers the length and state of the water. I know that it is called the Sixmilewater, but I believe it is 26 miles long. There will be a gae lang yarn in telling how the name came about, and I am sure that Mr Girvan knows it. Regardless of that, it is quite horrifying that, over two days, 964 fish were confirmed to be recovered, but that is not to say that there were not hundreds, if not thousands, more.

I have the details here. On 29 October, there were 82 1 lb-plus fish, 294 2 lb-plus fish and 68 3 lb to 10 lb-plus fish. On 30 October, there were 201 1 lb-plus trout, 106 2 lb-plus trout and 66 3 lb-plus trout. The last two categories are the breeding stock, so if you lose them at any stage, there goes your stock in the river.

Mr Girvan referred to a number of officials, and I think that part of the problem that we have in dealing with pollution incidents is that it is a multi-departmental issue. I have a very detailed report from Ballynure Angling Club from 29 and 30 October. The club had people on the ground, and there were departmental officials and officials from NI Water, NIEA and DCAL and what have you. I share Mr Girvan's frustration about the lack of information so far, which will continue in the days and weeks ahead.

I will refer to another incident on my own river in July 2005, which happened mid-afternoon.

By 5.00 pm, I knew the chemical involved and the source of the chemical involved. I knew the timing of the incident, and I nearly knew how

many fish were killed. It still took the NIEA until 2011 to identify the polluter, and it took until 2013 to actually bring it to court. The company was fined a derisory sum at that time. I do not think that that sends out the right message to anybody who is interested in our natural environment and in our native species. That is an example. I am giving fair warning not to expect an answer any time soon. It is up to us to push this matter.

It is regrettable that responsibility for this matter goes across four Departments: DARD, DRD, DOE and DCAL. That is the nature of it, and I think that it is something that we have to look at in the Assembly, particularly with anything to do with rivers and the wildlife there. As I said, the very detailed report from Ballynure is there. I think it is a very good idea that it was recorded. It is a blow-by-blow account. It is almost a minute-by-minute account of phone calls going into the Departments, the responses of the officials, and how they came out.

I was contacted by the DCAL inland fisheries people as recently as yesterday. They said that they have talked to the likes of Billy Robinson, the chair of Ballynure Angling Club, and they have said that they want to clarify how angling clubs can assist DCAL with any further fish kills. I welcome that, and I hope that that piece of work will be done sooner rather than later.

I understand the restrictions there might be on removing fish because we do not always know what source the fish will come from, but I think that a general assessment can be made that, once there is a fish kill, nobody will be bringing fish in from any other river until what has happened there and then has been assessed.

So, there is a piece of work that we must do in hoping to address this. It will be poor consolation to Ballynure anglers and other anglers. They have lost 1,000 fish from the stock. How many years will it take to rebuild that? It is the breeding stock. Fortunately, some of the up-river breeder streams have been saved, and, seemingly, the pollutant passed through relatively quickly. It is a regrettable incident, and I think that, in real terms, environmental crime like this should get the punishment it requires and not the paltry sums that companies and others are being fined. I have absolutely no bother in supporting the debate, and I hope that everyone else will.

Mr Kinahan: Before we start, I need to declare an interest in that I own some land that neighbours on to the Sixmilewater. I am not sure that that means that I actually own any of the river, but I declare an interest anyway.

I welcome the debate. It is sad that we have to do it again. One of the first debates I led was on exactly this subject a few years ago. We really have to get to the point where it does not happen, and I hope that it never happens again.

The Minister has heard the details of this fish kill, and what I am really asking for is that we look at a new way of dealing with things. We are asking for a review of how things are done so that we get an immediate, comprehensive and open and transparent action on the day, and from then on, so that we eventually know who the polluter is and that the polluter pays. We all need to be involved, but it needs to be immediate and fast.

I know that DCAL and the NIEA were down on the day. I am sorry that I was not there; I was away on holiday. They could not cover every angle, and I feel that we should have a really comprehensive list, on every river, of all the people who neighbour on to a river and all the people who could pollute it so that when a pollution incident happens people know exactly who to check and who the most likely polluters are. They could then go straight to those locations and not be limited by numbers.

Mr Ó hOisín: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he recognise that the nature of the water and sewerage system in this part of the world is, for the most part in many, many places, a combined storm and sewerage system? To actually trace the original source is sometimes very difficult, and that is maybe something that we have to look at as well.

Mr Kinahan: I certainly agree that it is difficult, but it is a task that I think we should start doing. If you at least have a good database, you can move forward. Within that, you need to have trained samplers.

I have asked for that already in the Chamber two or three times. We really need much better use of volunteers and all the people who are involved on the rivers and could sample. We need to look at where sampling should be happening all the time and how it should be done. We should also ensure that it is not just government sampling by government sources. We need some form of independent sampling and something that can hold government to account if, indeed, it is the polluter. It needs to be thorough, and it needs to happen extremely quickly.

I know that one Member mentioned that the treatment plant may have been responsible in this case. However, there are two industrial areas that need to be checked and a waste area that might be leaching. We need to have

a thorough check. As I said, that all needs to happen at the beginning. Therefore, we need a good database.

I know that we have extremely good groups working on the river, and some of them are sitting here in the Chamber above me. We have the Six Mile Water Trust — the anglers. Today, I want to praise not only them but the good work done on many occasions by the A8 team when they were contacted. When things went wrong, they dealt with them. However, things should not have gone wrong. We also have very good relationships with the wastewater plant. Yet, there are still things that we can all do better. Everyone is working together, and the reason I raise that is because that is the way we should be working — in partnerships. We need to find better ways of working, particularly at a time of fewer resources.

As already touched on, we need suitable fines. Under the fining system, for an offence committed on a non-commercial basis it is a £2,000 fine plus a compensation order with a sentencing range between £1,000 and three months in custody and compensation. For an offence committed on a commercial basis, two months in custody and as high as a £10,000 fine and three months.

Mr Girvan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I am happy to give way.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that the Member is focusing on the fines, most of which will apply to private businesses. If it is identified that pollution comes from a government agency, how do we deal with that? That is one of the problems that we have. On many occasions, we pursue the wee man, but, sometimes, it is a government agency that has caused the problem. How do we ensure that such agencies are made answerable so that it does not happen again?

Mr Kinahan: I entirely agree. There is a maximum £20,000 fine, but the Minister and we, as politicians, need to find a better way forward so that there is a suitable punishment and suitable compensation is paid. That is key.

I have been told by one observer that otters, kingfishers and dippers were back on the Sixmilewater and that they had all come back since 2008, although I have not seen them myself. I wrote a note of congratulation in the press when we heard that dollaghan, trout and salmon were well back in the river and of a

decent size. Then we got the pollution. That is why I ask the Minister again to review how we deal with this.

On Friday, the Six Mile Water Trust met Jim Nicholson. Many other issues were raised, all of which are relevant. We do not seem to be working properly to the European water directive. Will the Minister please look at how we can enforce that throughout Northern Ireland and not just on the Sixmilewater?

There used to be two very good biannual cross-sectoral departmental meetings at which everything was discussed. Those have been stopped. They were very useful for everybody, and we need those to start again or find something suitable to replace them.

We need to know who is responsible for cleaning out rivers — when things are left in rivers, whose responsibility is it? If we do not know who is responsible, items just stay in rivers, and you get flooding like that which happened in Antrim a few years ago when the bridges blocked up and the water found its way into people's homes. Equally, there does not seem to be any monitoring system for consents to discharge: when someone has consent to discharge, no one checks what they discharge. A whole lot of things lead to the pollution of rivers, and what I am really asking is whether the Minister will review the situation. I know that the Deputy Speaker will be very keen for me to stop there. However, remember that angling is not just a hobby or a livelihood; it helps the whole ecosystem. I look forward to things changing in the future.

7.15 pm

Mr Clarke: I am happy to follow on from the comments that my South Antrim colleague has made. I was fortunate — unfortunate, I should say — to be there that day. I say "unfortunate", because none of us wants to be there when such devastation is caused to a river. We have anglers in the Public Gallery tonight. On the day of the incident, I noticed that there were some very young anglers present. They are the anglers of the future. Seeing their disappointment struck me more than anything else.

I have listened to the other contributions. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, your colleague on the Benches opposite talked about DCAL's responsibility. Among the things that struck me that day were, first, the time that it took DCAL to come out and, secondly, the time that it took its officials to act when they got there. They tried to explain the responsibility rather than get on

with the job of trying to find the source of the problem. Many of the anglers knew that, if the fish kill did not happen during the night, it certainly happened in the early hours of the morning. However, DCAL officials arrived at 1.00 pm and spoke to some of the fishermen in, I would say, an argumentative manner. The fishermen thought that they were doing their best by bringing some of the fish out and preventing them going further down river. I also thought that the fishermen, particularly some of the young lads, were doing their best. The Member opposite gave us a very detailed account of the number of fish involved. However, DCAL discounted any of the fish that already had been lifted out. Everyone from the fishing fraternity who was there was interested in that stretch of the river. They certainly were not introducing other fish on that day. Anything that was lifted out that day came from that stretch of the river.

I am not necessarily trying to get into the blame game, but we have had agencies involved in pollution before. Departments have been a bit cloak and dagger about some of this stuff, because the first fish that were identified that day, certainly up to the time that I was there, were identified downstream from the waste water treatment works. That would lead you to the very strong conclusion that the pollution was coming from that facility. As a public representative who was there that day and went to the waste water treatment works, I did not see cooperation: I did not get past the gate. It was nearly as if they were in defence mode — "We'll keep you guys out, because we don't want you to see what is going on in here". I am led to believe that someone from the fishing fraternity was there before me. I am unsure of what sort of reception that individual got, but, when I arrived at the gate, there was not a very welcoming reception. It was not one that said, "We've an open-door policy. Come on in and see that we are not guilty. We're actually trying to work with you to prevent incidents such as this". From a government point of view and a public representative point of view, it was very disappointing. There was not much transparency at the waste water treatment plant.

That does not take away from the responsibilities of others. Regardless of whether the treatment works turns out to be guilty or not guilty, it needs to be more transparent in its operation. As my colleague said, there has been a suggestion of investment for that plant. There are also suggestions of a requirement of investment for other plants. The sooner that the Minister brings that to fruition, the better, because, if it was not the treatment

works this time, there is every possibility that it could be it in the future. We are not going to prevent such incidents until proper investment is made in the plant.

My colleague from South Antrim mentioned discharging and consent to discharge. He makes a very interesting point. The Minister is here to respond today. One of the things that strikes me is that, although this was the Sixmilewater, we just have to travel further towards Antrim. Up until next year, Minister, you have power over planning. I have always been intrigued by the fact that DOE's Planning Service passed so much development on the edge of the river. Look at Grainger's Mill on the road into Antrim and the flooding incidents there. Look at the pollution that that has to cause. Once the river breaches its banks, gets in around developments and enters the sewerage system and oil tanks, it is pretty obvious that that pollution will enter a river. As a public representative, I have always been disappointed at how the agencies in the consultation process have approached the planning process. They do not give any consideration to our rivers.

Some Members talked about what the angling clubs have done. I know that another representation is being made to each of the South Antrim representatives on an incident on the upper side of Glenavy, where there has been a report of another fish kill. There has been huge investment there by anglers, just as there has been a lot of investment by anglers on this stretch of river. We had another incident earlier this year, and it is believed that the person responsible has been guilty of polluting before. What does that say? Does it say that you can continually pollute? Pollute, pollute, pay a small fine and pollute again. It is time that you, Minister, and your Department did something to prevent that. Discharges are happening and have happened, and, if someone has been found guilty, something has to be done to prevent them using the discharge opportunity to go into our watercourse.

Unlike the Member opposite, I was a fisherman many years ago when I was a young lad, and, when I was at the Sixmilewater, I was struck by the passion that those young lads had about fishing. I have family who regularly come from England and bring people to fish our rivers in Northern Ireland, so what we have here is attracting people. We have a rich resource and some good fishing grounds in Northern Ireland, and there is tourist potential for that. However, if such incidents are allowed to continue, what we have we will lose, because, unfortunately, it takes the rivers some time to recover. I note

that some Members said today that the pollution flowed past quickly in this incident, but what about the next one? That is what alarms me most.

The people who are in the Public Gallery are not here tonight for tea and sympathy. I think that they want to hear the Minister coming forward with sound suggestions on how we will tackle the problem. We have talked about it before, and we could come back here in three months' time and talk about the same thing. We need action from DOE, DRD and DARD. The sooner the three Departments knock their heads together and try to take a coordinated approach to prevent incidents such as this happening again, the better. It is better for the Sixmilewater, and it will be better for all the watercourses in Northern Ireland. Until it is sorted, all the tea and sympathy that we can give will make absolutely no difference. We need action on the rivers, and we need it now.

Mrs Cameron: I rise as a Member for South Antrim and not as Deputy Chair of the Environment Committee. I thank my colleague Paul Girvan for bringing this important matter to the House this evening.

On 29 October, anglers discovered dozens of dead fish in the stretch of Sixmilewater. Upon inspection by the Rivers Agency, a total of 964 dead fish were found, and a major fish kill was declared. The Department of the Environment and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency assessed the area, and the pollution in the river was classified as being of high severity. It is the third major incident on this stretch of river in the past six years. It has been a devastating blow for local anglers, particularly for Ballynure Angling Club, who have worked tirelessly to restock the river following previous pollution incidents and ensure that the environment is conducive to aquatic life. This latest incident has, once again, decimated the river and undone all the hard work that has been carried out to return the river to full stock.

Given that the river is an important tributary of Lough Neagh, the pollution of the river has huge implications for the whole of Northern Ireland. As we are all aware, Lough Neagh has a vastly significant ecosystem, and the wider implications of fish kills such as this should not be underestimated. Lough Neagh is a significant breeding and spawning ground for fish such as pollan, Atlantic salmon and European eels and is home to kingfishers, sand martins, otters and bats, amongst many other species of flora and fauna.

Pollution on the scale of the recent Sixmilewater incident is sure to affect the delicate environmental balance of the area for many months or even years to come. The Sixmilewater is an important habitat for the dollaghan trout that migrate from Lough Neagh in the autumn to spawn in its tributaries. Given that the latest incident occurred in late October, it will have a devastating effect on the dollaghan population of Northern Ireland. Whilst I am pleased that the Department of the Environment, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure acted quickly to minimise the impact of the incident in the short to medium term, a commitment must be given to find the source of the incident, and the perpetrator must be brought to justice.

The penalties for environmental crime are simply not robust enough to act as a deterrent to individuals and businesses intent on wreaking havoc on our environment. I would like to use this opportunity to call on the Minister of Justice to ensure that adequate resources are directed to ensuring that the perpetrators of environmental crime feel the full force of the law. Currently, sentencing is inconsistent and too lenient and serves no purpose in acting as a deterrent to those who feel that it is acceptable to carry out such acts.

A joined-up approach between the Department of the Environment, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Justice is long overdue so that a clear message can be sent to the culprits of environmental crime that they will be subject to the full rigor of the law. I hope that the recent incident on the Sixmilewater is fully investigated, the source identified and prosecution sought. Environmental crime is a growing problem that cannot be overlooked or underestimated. It is a problem that affects each and every one of us, although, at times, it is often taken lightly. The long-term ramifications cannot be disregarded, and we must do all within our control to discourage and deter those who think that it is acceptable to pollute, contaminate and poison our environment.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. My Department was first alerted to the fish kill on the Sixmilewater at Ballyclare on the morning of Wednesday 29 October 2014 when a report was received, via the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's water pollution hotline, of a number of dead fish at Ballyclare. Mr Girvan said that it was with great sadness that

people learned of the incident, and that is certainly and sadly true.

NIEA staff were immediately tasked with investigating the report. During the subsequent NIEA investigation, statutory samples were collected from two different premises, and NIEA's investigation of events at those premises remains ongoing. A number of other potential sources of pollution in the catchment were also visited and investigated by my NIEA staff to rule them out of the inquiry.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is the lead Department for fisheries protection, and its inland fisheries group was also informed of the fish kill by NIEA.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate the Minister giving way. I know that you are moving on to DCAL, but in your Department, we are some weeks past, and you said that you have ruled some out. Is the Minister prepared to say on the record today who has not been ruled out, whether the wastewater treatment works has not been entirely ruled out and where NIEA is at with those samples? The Member opposite has stated the number of years it has taken to get an outcome on these.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Clarke for his intervention. As only two have not been ruled out, I am not really at liberty to identify who they are at this stage. However, as I said, investigations are ongoing. We want to be sure that we get these investigations right and that we ensure that not only does the polluter pay but that the polluter prevents any incidents of pollution from happening again.

The subsequent DCAL investigation confirmed that a total of 964 fish of all sizes had been killed. Mr Ó hOisín gave a breakdown of the sizes of the fish and, given his expressed interest in angling, I was waiting to hear about the one that was this size.

As part of the investigation, NIEA also collected a number of investigatory water samples and carried out a detailed biological survey of the river and its tributaries. Analysis of the findings from those samples and surveys is continuing. I am very conscious that there have, unfortunately, been two previous serious fish kills on the Sixmilewater in recent years, one in 2008 and one in 2011, and other Members referred to that. It is, therefore, particularly disappointing that a further serious fish kill has now occurred, especially given all the hard work by local angling clubs and by my Department in the aftermath of those previous incidents.

Following the two previous serious fish kills, NIEA devoted a lot of time and effort to minimising pollution risk throughout the Sixmilewater catchment, including, for example, detailed inspections of all industrial premises in the Ballyclare and Mallusk areas. Those inspections identified a number of pollution risks, all of which were addressed, greatly reducing the overall pollution risk in the catchment.

7.30 pm

NIEA has worked closely with a wide range of stakeholders, such as anglers and a number of other agencies, to protect and improve the Sixmilewater. Mr Girvan expressed frustration that interaction and collaboration with river users is not what it should be, but it certainly cannot be accused of being non-existent. A good example of that practical cooperative effort is that, about six years ago, NIEA established a number of catchment stakeholder groups to allow the public to have a direct input into protecting their local rivers. As part of that initiative, a dedicated Lower Bann stakeholder group was established, whose area of responsibility includes the Sixmilewater and its tributaries. Those stakeholder groups each meet twice a year and allow local anglers and local people to work directly with a wide range of Departments and agencies to help protect and improve their local rivers.

I understand that anglers on and around the Sixmilewater have been particularly enthusiastic participants in the stakeholder groups and that their practical input has been and is of great value. For example, anglers on the Sixmilewater have taken part in environmental monitoring programmes, which feed into and complement government-led monitoring programmes. Officials have also been closely involved in providing advice and support to the Six Mile Water Trust, which I am aware plays an important role in the protection and enhancement of the river. I therefore understand and share the frustration of local people and anglers that, following all that enthusiastic hard work, a further serious fish kill has occurred.

Mr Clarke and others spoke of the paltry nature of the fines, and, yes, there is indeed some strong evidence that average fines for water pollution offences are higher in, for example, England and Wales than here in the North. However, as quite rightly identified by Mrs Cameron, the levels of fine imposed are entirely in the power of the courts and are well beyond the remit of my Department. I can, however, assure you that I and my Department are

committed to thoroughly investigating the cause of the latest fish kill and to continuing to work — and improving that work — with other Departments, local anglers and local people to protect the Sixmilewater and other rivers and watercourses.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for giving way. It is not in my constituency, but the Minister and others referred to the fines and sentencing. Has the Minister had any discussions with his colleague the Justice Minister to consider whether there is room in the Justice Bill to look at changes to sentencing or at working with that agency to look at a potential change to fines?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the intervention.

In conclusion, I hope very shortly to outline how I intend and am determined to work with other Ministers on this topical and very important subject. Indeed, it is very important that we get this right. I am firm believer that, in any case, the polluter should pay, and I am keen to work with others to identify how we manage our systems better. If that involves utilising volunteers, which it clearly does, I am happy to do that as well. What I am getting loud and clear here today is that partnership working has to be improved, and while I will work with partners and other Departments, let me assure the House that I will not be complicit in or tolerate any whiff of the cover-up that was implied by some Members.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency does not just go after the wee man. The agency pursues other and all polluters. As an outcome of today —

Mr Girvan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Girvan: I did not wish it to be implied; I wanted it to be totally overt. It definitely has gone on and is going on. It is alive and well in the Civil Service.

Mr Durkan: I give the Member an undertaking and a commitment to investigate his allegation — it is not an insinuation any more — robustly.

As an outcome from today, to give the anglers in the Gallery, those anglers in the Chamber and the thousands of anglers outside some sort of comfort and something other than the tea and sympathy that they might expect from here, I am happy to give a commitment to the House

that I will undertake to review how the system works and how my Department works with others, including DCAL, DARD, DRD and, importantly, the Department of Justice. I will be happy to get on to that as soon as possible.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: I am interested in Mr Ó hOisín's proposal of an all-party group. I wonder why that has not got off the ground to date. I will give way.

Mr Kinahan: Minister, you said that sectoral groups were meeting, but I am being informed that those meetings have stopped. Whether it is departmental meetings or other meetings, will you please make sure that those are restored so that the partnerships work?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is almost up, but you are at a very important point in your response, so we have a little bit of laxity for you.

Mr Durkan: I am finished the most important parts, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, but, in response to Mr Kinahan's question, I will ensure that existing groups are meeting. Perhaps there is a need for more groups. A group that exists and does not meet might as well not exist, so it is important that we ensure that everything that had previously been put in place and yielded some successful outcomes continues to operate and function.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank all Members for their contributions and the Minister for his attendance and response.

Adjourned at 7.37 pm.



Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,
Belfast: The Stationery Office

and available from:

Online
www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

TSO
PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN
Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 600 5522
Fax orders: 0870 600 5533
E-mail: customer.services@tso.co.uk
Textphone 0870 240 3701

TSO@Blackwell and other Accredited Agents

ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325
Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited
© Copyright Northern Ireland Assembly Commission 2014

ISBN 978-0-339-50736-4



9 780339 507364